

# From Jaffna to Wanni

The Third Eelam War is slowly drifting into a quagmire. V. Suryanarayanan writes

**T**WO CONTRASTING scenarios provide insights into the fast changing fortunes of the Third Eelam War. On October 10, 1999 the Galle Face Green in Colombo witnessed a grand display of pomp and pageantry to mark the golden jubilee of the founding of the Sri Lankan army.

Among the dignitaries who were present on the occasion were the Pakistani Chief of Staff, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, the Bangladesh Army Chief, Lt. Gen. Muhammad Mustafizur Rahman, and the Indian Army's Deputy Chief of Staff, Lt. Gen. V. P. Chandrasekhar. Speaking on that occasion, the President, Ms. Chandrika Kumaratunga, proudly proclaimed:

"In the discharge of its responsibilities...the army has manifested professionalism and dedication of the highest order, earning for itself the deep gratitude of the entire nation." Within a month, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) inflicted stunning blows on the Sri Lankan army in the Wanni region.

It was the worst military debacle in the prolonged Eelam war. Code-named Oyatha Alaigal III (unceasing waves), the Tigers overran one military garrison after another. Iqbal Athas, the Correspondent of the *Sunday Times* rightly put it: "Years of gains were lost in days." More than the loss of territory, the death of hundreds of soldiers and the loss of arms and equipment worth millions of Sri Lankan rupees, was the dwindling morale of the Sri Lankan armed forces. Panic spread like wild fire; soldiers revolted; many preferred to flee from the battlefield. Following a warning from the Tigers that they will target Vavuniya, civilian administration collapsed.

Equally significant, when the JVP resorted to armed struggle again following the India-Sri Lanka Accord, 1987, the Sri Lankan army could control the situation because the IPKF was fighting the LTTE in the north and the east. Today, the JVP has given up the path of armed struggle and has even fielded a candidate in the presidential election. But if the JVP gives up the parliamentary path and unleashes an armed struggle again, will the Sri Lankan

mass exodus ensued and Vavuniya virtually became a "ghost town".

Taking place barely six weeks before the presidential elections, the reverses will have profound consequences.

Censorship and muzzling of the media immediately followed. Rumour mongers had a field day. Equally deplorable is the People's Alliance (PA) and the United National Party (UNP) resorted to mudslinging and levelled wild charges against one another.

In any discussion on the role of the armed forces, it is necessary to highlight the fact that during the 1950s and 1960s, the Sri Lankan army had only a ceremonial role, providing guard of honour to visiting dignitaries and holding march pasts on independence days. The first major challenge to the security of the island took place in 1971, when the Janata Vimukt Peramuna (JVP) raised the Sri Lankan army could not cope with the situation. The then Prime Minister, Ms. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, immediately contacted India, the U.K., the U.S., Yugoslavia, USSR and Pakistan for help. It was India's spontaneous response, which enabled Colombo to put down the JVP threat.

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army be able to fight on two fronts? What will be the consequences if the JVP and the LTTE, for tactical reasons, come together against a common enemy? These are vital issues, which should be pondered over by South Asian strategic specialists.

The defence budget is assuming staggering proportions. In 1978, the budget amounted to only 560 million SL rupees; in 1983, it went up to 1800 million SL rupees. Since 1983, it has escalated year after year. The estimated defence expenditure for 1999 is 47.3 billion SL rupees. The corresponding figure for 1998 was 45.0 billion SL rupees. Defence expenditure accounts for nearly 13.26 per cent of the budgetary expenditure, one of the highest in Third World countries.

The armed forces, especially at the officers' level, are emerging as a professional group. They are relatively more sensitive to human rights. Most observers agree that the human rights situation has improved since Ms. Kumaratunga assumed power. It must be highlighted that the Sri Lankan army is facing acute shortage of manpower. What is more tragic, desertions are very high. According to reliable sources, one out of ten soldiers desert, some of them with arms.

Instead of punishing the deserters, the Government has repeatedly declared amnesty. Few deserters have responded to Government appeal, while many others are absconding. Equally deplorable, only six weeks training is given before the soldiers are sent to the battle front. The recruitment drive, despite a massive increase in salary, has not been very successful. Early this year,

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Government made concerted efforts to recruit Tamils into the army, but the attempt ended in dismal failure.

In an interview with *Janes' Defence Weekly* (June 16, 1999), the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister, Mr. Lakshman Kadiragamar, admitted that Colombo did not have an external intelligence wing "until last year". He added, with unusual candour, that "our intelligence agencies are (still) very poor indeed."

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WIT

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