

“Inability to sustain luxurious life style caused LTTE’s fall”

– Dr. Rohan Gunaratna



With the curtain falling on the Sri Lankan government’s triumphant military operation against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the time has come for analysing the fall of the most ruthless terror outfit in the world. Few such organisations could have boasted the military might and ruthless capacity of this organisation which laid claim to land, sea and air capabilities and the assassination of numerous political leaders both here and abroad. Yet even at the zenith of its power, there were a few who believed that the LTTE could be defeated with a combination of the right strategy and leadership.

One such analyst is Sri Lanka’s own international terrorism expert, Dr. Rohan Gunaratna, who has extensively written on the structure and capability of the Tamil Tigers. Today, with the LTTE now relegated to the pages of history, The Nation spoke to Dr. Gunaratne to obtain his specialised views on the government’s military strategies, and the evolution of the ruthless guerrilla outfit that eventually led to the fall of the Tigers.



Experience in the field: Commanding Officer, 4th Gajaba Regiment, Lt. Col. Gotabhaya Rajapaksa and Commanding Officer 1st Sinha Regiment, Lt. Col. Sarath Fonseka pictured during their days in the Army together. Now as Defence Secretary and Army Commander respectively, the two former batch-mates have proved a tough combination to beat

Following are excerpts:

By Dharisha Bastians

Q: For many years, it was a common perception that this was an ‘un-winnable’ war. In what ways did these stakes change in Eelam War IV?

A: There were three principle reasons. The first was that Karuna, who was the Eastern Commander, broke away in 2004. And with the Eastern Commander breaking away, Prabhakaran lost 6,000 fighters. Traditionally, the LTTE relied on the Eastern sector for recruitment and resources – like rice, funds etc. With Karuna breaking away, the LTTE north could not replenish their human wastage i.e. the LTTE fighters who die in battle who must be replaced. This is known as human wastage or human resources. Prabhakaran traditionally recruited fighters from the East of the country. With Karuna defecting, they could not replenish the human losses. This was the most significant development, because Prabhakaran could not recruit from the East or raise funds from the east. The second factor was that in 2006-2007, the Navy, under the stewardship of

Admiral Wasantha Karannagoda who is a very creative and innovative Navy Commander, destroyed the LTTE fleet of ships – three of them. Most of those ships were on the equator or south of the equator. So for the first time, there was a Navy Commander who was able to take the Sri Lanka Navy's fleet out to the deep sea, into international territorial waters, to hunt and destroy LTTE supply ships. So one of the second factors that led to the defeat of the LTTE was that the organisation could not replenish 'material wastage' – or guns, explosives, equipment, etc. Any terrorist group, in order to sustain its battle needs two things: one is human resources – and for the LTTE that could not be replenished from the East. The second is that the supply of mortars, artillery, explosives, guns, motor engines for their boats, communication gear, etc, could not be supplied. And the third factor I see as being crucial to the defeat of the LTTE, was that the Gotabhaya Rajapaksa who is Defence Secretary, understood because he had been in the field and on the frontlines himself. I myself have interviewed him in the field, and I can tell you that even when he was a young lieutenant colonel in the field, he understood the battle very well. And he understood that if the Sri Lankan Army was going to win, it had to wage war on several fronts. Traditional Army Commanders in the past have always fought only one battle at a time. But in this case, Gen. Sarath Fonseka would fight them in the east, in Mannar, in Kilinochchi and in Mullaitivu. Because the Army had strength in numbers because of recruitment, it was possible for the Army to engage the LTTE on multiple fronts.

The LTTE meanwhile could not sustain the fight because large numbers of their fighters were killed including some of their senior leaders. So these were the three key factors – one was political, one was naval and the third was the strategy of the Army. The Army was fully supported by the Air Force, Navy and Police. So the LTTE's numbers were reduced and they could not sustain the fight. So the developments in the past five to six years, really helped the government to politically and militarily defeat the LTTE.

Q: When you say in the last five or six years, are you referring to the ceasefire years?

A: It was during the ceasefire agreement that Karuna defected. If Karuna didn't go to Bangkok and see the pretty girls and the nightlife, he would never have realised that there was a world outside the jungle. As it was, during the peace process, Karuna travelled to the West and he saw the world. Karuna would have asked himself why he was leading this life, and what he was doing with this crazy man called Prabhakaran, when there was a world of things for him to see. In many ways therefore, Ranil Wickremesinghe also contributed to this fight. You see it was not a fight by just a few people. It was a sequence of events, and the fact that President Rajapaksa realised the importance of making Karuna the Minister of National Integration in 2008. The President realised the importance of co-opting Karuna - that is to take Tamil leaders and make them politicians, give them power, important positions and get them to work for you. My own view is that President Rajapaksa should take steps towards, perhaps, appointing Minister Douglas Devananda Prime Minister of the country. In fact, during the tenure of President Chandrika Kumaratunga, I requested her to make Lakshman Kadirgamar the Prime Minister. Now I am making the same request to President Mahinda Rajapaksa to make Devananda Prime Minister. We have to give members of the Tamil community prominence in our political

system. It is by doing so that we can prevent the Tamil community from feeling marginalised and so on.

Q: As an expert on the LTTE and its modus operandi, what tactics used by the Sri Lanka Army, specifically, the manner in which ground troops advanced towards ever-shrinking LTTE territory, were different to the way other infantry operations were conducted in the past?

A: Firstly, Gen. Sarath Fonseka is a very capable commander, because he spent most of his years in the field. He has been wounded thrice, once in a suicide bomb attack, and he is one of the few people in the world who have survived a suicide attack. He knew the battlefield inside out. There is a famous quotation that I have heard in the field whenever I was with the Army. They would say, “Batta issaraha, Fonniya pitipasse”. Fonniya in this sense meant Sarath Fonseka. So what troops were saying was that the Johnny ‘batta’ or anti-personnel mine was issaraha or in front of them, while Sarath Fonseka was at their back, urging them on. Fonseka is a commander who drives his Army to fight. Traditionally, our Army commanders moved troops on the A-9, which is the centre of the country. But Sarath Fonseka decided to move his troops along the coast because he had enough men to adopt this tactic. Moving the troops along the coast was the ideal thing to do, because the troops can be supplied from the seas and not only that, the troops would then prevent the flow of supplies and fighters to the LTTE by sea. So Sarath Fonseka understood the battleground and that played an integral part in defeating the LTTE.

Q: Do you think that when the LTTE began provocative attacks on ‘soft’ targets almost as soon as President Mahinda Rajapaksa took office in 2005, they anticipated this kind of retaliation? Was the great threat of the LTTE going back to war, a stronger force because of the 2002 CFA being no more than just bluffing?

A: No, the LTTE has always looked for opportunities to attack. Even if they are to see an opportunity in the next few weeks or months, they will certainly attack. But we must never be deceived into thinking that the LTTE is an invincible force. Mahinda Rajapaksa realised this, because he was properly advised by his commanders that the LTTE can be defeated. Unfortunately, most of the previous commanders were very weak, and they would only give excuses as to why they couldn’t take the battle to the Tigers. But in this case, none of the commanders did this. It was also a great advantage in this regard that the Secretary of Defence was an individual who knew the ground. So if a commander was to give him information, he was in an excellent position to question or analyse that information. Also, as an administration, they were not deterred by LTTE attacks on military or civilian targets. Even if you have another 10 LTTE type organisations to defeat, the current set of commanders and the Defence Secretary would be up to the task and they would do it. They are not only committed to the cause, but they are fearless. Gotabhaya Rajapaksa and his three commanders have no fear of death. If you’re fearless, then you are on par with the terrorist fighter, and with that kind of mindset when you go into battle, you can win. The reason this battle was won was because it had the ideal configuration of people at the vanguard of the operation: very capable commanders and a Secretary Defence who understood the ground better than anyone else. He is by far the best Secretary Defence Sri Lanka has seen in its recent history.

Q: Did the LTTE's aspirations to become a conventional army, by means of obtaining aircraft and big guns, diminish their effectiveness in this fight? Were they more effective as a guerrilla group?

A: That is a good question. You see the LTTE was originally a lean and mean organisation. What we mean by that is that it was a very thin organisation, resorting to very shrewd and cunning things in the battlefield. But what happened to the LTTE in recent years is that, if one were to use the analogy of the human body, it became too fat. When you put on weight and carry excess mass, you cannot move as quickly as you could if you were leaner. The LTTE purchased expensive ships, aircraft, luxury vehicles; they air-conditioned their bunkers and built palatial houses. So the LTTE finally started to lead a kind of a life that they could not, as a terrorist organisation sustain. Because you see, the LTTE is not a state. A state can afford to be corrupt; but the LTTE became extravagant and it could not sustain itself. As an organisation it found it difficult to sustain the luxurious lives led by many of its leaders even overseas.

For example, Murali, a LTTE leader living in Switzerland – he was travelling in a Mercedes Benz and he reared expensive dogs as pets. So there was lots of corruption within the LTTE. For instance, the LTTE even tried to bribe a US government official with 1 million USD to take them off the list of proscribed organisations in that country. So the LTTE did certain things where they wasted money. It was not utilised effectively. They lost their perspective of being a guerrilla organisation, and tried to become a conventional force, which is impossible for an insurgent group to do.

Q: What does the fact that the LTTE Leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran's apparent reluctance to swallow cyanide say about the evolution of his character?

A: Personally, I don't think he was ever reluctant to commit suicide. He was shot by a sniper in the head. If he knew he was going to be captured, he would have certainly swallowed cyanide or shot himself. He was surprised. He is a man who would have killed himself rather than be captured. That is his character. I have met Prabhakaran.

Q: But Karuna, who was formerly one of his closest deputies, claimed that Prabhakaran was not the same man, and that under no circumstances would he kill himself. You think this is not true?

A: You know, Prabhakaran after he got the news that his son, Charles Anthony had been killed, would have been very sad. Also, there is no being in this world, even an animal, who is not afraid of death. Certainly, even in Prabhakaran there would have been fear. But still, I believe that he would have killed himself if he knew that capture was imminent.

Q: But wasn't that obvious, at the time he was killed that the Army was closing in, and capture was, in fact, a very real possibility?

A: Yes, but I think he would have wanted to go on fighting. He is a coward, make no mistake. I will call him a coward because he held over a 100,000 Tamil people as hostages. Although he purported to be fighting for the Tamil cause, he achieved nothing for the Tamil people. All he succeeded in doing was inflicting pain and suffering and misery on the Tamil people. And his final act was to hold more than 100,000 Tamils –

some of the poorest and most innocent people in Sri Lanka, as hostages. This is an unpardonable crime which he has committed. Not only Prabhakaran, but any LTTE leader, including Kumaran Padhmanathan, should be tried for War Crimes, for what they did there in the safe zone. So there is nothing heroic about Prabhakaran.

More than 60 percent of his fighters were below 16 years old. These were impressionable youth who might have become doctors, engineers or accountants if they were allowed to grow up. He recruited them and sent them to their death. So he is a terrorist monster and a remorseless man.

Q: Do you foresee any possibility for the LTTE to regroup?

A: No, absolutely not, if the government of Sri Lanka does two things: one is to extradite Kumaran Pathmanathan, his real name is Dharmalingam Shanmugam Kumaran who is now in Thailand, and is travelling back and forth to Malaysia. If he is arrested and brought back to Sri Lanka, the LTTE cannot regroup. However, if he remains where he is, he will revive the LTTE: this is the first point. Number two is that Sri Lanka must build bridges towards the Tamil community and make them feel very much a part of the country, and its political structure. If the President is willing to do this, then we will have peace. If not, it is likely that there will be a resurgence of violence, if not immediately, in the future.