

Anatomy of LTTE collapse and the Fonseka factor

By Shamindra Ferdinando

Whatever the circumstances in which General Sarath Fonseka quit the army, a grateful nation should never forget his leading role in Sri Lanka's victory over LTTE terrorism. Fonseka, the first Sinha Regiment officer to command the army achieved what many felt could not be feasible, particularly for a third world army though it had vast experience in fighting terrorism.

Although, right thinking people would not condone, Fonseka 'playing' politics at the expense of the very victory which would not have been possible without his resolute leadership, it would be a mistake to undervalue his role in Sri Lanka's greatest ever post-independence achievement.

Any attempt to discredit the war hero would not only be counter-productive but a slur on the fighting forces as well as the entire nation which rallied around the armed forces. Although all three forces suffered some humiliating setbacks with heavy loss of life, particularly in the case of the army and Rs. Billions worth of arms, ammunition and equipment, the fighting forces never looked back until LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran's body was shown on television.

In fact, nothing would please those who had failed to save the LTTE than causing an irreparable rift among key political and military leaders responsible for defeating the LTTE. For an Opposition (now it can be called UNP-JVP combine), which had never been able to come to terms with President Mahinda Rajapaksa's growing popularity, the Fonseka factor seems to be the only way to hit back at the President. But the government (read as decision makers within the ruling UPFA) should be aware of a danger posed by friends who may cause chaos by wild allegations. Nothing could be as bad as an attempt to propagate a lie that there had been a foreign backed attempt to overthrow the Sri Lankan government.

An out-and-out military triumph over the LTTE would have been an extremely overwhelming task had the LTTE succeeded in assassinating the then Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka in April 2006. Addressing troops on the Vellamullivaikkal beach at the end of the war, a jubilant Fonseka declared that Sri Lanka's war victory was the only second such success over a terrorist organisation. The first was the insurgency in Malaysia 50 years ago whereas his troops had to overcome a fully equipped enemy with assets at sea as well as air.

Fonseka, who had been wounded in action before, survived the assassination attempt though he received grievous injuries. He returned a few months later to spearhead ground operations. During his absence the then Chief of Staff Major General Nanda Mallawarachchi, presently Sri Lanka High Commissioner in Indonesia gave leadership.

In December of the same year, the LTTE targeted Defence Secretary Lt. Colonel Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, who had retired in the early 90s following a distinguished career in the army. The Gajaba Regiment veteran survived the attack. Had the LTTE achieved its target, the war effort would have definitely collapsed as no one could have kept the combined security forces offensive on track. To the LTTE's credit, its assessment on the

strength of the government's war machine had been accurate. They quite correctly believed that assassination of the Defence Secretary and the army chief in quick succession would cause a severe setback and the government may probably seek political negotiations again.

Fonseka was the only army chief targeted by an LTTE suicide cadre. Similarly, the LTTE had not bothered with any other previous

achievements, too, would be envied by many Messrs Karannagoda and Goonetilleke went to the extent in changing the mode of operations. The bottom line is that both officers conducted independent offensive operations outside the missions directly in support of the army as part of the government's overall strategy. Karannagoda put the vast LTTE arms smuggling network out of business and also ensured that

time and I believe any other would have succumbed to immense pressure caused by mounting losses. But he held firm, tolerated no dissent and forced the officer corps to meet targets regardless battlefield difficulties. He had been harsh, brash and ruthless and did not stop until the army achieved its victory.

Those who believed in a quick LTTE victory over the government never expected the Defence

Secretary played a pivotal role in this. Let me remind you, the government would have re-opened the Muhamalai entry/exit point at the height of the Eelam war IV if not for Gotabhaya, who opposed the move as it would be detrimental to the overall military strategy. The Rajapakas also secured the much needed political stability needed to prosecute the war by offering perks and privileges to Opposition MPs who switched their allegiance to the President. The war would have come to an end had the UNP-JVP combine succeeded in defeating the government at the 2008 Budget.

The President and his political team fully exploited splits within the LTTE, also to strengthen the UPFA while the military, including the navy, used the Eastern Tigers against the Vanni Tigers.

The President and the Defence Secretary provided the wherewithal to fight the enemy. Perhaps the most important decision taken by them was to authorise not only the army but other services as well to launch a rapid recruitment programme. This allowed the army to double its strength during the campaign, thereby providing the necessary muscle to continue with ground operations.

The UNP and even the JVP, never expected the Rajapakas to succeed and continue until the LTTE collapsed. While troops battled it out on the Vanni front, Basil Rajapaksa, MP, spearheaded rehabilitation efforts in the Eastern Province before turning his attention to the north. Although, the President had been accused of nepotism, no one could dispute the fact that both Gotabhaya and Basil had met the challenge. No one else could have done a better job.

The LTTE made several attempts to assassinate the President during the war and even after the Tigers' collapse last May. The LTTE had men in uniform in its payroll to facilitate attacks on both the President and the former army Chief in the recent past. Anton Balasingham, a former *Virakesari* staffer and British High Commission employee at the HC in Colombo had boasted about their ability to infiltrate the military when LTTE and Sri Lankan delegations met in Geneva in early 2006. Gomin Dayasri, veteran lawyer who represented Sri Lanka at the Geneva confab told this writer about Balasingham's bragging to the embarrassment to the Sri Lankan delegation.

Although this government like any other administration had been corrupt and wasteful to its core, it succeeded at the war front though critics believed the President and his 'A' team could not sustain the offensive due to domestic and external resources. The forces arrayed against the Sri Lankan government had been formidable. As the LTTE retreated on multiple fronts in the Vanni theatre, a section of the international community led by US, EU, UK and Tamil Nadu demanded an immediate end to the offensive. A section of the media, too, did everything possible to throw a lifeline. But the Sri Lankan leadership stood firm. Had the President given in to their pressure and called off the offensive, GSP plus would never have been an issue. Sri Lanka would not have been targeted at the Geneva Human Rights Council or opposed a recent \$ 2.6 billion IMF loan facility.

To President Rajapaksa's credit, he simply ignored foreign dictates as well as domestic political compulsions until the LTTE lay wasted on the Vanni battlefields. The likes

of CWC, the SLMC and the TNA which went to the extent in recognising the LTTE as the sole representatives of the Tamil speaking people never managed to manipulate the President. For him, the war against LTTE terrorism was non-negotiable and he wanted the LTTE wiped out at any cost. There had not been any difference between the President's position and that of Messrs Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, Fonseka, Karannagoda and Goonetilleke. The vast majority of people wanted the same whereas the only exception was a section of the Opposition whose political fortunes very much depend on the LTTE factor. The international community and a section of the press which always overestimated the LTTE's military capability worked overtime to save the Tigers. The Tamil Diaspora and those who lived luxurious life with foreign funds received for peace building, national reconciliation, human rights and good governance shed crocodile tears for Tamil civilians. They had conveniently forgotten that not only Tamil civilians but over 10,000 LTTE cadres, including Prabhakaran's parents, too, sought protection from the government. As the end neared, thousands of LTTE cadres, including suicide cadres had dropped their weapons and joined the civilian exodus. Had they fought, the army would have definitely lost thousands more on Vanni battlefields but intense military pressure caused rapid collapse of the Tigers. Those who bragged about LTTE conventional fighting capability after they overran the strategic Elephant Pass base and almost succeeded in overwhelming the Jaffna peninsula way back in 2000 would never have expected General Fonseka's army to finish off the enemy.

The Opposition believes that a wartime alliance headed by President Rajapaksa would collapse over the Fonseka affair, thereby paving the way for political change. Their strategy is clear and if successful will cause immense damage even though the incumbent President can comfortably secure a second term. Contrary to Opposition claims, in keeping with Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa's directives, investigators are hunting for LTTE operatives both here and overseas. The seizure of 'KP' abroad is evidence that the government is continuing with anti-LTTE operations aimed at thwarting any LTTE attempt to stage a comeback. Would the so-called Opposition alliance assure that intelligence operations will continue even if their man wins the presidency? Would Tamil political parties in the Opposition alliance agree for continuation of operations against the backdrop of recent UNP declaration that the government should sell its military assets now that the LTTE had been defeated.



President Mahinda Rajapaksa and Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa with former Army Chief General Sarath Fonseka visit Kilinochchi shortly after troops liberated the town last January.



SLAF Chief and Acting Chief of Defence Staff

Defence Secretary Admiral Clancy Fernando was the only service chief assassinated by an LTTE suicide cadre way back in November 1992. Fernando earned the wrath of the LTTE for trying to cut off LTTE supply routes to and from the Jaffna peninsula by launching operations in the Jaffna lagoon.

In fact, the Defence Secretary and the army Chief had fashioned Sri Lanka's response to the LTTE threat. Had they succumbed, the war effort would have collapsed and terrorism reigned supreme. There is absolutely no doubt that no one would be able to repeat their achievements. Their unprecedented achievements would be unparalleled. Similarly, Admiral Wasantha Karannagoda, Air Chief Marshal Roshan Goonetilleke and the then Commandant of the elite Special Task Force (STF) met the LTTE challenge. Their unparalleled



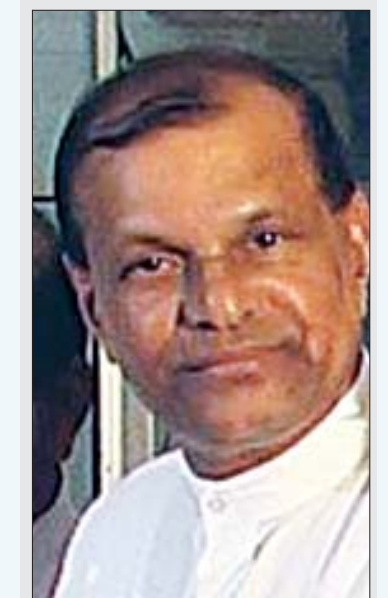
Former Navy Chief

the LTTE could not escape by sea at the final stages of the Mullaitivu battle early this year while the Air Force chief achieved tremendous success. Under Goonetilleke's command, the SLAF crushed the LTTE's desire to fight. The navy also maintained the Trincomalee-Kankesanthurai lifeline at a heavy cost with the support of the SLAF. Had the navy failed in this gigantic task, the Jaffna-based forces would have been vulnerable. The army lost the overland main supply route in 1990 during the then President Ranasinghe Premadasa's tenure.

But at the end of the day, whatever the roles played by sister services, the army had to fight. The army paid an extremely high price for its victory over the LTTE. The loss of about 5,500 officers and men and about 30,000 during the three-year offensive was evidence of their commitment. General Fonseka held the command at a very difficult

Secretary and the armed forces chiefs to react boldly to the LTTE military challenge. A section of the international community supportive of the LTTE campaign as well as pro-LTTE groups, both here and abroad, including the media heaped pressure on the government. Had anyone bothered to study the print and electronic media coverage of the suicide attack on General Fonseka, their strategy could be identified. But today, the same lot had thrown its weight behind a UNP-led Opposition bid to field General Fonseka at the next presidential poll against President Mahinda Rajapaksa.

The armed forces' triumph over the LTTE depended very much on President Rajapaksa's strength. Had he succumbed to international pressure like his predecessors did, the armed forces would never have launched a massive multi-pronged offensive to liberate the Vanni. Heavy casualties on the battle front, a sneering Opposition, mounting international pressure over loss of civilian life due to military action and indiscriminate LTTE attacks on public targets in the South, would have forced any other President to seek fresh negotiations. But President Rajapaksa resolutely met the challenge and went ahead with the offensive until General Fonseka's army wiped out the LTTE on the banks of the Nanthikadal lagoon last May. His brother Gotabhaya had been his strength. Also to the credit of the President, his foreign policy though criticised by many, never failed to bring in fresh arms, ammunition and equipment to fight the LTTE while blocking overseas arms shipments to the LTTE. The President went to the extent of appealing to China to close down illegal arms



Former Army Chief of Staff Major General G. A. Chandrasiri says that the resettlement process is on track. Chandrasiri, the first Governor of the Northern Province is confident that the government can meet the challenging task early next year with the support of the international community. Early this week, the government gave the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) access to areas west of the A9 where people are being resettled with the help of many countries and UN agencies.