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Introduction

Major General Ashok Mehta's paper is the first complete account to be published on Sri Lanka's last Eelam War. General Mehta provides a comprehensive overview of Eelam War IV, detailing the history of events from the outbreak of the conflict right up to its conclusion. His overview looks at the military and political factors involved and succeeds in being both narrative and analytical

One of the most valuable aspects of this paper lies in the author's ability to bring together a wide range of information on different aspects and areas of the conflict. Using Sri Lankan and international sources, General Mehta has done his best to scrutinise everything within his reach, drawing on newspapers, magazine articles, media sources, personal interviews, conversations and field accounts. Despite the vast array of material which has emerged, General Mehta works his way through the different stages of the conflict step by step. His approach is ordered and methodical, and above all, it is extremely lucid. This is what makes his paper such a useful and informative introduction to the subject.

Given his vast experience and eminence in his field, it is disappointing that General Mehta has to rely so heavily on secondary evidence. At times, this serves to restrict his very considerable powers of analysis. How the rest of the world sees the Eelam War is well known and well documented. How Sri Lankans saw the conflict and how they fought it less known. What happened? What changed and how was it done? This is the story which General Mehta and other authorities should seek to understand and try to tell.

The first part of Mehta's paper goes to some length to set the scene, outlining the political circumstances which led to the outbreak of hostilities. In tracing the history of these events, Mehta very rightly points out that it was the LTTE who closed the door to negotiations.

The LTTE's attempts to assassinate the Army Commander and the Defence Secretary had a profound impact on the military and political leadership. Although he acknowledges that they helped precipitate the reorganisation of the army,³ General Mehta does not probe any further. In reality, there were crucial moments and their impact fundamental and formative.

The LTTE were well aware of the threat posed by General Sarath Fonseka. In their eyes, he was one of the few men left capable of destroying their organisation. In the short time since he became Army Commander, General Fonseka had already embarked on a far-reaching reorganisation of the army. However, due to the political situation at the time, he found himself working under tremendous constraints.

The LTTE suicide attack left Fonseka badly injured and he was lucky to escape with his life. This had a profound effect on the Army Commander, who was well known in army circles for his tenacious and unrelenting nature. Whereas previous commanders may have backed down, with Fonseka, the attempt to kill him merely hardened his determination, setting his resolve in stone. "They tried to kill me once. They will not get a second chance."⁴ In trying to kill Fonseka, the LTTE had created a driving, implacable enemy. This was the source of his motivation and unremitting personal commitment.

The attempt on General Fonseka also helped change attitudes within the establishment. The leadership realised that without Fonseka, they could not hope to fight (and defeat) the Tigers. The restraints which had held Fonseka back were lifted. He was allowed a free hand and given the resources he needed.

The attempt on the life of the Defence Secretary in December 2006 was another crucial moment. One of the most telling images of the conflict is the sight of President Mahinda Rajapakse embracing his brother after he had just escaped with his life. Captured on national television, the President's face as he embraces his brother, makes an interesting study. Apart from the immense joy and relief, there is apprehension and sober realisation.

Sri Lanka's political leadership had been renowned for its lack of commitment and its tendency to back down in the face of military reverses and international pressure. This had been one of the prevailing characteristics of the whole conflict. To many within the military, President Mahinda Rajapakse was no different. In Mehta's own words, "puncturing the myth of the LTTE's invincibility was an idea which even Mahinda Rajapakse did not believe possible."

General Mehta writes that in "November 2005, soon after he became president, he cranked up the war machinery." A populist and a shrewd tactician, a brief glance at Mahinda Rajapakse's political career does not reveal a man with a set agenda or a particular cause. Very much a man of the moment, in many peoples' eyes, he was the quintessential dealmaker. To see him as he has been portrayed, as a hardline Sinhala Buddhist nationalist, irretrievably committed to war, is far from the truth. The assassination attempt on his brother however, brought home the hard truth. It convinced the President and those nearest to him that they would never be safe while the LTTE remained in being. It convinced them that this was a struggle which had to be fought to the finish; only then could a lasting peace be achieved. This realisation was what added steel to the political will, generating a resolution and a tenacity which no Sri Lankan government had ever shown before.

In 1987, the government of JR Jayewardene had given way in the face of Indian pressure. It called off the Vadamarachchi offensive when it was on the verge of success, signed the Indo-Lanka Accord and accepted the reality of Indian intervention in Sri Lanka. The administration of President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaranatunge proved no different. After a series of military reverses and an attempt on her life in 1999, a visibly shaken Kumaranatunge lost her nerve. Calling off the war, she did everything she could to prevent a resumption of hostilities, remaining inactive even when her Foreign Minister, Lakshman Kadirgamar, was murdered in 2005.

The history of the Eelam War shows that the LTTE had consistently relied on assassinations to break the morale of the Sri Lankan government and undermine its willingness and ability to fight. This had been a tried and tested method and it had always worked before. What is extraordinary is that it did not work this time.

Instead, the very opposite of what the LTTE had intended occurred. It brought the military and the political leadership together and gave them a vested interest in fighting the war. Unlike previous regimes, this administration did not lose its nerve and back down. The Rajapakse government was not overwhelmed by the grim reality of what had been up till now an unwinnable war. Instead of being cowed, they embraced this reality and set about changing it – to make an unwinnable war winnable. It was a remarkable political transformation. Almost every commentator talks of political will as being a key factor in the final resolution of the last Eelam War. This was its secret.

The real clues to the outbreak of Eelam War IV lie in the thinking of Prabhakaran and the Tamil Tiger hierarchy. Why did the LTTE obstruct negotiations? Why did it refuse to compromise and why did it drive the Sri Lanka government to the point of war? These are some of the questions which come to mind.

The answer is simple. The LTTE went to war because it thought it could win. This was the other reality behind the conflict. The international community and the international media had trumpeted it around the world that the Tamil Tigers were invincible. General Mehta is absolutely right when he tells us that Prabhakaran and the LTTE misread Mahinda Rajapakse and that they underestimated the Sri Lankan army.⁹ As a result, the Tigers believed that this administration would set out to do what all Sri Lankan governments had tried to do in the past - to weaken the LTTE and force them to talk.

The Tigers themselves believed that the Sri Lankan government could not win and that the Sri Lanka army could not fight. It was what they told the civilians who followed them. In the words of an old woman fleeing the great camp at Pudemattalan, this was something which they had all believed.

They promised us Freedom. Freedom from the Sinhalese. They said that the Sinhalese army would never come here. They said that they were frightened and stupid. They will only come on the road. Where is our freedom now?

Judging from past history, the Tigers felt sure that even if the Sri Lankan government did go to

war, it could not sustain the cost of a prolonged conflict. The Tigers believed the Rajapakse administration would never be able to stand up to international pressure. Despite everything which has been said and written about Mahinda Rajapakse's hardline attitude, the fact remains that the LTTE themselves were convinced that Rajapakse was weak. In their eyes, he was an easier option than the better known and more seasoned Ranil Wickremasinghe.

This was an important strand in their thinking. It explains why they prevented voting in the areas under their control in the Presidential election. Had they not done so, the consensus is that the election would have gone Wickremasinghe's way.

As the LTTE saw it, they had succeeded in bringing every Sri Lankan government to its knees. They were convinced that they would win and that this would be the final blow. The time had finally come.

Liberation of the East

After he has set the scene, General Mehta moves on to recount the liberation of the eastern province.¹² Very much in command of his facts, he pieces together the various strands of information to record the progress of military operations with great clarity. Both tactically and strategically, he is able to assess the key decisions made and evaluate the turn of events.

The eastern province contained large tracts of primary jungle and it was ideal for guerilla fighting. The operations here were spearheaded by commandos and special forces, backed up by infantry. In its early stages, the campaign was directed by Brigadier Prasanna Silva. An infantryman with a special forces background, Brigadier Silva understood the nuances of using troops in small operations in this environment. In the recent past, the army had relied on establishing Forward Defence Lines (FDL). This time, they set Forward Operating Bases (FOB) and took on the Tamil Tigers in the jungles.

The jungle terrain restricted the use of heavy weapons and airpower; as a result, collateral damage was very limited. The guerillas were dependent on Tamil villages which were located nearby, in the vicinity of the jungle areas where they operated. It was here that they had their supply dumps and hid their stores of arms and ammunition. For many of the cadres, these villages were also their homes and they often would return to rest and have a hot meal. Probing into the forest in small units, the Sri Lankan army targeted these areas, launching detailed patrols and ambushing the enemy. These tactics upset the guerillas and disrupted their *modus operandi*.

Karuna's defection was an important element in the success of the whole operation and General Mehta leaves us in no doubt of its significance. However the crucial fact is that the Sri Lankan

army, especially the special forces and commandos, had operated in these jungles before and that they had been just as successful in the past.¹³ From 1991-2, the Sri Lankan army had proved so effective in the East that they had managed to establish government control across the province.¹⁴ As a result, the government was able to hold an election in 1993, where almost 70 percent of the population voted. For all his vaunted prowess, Karuna had been unable to halt the army's progress and he was forced to flee to the north. However, in the following years, poor political and military thinking saw the eastern province lost once more. The areas which had been so painstakingly cleared were abandoned and the troops transferred to participate in Operation Riviresa in the north. It was only in 1995, after Riviresa had ended, that Karuna was able to return.

These were the real reasons for the rapid success of the eastern campaign. The Sri Lankan army was already familiar with the environment and they been just as effective in the past. Karuna's defection certainly made their task easier. However, he and his cadres had been bested once before on their home ground.

One of the most extraordinary characteristics of the war in the eastern province was the chorus of derision and condemnation against which the whole operation was conducted. This chorus was led by the opposition United National Party, whose leaders went out of their way to belittle the army's efforts. The army's seizure of the LTTE's great jungle stronghold of Thoppigala was ridiculed by no less a figure than the leader of the Opposition, Mr. Ranil Wickremasinghe. Speaking on television at a public gathering at Galle on 17 July 2007 Wickremasinghe dismissed Thoppigala as an empty patch of jungle.¹⁵ Amidst roars of laughter from his own supporters, he asked, "So what is so special about Thoppigala? Its just a useless patch of empty jungle which is larger than whole district of Colombo."¹⁶

This onslaught continued for the greater part of the war and lasted till the capture of Kilinochchi. On 13 November 2008, at the height of the Vanni operation, UNP front-liner Ravi Karunanayake mocked the army's advance in the Parliament.¹⁷ He accused the army of pretending to march towards "Alimankade" (Elephant Pass) when it was really only going towards Pamankade, a suburb of Colombo.¹⁸ Two weeks later, another political heavyweight Mangala Samaraweera, leader of the People's Wing of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, personally attacked the army commander. "Sarath Fonseka," he said. "was not only unsuitable to lead the Sri Lanka army, he was not even fit to command the Salvation Army."¹⁹

It was an extraordinary set of circumstances, quite unparalleled in the history of recent conflicts. While the army was making unprecedented gains, it was being publicly ridiculed by a large section of the political elite. It is a factor which is not always appreciated and very few analysts have touched on it. One would have expected General Mehta to refer to this, especially in light of its impact on morale and motivation.

From the Falklands to the Gulf War, Iraq and Afghanistan, no fighting force and its serving officers have had to endure this kind of ridicule during a campaign. A sobering lesson to any soldier, it is an unsavoury aspect of democracy at its very worst. Indeed, to search for parallels, one has to hark back to the ancient past, to the bitter party politics of Athens during the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC).

The army was also attacked by a section of the press, and there were strong suspicions that military details were being leaked by leading English newspapers and individual columnists. It was also denounced by leading members of the English intelligentsia, several of whom spearheaded a far-reaching campaign against the army. These factors only served to heighten the level of international criticism, putting enormous pressure on the government, the armed forces and the conduct of military operations.

The remarkable fact is that this did not have a crippling effect on morale and motivation.

The reason for this can only lie in the spirit which had been fostered within the armed forces. General Mehta tells us that this was the result of government initiatives to foster public support and raise the profile of the average soldier.²⁰ The Sinhala press and media were extensively deployed to portray the soldiers as national heroes and defenders of the motherland from terrorism.²¹ Honoured and respected in their own communities, the servicemen felt that the country was behind them.²² This was the first time that this had happened in the history of the Eelam War ²³ It was a powerful motivating force and it made a huge difference.²⁴

An internal momentum had been generated. The effect was that the *esprit de corps* was so high that it could not be eroded from without; only from within.

The Northern Offensive

General Mehta's account of the northern offensive is once again informative and clear cut.²⁵ Beginning in July 2007 and ending in April 2009, this was a critical operation of immense complexity and enormous difficulty. Far more prolonged than the eastern campaign, it was also far more uncertain. What was so important about this theatre was that the Sri Lankan army was going into these areas for the very first time, after almost seventeen years. Unlike the East, they were operating in territory which was completely unfamiliar and totally hostile. However, General's Mehta's narrative is all too brief, at times sketchy and at others, almost skeletal. Most of his attention is focused on The Last Battle and the rest of the campaign occupies a relatively brief section; in fact, it takes up less than half the space devoted to the eastern campaign.

In his narrative of military operations, it would have been helpful if General Mehta had been able look more closely at the nature of the environment in each theatre. Each formation found itself operating under different conditions in different terrains. As the lay of the land changed, so did the way that the enemy used it. This meant that almost every division found itself fighting a different type of battle, sometimes several different battles, during the course of one campaign.

In the north, both the 53 Division and the 55 Division had to fight in the arid, semi desert conditions of the Jaffna peninsula. Temperatures rose to 40 C, water was scarce and shade limited. After the breakthrough had been made, the 55 Division under General Prasanna Silva, found itself fighting along the sands, beaches and lagoons of the North Eastern shoreline.²⁶

Along with the 58, the 53 Division under General Kamal Guneratne was then caught up in bitter semi-urban warfare in the areas around Dharmapuram and Pudukudirippu. This was a relatively builtup area, closely settled with small towns and villages. The obstacles here were many and varied, the challenge far more complex and the fighting much more intense.²⁷ One of the specific problems was that the buildings were smaller and the spaces between them were larger, which made the guerillas lines of observation clearer and it was easier for them to use artillery. They were also able to deploy their machine guns to maximum effect, creating areas where the advancing troops were channeled into killing zones.

A key part of the campaign was the role which was given to the 57 Division under General Jagath Dias. This formation spearheaded the crucial thrust which opened the route to Kilinochchi. The LTTE considered Kilinochchi to be their stronghold and they had surrounded it with a network of defences. It is significant that this task was entrusted to Jagath Dias. Dias was an immensely experienced infantry officer who had spent more time in the field than in staff commands. He had seen the war from the position of a platoon commander to general and understood the soldier's mind, his needs and concerns.

However, instead of launching a frontal assault, the army attacked through the Madhu jungles, outflanking the defences which the LTTE had prepared. This turned out to be one of the most difficult operations, a prolonged and painstaking effort, which inched its way through the forest. These were mostly secondary jungles, full of little trees and scrub with dense, tangled undergrowth. These small trees made it much more difficult to see and the thick undergrowth made the going very difficult. Interspersed with the stretches of jungle were paddy fields, patches of chena cultivation, marshy land and scrub. All of these different natural features posed their own challenges as the defenders had prepared each one to their own advantage. It was the transition from one to another which proved the most dangerous for the advancing troops.

The terrain was made even more difficult by the weather. The campaign was fought during the monsoon, often in pouring rain and oceans of mud. Constantly wet and never dry, colds, fever and foot rot played havoc with the advancing troops.²⁸ Lieutenant Colonel Liyanage remembers that a lot of the time they had to walk without boots because their feet were rotting.²⁹ When they finally reached Kilinochchi, it was the first time in months that he was able to sleep under a roof.³⁰

The importance of this theatre has yet to be fully realised. By coming through the jungles, the army caught the guerillas by surprise.³¹ They had not expected the enemy to take this route so they had not mined these areas as heavily.³² It stretched the LTTE, forcing them to fight far from their base in Kilinochchi.³³ They had to transport their troops, their supplies, their armament and their wounded long distances along narrow jungle tracks.³⁴ Prabharakan was compelled to deploy many of his best troops here, using up many of his most experienced cadres and middle level leaders.³⁵ Such was the level of attrition that by the time the 57 Division reached Kilinochchi, it was estimated that Prabharakan had lost 65 percent of his best cadres.³⁶ The Madhu campaign so weakened the LTTE that it opened up many of the other fronts. Reaching Kilinochchi was really the key; as such its treatment in the paper could have been far more substantial.

It was the success of the Madhu offensive which made the western route taken by Brigadier Shavendra de Silva possible. This spectacular campaign was conducted at great speed, with the aid of armour and mechanised forces. Turning the LTTE's entire western defences, this operation eliminated the satellite camps in the vicinity of the Western coastline and cut off the logistics bases connecting the coast to the hinterland.

To the west of Giant's Tank was the Mannar District. Described as the Rice Bowl of Sri Lanka, this was flat, open terrain, abounding in many small tanks and lush paddyfields. During the monsoon, it became waterlogged and marshy.³⁷ To enable his infantry to approach the enemy lines, de Silva dug ditches and entrenchments across open plains.³⁸ The rains flooded many of these entrenchments, causing severe loss of life. "The water level sometimes rose to six feet, while the average Sri Lankan soldier was five foot five or five foot six."³⁹ Many of them were swept away and some even drowned. In these conditions, the armoured and mechanised forces found the going particularly difficult and de Silva's progress was excruciatingly slow. General Mehta notes that in eight months, the troops barely advanced eight kilometres.⁴⁰

Once the 58 Division had fought its way through the LTTE defences, it proceeded rapidly up the coast, overrunning the sea bases which had existed all along the western coast. This severed the links and the routes which the LTTE had cultivated with Tamil Nadu, depriving them of much needed supplies. It also deprived the Tigers of a vital casualty evacuation route, which they had used ever since the deployment of the IPKF.

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