

The 59 Division, under Armoured Corps officer General Nandana Udawatte, was charged with penetrating the great Andakulam forests, which stretched from Weli Oya to Mullaitivu. These were very different in character to the jungles of the Vanni. They were mostly primary forests, which had never been cut or cleared. Here, great trees grew close together, shutting out the sky and forming a thick canopy overhead. The ground was carpeted with crackling twigs and fallen leaves and sound here carried much further. Unlike the Vanni jungles, there was very little undergrowth and the going was much easier. The lines of vision too were much clearer and from the tops of trees, you could see for great distances. It was here that the Tamil Tigers had brought the Indian Peace Keeping Force to a grounding halt. Since then, the penetration of these forests had been seen as an impossible task and many experts predicted that the Mullaitivu jungle would have been turned in to a killing field. In February 2009, General AS Kalkat reflected.

The LTTE surprised the IPKF by booby trapping the forest near Mullaitivu; they knew the terrain like the back of their palm and put up fierce resistance...It is one of the most dangerous forests in the world and till the Sinhalese forces defeat the LTTE there, they cannot be called the real victors. Unlike the two other battlefronts, there were very few populated areas and much of the fighting took place in thick jungle terrain. This environment demanded a completely different way of thinking and it was here that the new concepts and strategies adopted by the army proved so effective.

Starting from Weli Oya, the 59 Division battled its way through Oddusudan to finally reach Mullaitivu on the eastern coast. Once again, the LTTE had never expected this line of attack. They had thought these forests were impenetrable and the army's success caught them completely by surprise. To contain the advance, they had to bring troops from other areas, denuding their defences on other fronts. It was an exhausting and bloody progress. By the time they reached Mullaitivu, this task force was so worn out that most of the fighting was left to the other army groups. Although very little is heard of this operation, it was of fundamental importance.

The northern campaign was a huge and ambitious operation. It entailed several large formations, proceeding simultaneously on multiple axes across different terrains into unfamiliar territory. The nature of this achievement has yet to be fully realised. In conception, scale and scope, it was completely different from every previous operation; indeed, nothing of this nature had ever been attempted. A triumph of strategy, planning and execution, it was also a huge feat of coordination and control. The progress of each operation was constantly monitored and its execution closely supervised. In almost every meeting with the senior field commanders, I observed that the phone would ring every few minutes, even late at night. Specific questions would be asked and detailed, sometimes lengthy explanations would follow.

The Last Battle

A great deal of General Mehta's account of the northern campaign is devoted to The Last Battle. This forms the largest and the longest part in the whole paper. Dealing with the events of end of April 2009, it recounts the last days of Prabhakaran and the Tamil Tigers. Although it is undoubtedly the most interesting episode from a political point of view, from a military perspective, it is perhaps the least interesting and the least useful. By this stage, the die had been cast and the conflict had assumed the character of a straightforward struggle for survival between an increasingly desperate LTTE and an increasingly dominant army.

General Mehta is very definite in his opinion of this last phase:

The cost of victory ignored...charges of genocide and war crimes and a humanitarian catastrophe. There were reports of 20,000 dead in the No Fire Zone between 22 April and 19 May.

In his conclusion, General Mehta observes that the Sri Lankan experience is a model which India could almost never follow. "It follows a policy of minimum force applied in good faith, with the use of heavy weapons and airpower almost always avoided." It would be unfair to judge the general's narrative on the basis of information to which he does not have access. However, it is here that the lack of first hand material begins to count. In its absence, General Mehta's account of this last phase becomes dependent on the secondary authorities which he has to work with. It becomes a tale of numbers and movements, and as such, it tells us little and the lack of detail is often telling.

The Tamil Tigers' use of civilians has been widely acknowledged.

The IPKF observed a number of LTTE battlefield innovations. The LTTE cadres were always accompanied by an equal number of unarmed personnel. Their function was to provide extra ammunition, to recover weaponry from their own fallen cadres and it was their job to carry away the bodies of slain LTTE personnel. If they could not remove a corpse, they clothed the body in a lungi to create the impression that the slain person was a civilian.

A closer look merely underlines the enormous difficulty which the troops faced in distinguishing between bona fide civilians and fighting cadres. In the fast moving circumstances of a running battle, the challenge this posed does not seem to be appreciated. The LTTE frequently used children and suicide bombers as offensive weapons, almost like tanks. Charging ahead, they would blast a way through the defences. The cadres would then pour through the breach.

Civilians fighting as soldiers, wearing T shirts and trousers. The first you see is when they are

running towards you. Young boys and girls. You have only a few moments to think. And then it is too late.

In these circumstances, restraint was dangerous; hesitation often fatal.

The details of close combat infantry fighting, against utterly reckless and suicidal opponents, is surely worth closer study. It is a scenario which is difficult for a conventional infantry force to imagine. One particular story vividly illustrates the challenges which had to be faced:

We were advancing in a line. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a suicide truck appeared. It came full speed at us, bumping across the ground. We didn't have time to think. The sergeant shouted "RPG, RPG!" It gave us time. The sergeant was blown up but we stopped the truck.

Clarity of thought combined with speed of action; these were the qualities which the infantryman relied on to keep himself alive. His life depended on his reflexes and his reactions; he had to think on his feet in order to survive.

General Mehta goes on to talk about the horrendous human cost of the campaign,⁵² mentioning the "callous lack of concern for civilian casualties" demonstrated by both Prabhakaran and "his opponents." Up till now, the General had confined himself to sure ground and his assessments have been cautious and measured. Leaving aside the issue of primary sources, there is a whole range of secondary material on this subject. The details suggest that there are many issues which need to be considered.

Not only did many of the guerillas not wear uniforms, once injured, they also tended to change their clothes. Another practical problem was the difficulty of separating civilian casualties from LTTE casualties. Testifying before the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission, the Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse underlines the importance of this fact.

If the military suffered, you can imagine the number of LTTE casualties. They all put these figures into the civilian casualty figures. Obviously, if the army suffered that much, it was at least the same amount of casualties from the LTTE. I'm sure that it is much more because of the firepower of the government forces. Nobody knows how much and nobody talks about it.

There were also the restraints which were imposed on the use of indirect fire, such as artillery, mortars and airpower. The advancing troops were called on to identify the nature of their targets before they opened fire.

By doing that, I should say that we suffered more casualties. We took that risk; obviously, you are restricting some of your fire. We had to use only the personal weapons. Soldiers had to move in, identify and shoot. That was a step we took to protect civilian casualties. Nowhere in the world is this done.

These issues are now well known and all of them need to be borne in mind.

One of the most daring operations of the war was launched specifically to release the civilians trapped within the No Fire Zone at Pudumattalan. The objective was to seize the earthen bund which the LTTE had erected across the shallow waters of the Nandi Kadal Lagoon. Nearly ten feet high and covered with thick palmyrah fronds, it was nearly three kilometers long. Designed to keep the army out, it was also a barricade which kept the civilians in.

Colonel Ralph Nugera, the Commander of the Commando Brigade was one of those entrusted with the task of capturing the bund.

The first challenge was to cross the lagoon, across the open ground and through the water. It was very exposed and there was no cover. The second was to seize the wall and make a breach. If we succeeded in taking it, the people trapped within the camp would be able to get through. If we didn't sort out the defences and the people tried to come, the casualties would be huge.

Nugera described the absolute chaos which ensued once his men had seized the embankment:

They were firing artillery at us. Luckily, the LTTE had very few heavy weapons left, but they were sniping at us from amongst the people as they were trying to get away. While everybody was running towards us, the cadres were shooting at us from behind them. We held on to our positions. We could only shoot when we were certain. Yet even in the middle of all this hell, the people screaming, running here and there, my men remained calm. They continued to take aim, firing at the cadres whenever they could get a shot.

This is but one example, but my impression is the restraint exercised by the Sri Lankan troops was considerable. By Monday, 20 April 2008, the bund had been breached and pictures beamed all over the world showed hundreds of thousands of people crossing the lagoon into army lines. It was one of the most memorable episodes of the conflict, yet it barely figures in General Mehta's narrative.

General Mehta draws our attention to the importance of public opinion in Tamil Nadu and India, observing that the last offensive was timed to coincide with the end of the Indian elections. On this issue, his judgment is correct. While this writer was in the conflict zone, he was puzzled by the lack of activity during this period. Every delay and every ceasefire gave the guerillas more time to build more defences, dig more trenches and lay more mines. The political factor cost the Sri Lankan army dearly. Every day lost saw more soldiers killed and wounded.

In the areas controlled by the Tamil Tigers, the fabric of civilian life was interwoven with the military cause. Walking through the huge LTTE encampment at Pudumattalan in the No Fire Zone, this was the reality which struck me time and time again. There was no distinction between civil and military. This was a community at war. Bunkers and sandbags were made out of women's saris, while home-made hand grenades lay scattered outside tents.

Everywhere you turned there were bunkers; like the grenades, they were rough and ready made. Even a stranded lorry had a purpose. Wedged into the sand, its undercarriage had been removed and the ground beneath carved out. Ingenious and unusual, as a strongpoint, it was as good as any.

People flying in fear of their lives only have the clothes on their backs. We have been told that the LTTE had forced their people from their homes. Yet they had time to bring their possessions, beds, tables, desks, chairs and even cupboards. Some had even brought their gates, while others had found time to bring their pets. As the Tigers had retreated, the people had fled with them. Gathering up their worldly goods, they had carried them as they went. They had not been driven from their homes; they had left them willingly, believing and trusting in the future of Tamil Eelam.

The thousands of casualties alluded to by the international media conjure up images of enormous graveyards running the length and breadth of the encampment. On foot, however, the picture appears very different. Although the camp itself was vast, despite all the reports of wanton bombing and shelling, the sea of tents and huts stretched as far as the eye could see. They were so densely packed that a few determined efforts would have been enough to ensure that whole areas were destroyed. Although blackened patches here and there showed where fires had raged, these were few and far between. There was little evidence of the vast swathes of devastation which have been talked of, still less of the graveyards said to stretch for miles.

Some authorities have already begun to question the casualty figures which have been put forward. One of them is Dr. Rohan Gunaratna, a well-known expert on the Sri Lankan conflict and Head of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (CPVTR) at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Between July and September 2009, Gunaratna conducted a number of interviews with Tamil doctors and Tamil civilians present in the No Fire Zone during the last days of the conflict. Based on this material, Gunaratna feels that the real figure was much lower than the numbers suggested by the international media. "The doctors told me that they were forced by the LTTE to give highly inflated figures to the BBC, CNN and Al Jazeera."

Gunaratna notes two factors which have been widely overlooked. He points out that for most of the fighting, civilians were not widely involved or affected. This was because the LTTE had moved all non-combatants deep into territory held by them before it faced the advancing army. As a result, casualties at this stage were very low. Gunaratna's second point is that "civilian" casualties only really began to occur when they were caught up in the very last phase of the fighting. According to his research, Gunaratna estimates that between 01 January and 19 May 2009, the number of non-combatants who lost their lives may have been as low as 1,400.

General Mehta does not mention the very real and concerted efforts made by the armed forces to care for the thousands of civilians who came across their path. The process of screening, registering, feeding, transporting and providing medical attention to the thousands of men, women and children flooding in, was a huge logistical task for a fighting force on the move. The

more ground the army made, the more civilians crossed over. The civilian issue compelled the formulation of an entirely separate administrative and logistic policy. It was given a lot of thought and great resources, supplies and manpower were devoted to it. The material on this is well known and widely published.

The need to conduct an operation of this nature not only imposed major military restraints; it posed a huge challenge for the advancing troops. Many of the escaping thousands had LTTE links, had been fighting cadres and some were suicide bombers. Private Saman Kumari was one of the several women soldiers from the 58 Division who had been deputed to meet the fleeing refugees as they crossed into army lines.

They always come at first light.. We give them water and search them and check their bags. They are frightened and so are we. There was one woman, she was about thirty. We had looked at her bags but we had not searched her body. She told us that she had lost her gold jewellery. She started crying and everyone gathered around to help. I left the other women soldiers with her and went to eat. Then we heard the sound. All we could see was smoke. People were screaming and there were pieces of flesh everywhere. She had strapped the bomb to her stomach. Before, we used to pick up the children and carry them. We used to carry their bags. Now we know. Even a small child can carry a bomb. Now we search everyone.⁷⁶

Sadly, this aspect of the campaign has yet to be explored. Very few armies in the world have had to conduct a major humanitarian operation at the same time as fighting a war. For the individual men and women of the Sri Lankan army, it also entailed the risk of life and limb.

If the Sri Lankan armed forces had indeed used the full weight of the weapons at their disposal during the last phase, their task would have been easier and it would have been finished much sooner. Certainly, it would not have dragged on until early May. The issue which has not been raised is the price which the Sri Lankan army had to pay. One soldier whose unit was involved in this phase recalls that of his platoon of 30, only six survived the bitter fighting which characterised the last days of the Eelam War.⁷⁷ What did these tactics cost in terms of dead and wounded?

In these circumstances, perhaps the question which should be asked is how many armies would have behaved in the same manner? However imperfect it may have been, surely this is a model which any country would be proud to follow.

Creating Capabilities: The Sri Lankan Military and the LTTE

In the past, every military operation had focused on a particular area. As a result, the LTTE had been able to manoeuvre, redeploy and gather its strength. As General Mehta emphasises, the multi-pronged strategy ensured that the LTTE was never able to switch forces.⁷⁸ This strategy denied the guerillas the space and freedom which they had come to take for granted.

Now they found themselves pinned down on every side, never sure where the next thrust would come from.

The nature of this pressure was relentless.⁷⁹ The LTTE had always relied on long intervals between each and every operation, which allowed them to rest, rebuild and regain their strength. This relentless onslaught on several fronts took the guerillas completely by surprise.⁸⁰ Wearing the Tigers down, it brought them to the point of exhaustion, taxing their resources and sapping their spirits. "We fought 24 hours. Just as the enemy was getting ready to rest, another team was getting ready."⁸¹ This was something which the guerillas had never had to face before and it completely disrupted their *modus operandi*.

Deception and surprise lie at the very heart of counterinsurgency warfare. To deceive and to surprise, is what Fonseka set out to do. Appropriating the element of surprise, it was now the army who did the unexpected, even when it was the more difficult thing to do.⁸²

To this purpose, Fonseka attacked the enemy where he least expected, where he was strongest or where he felt most secure. Coming through the jungles of Madhu, Weli Oya and Mullaitivu, the army took the LTTE completely by surprise. The LTTE had never anticipated this and as a result, the forests were far less heavily mined than had been feared.⁸³ A new emphasis was put on night operations and the army now made a habit of attacking at night, something which it had never done before.⁸⁴

It was realised that the large infantry formations which had characterised previous campaigns were not effective.⁸⁵ Large groups had less penetration, they presented a bigger target and hardly ever achieved surprise.⁸⁶ In their stead, new tactics were introduced, involving teams of four and eight. These smaller units proved themselves much more capable of surprise and were far more penetrating.⁸⁷ In the past, the guerillas had known exactly where the army was; "The terrorist looks at where we are and then he fights." ⁸⁸ By their very nature, these four and eight man teams were very adaptable, for they encouraged flexibility and initiative. This meant that the LTTE no longer knew where the army units were or what they would do. Now that they were on the receiving end, they were much more uncertain than before and there was an element of fear in their minds.

This element of fear and uncertainty was enhanced by the use of long range units, which penetrated deep into enemy territory.⁸⁹ This denied the Tamil Tigers the freedom of movement which they had come to rely on.⁹⁰ The impact on the LTTE leadership was considerable. Undermining their confidence, it put them under immense pressure. It was now the guerillas who felt vulnerable. "Every time an LTTE leader went any where, large numbers of cadres would have to be taken out of the line, just to picket the route."⁹¹ By attacking along multiple axes, the army kept the LTTE guessing. In marked contrast to previous campaigns, now they never knew where the main attack would fall. Maintaining the element of surprise, operations were now conducted in the foulest weather and the army fought through the monsoon. This served to keep up the pressure on the guerillas, forcing them to make more mistakes. No one had ever expected the Sri Lankan army to be so adaptable.

In the past, the lack of battle field intelligence had been a major handicap.⁹² This had been the

cause of many military failures. Intelligence had previously been the responsibility of the brigade in the area of operations.⁹³ Fonseka reorganised the whole system.

We decided that through the use of small groups, we could obtain much better battlefield intelligence. This would achieve far better targeting and ensure that the correct command decisions were made.⁹⁴

General Mehta identifies the role reversal which took place. "The conventional SLA was fighting using guerilla tactics, while the Tigers were forced to fight conventional set piece battles."⁹⁵ In the two sections Opposing Strategies and Creating Capabilities, he looks at the remoulding of the Sri Lankan army. Previous tactics had revolved around trying to gain territory. The new tactics concentrated on inflicting the maximum casualties on the terrorists and destroying their infrastructure.⁹⁶ General Mehta is correct in his appreciation of this factor, as it marked a significant change and it made a huge difference.

General Mehta titles one section Creating Capabilities: The Sri Lankan Military and the LTTE. This is exactly what General Sarath Fonseka did. He created a capability, a sense of the possible and it transform the Sri Lankan army. By improving the capability of the Sri Lankan infantryman, he gave him confidence and made him self-reliant. This transformed the infantryman into an aggressive, offensive weapon and made it possible for Fonseka to take on the guerillas at their own game.

Mehta tells us that "Fonseka overhauled the SLA's battle fighting techniques, tactics and strategy."⁹⁷ This revolution in the way in which the Sri Lankan army thought and functioned was all important. It saw the conversion of a conventional army into an army of small units, where regular infantry thought and functioned like special forces. How did this take place? What was done and how was it done? The importance of training and retraining was absolutely crucial. It is here that we feel the lack of detail.

Changing the mentality of an entire fighting force is a major achievement. From a military point of view, it is one area of study which we cannot afford to overlook. In this context, it is regrettable that General Mehta does not have access to the necessary material. In the right hands, it is a story of some importance. It would be both fascinating and revealing to see the impact of the various training programs and gauge their effect.

Continuous recruiting was an important factor on Fonseka's strategy. He made it a point to ensure that there were adequate reserves to cater for every contingency. This numerical strength made it possible for the Sri Lankan army to dominate and control the areas which it captured.⁹⁸ This was a vital part of any counterinsurgency operation. Without the presence of troops on the ground, it would not be possible to create the secure environment needed to re-establish the administrative control.⁹⁹

Mehta uses the issue of recruitment as an indicator to measure the changing nature of the army.¹⁰⁰ This is an interesting and useful technique and he draws our attention to some noteworthy statistics. One is the fall in the desertion rate, which had been as high as 10-15 percent. During Fonseka's term, this was brought down by almost half.¹⁰¹ By any standards,

this is an extraordinary turnaround. Mehta also points to the increase in the numbers enlisting.¹⁰² Even at the height of the fighting, when the risk factor was at its greatest, there were large numbers willing to join. It is a singular achievement for any country in the middle of a war. For a volunteer force, it is even more remarkable. It underlines the level of public support and commitment throughout the country, a fact which has frequently been misunderstood and underestimated by the English-speaking elite and the international community. It also reveals the extent to which the military and political leadership had been able to mobilise the population, changing the widely established perception of an unwinnable war. Nothing succeeds like success and continuous victories on the battlefield caused the youth to rally round the Army.¹⁰³ "When we started winning, the country and the people started believing in us."

It would be interesting to see some of recruitment statistics for the American, British and other NATO forces deployed in Afghanistan. The level of public commitment gave the Sri Lankan army the numerical strength it needed to hold the territory which it had won. As we have seen, this is a vital factor in fighting a guerilla war. It is something which the USA, the UK and its allies are as yet unwilling or unable to provide.

Faced with new tactics and assailed from all sides, the LTTE found itself too thin on the ground; yet, it tried to hold every inch of ground in an ever widening arc. As Mehta observes, this was a fundamental mistake. Instead of changing its tactics, the LTTE continued to fight a vastly superior army on its own terms. "On the battlefield, Prabhakaran repeatedly made the error of fighting a conventional battle instead of employing superior guerilla tactics."¹⁰⁵ Flexibility and imaginative thinking are fundamental to the success of any guerilla struggle. These qualities had once characterised the LTTE's approach and they had always demonstrated them in the past. However, when confronted with a change in their enemy's approach, the guerillas failed to adapt. This was one of the reasons behind their failure.

Prabhakaran's greatest mistake, however, was his least apparent. The LTTE's use of civilians as human shields has been hailed as a very effective military and political tactic. By taking the civilians with him, Prabhakaran invented a potent military weapon. Providing the LTTE with a never-ending pool of manpower, it also constrained the army's freedom of action. When the guerillas could no longer disappear into the surrounding environment, they were able to blend into the surrounding population. This meant that collateral civilian deaths were almost inevitable. It provided the LTTE with an explosive political and media weapon, generating mounting outrage and condemnation right across the world.

Over the last decade, the LTTE had established a parallel administration throughout the north and east of Sri Lanka. As their name, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam suggests, they saw themselves as the army of the Tamil people. It was the source of their legitimacy and the foundation of their power. Prabhakaran as the self proclaimed leader of the Tamil people, had to have the people with him; they were a living part of his nation.

In fulfilling his political destiny, Prabhakaran lost sight of the military realities of guerilla war. By taking the local population with him, he gave the army a free hand to clear and consolidate the territory which it occupied. By concentrating the people and the cadres together, the LTTE exposed itself, making the army's job far more straightforward. Had Prabhakaran left the civilian population in place, the task would have been far more difficult and infinitely more complex. A much greater number of troops would have been needed to secure the areas under the army's control. It would also have been far more difficult to target the guerillas if the villagers had remained amidst the newly occupied territories. The advancing troops themselves would have been far less secure and much more vulnerable. Instead of advancing, they might have had to take a more defensive approach. Indeed, a campaign which had been completed in less than three years might still be continuing today.

Sri Lankan Air force

Major General Mehta asserts that one of the cardinal factors behind the military success was the supremacy achieved by the Sri Lankan air force.¹⁰⁶ Although airpower had its uses tactically, it was never a strategic factor. There is no doubt that the air force made an important contribution. Trenches and strongpoints hidden deep in the sand and scrub were attacked with precision.¹⁰⁷ The intelligence provided by the Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) also provided vital information on the battlefield. In the words of one infantryman, "they were able to go where we could not go and see what we could not."¹⁰⁸

In an unconventional conflict of this nature, it is important to realise that airpower could only have a limited effect. Except for the final stage, for the most part, the LTTE defences were very well hidden, well constructed and well thought out. Often impervious to artillery and inaccessible from the air, many of them could only be reached from the ground. Ultimately, it was the willingness of the infantry to go forward and die which made the difference.

LTTE

Taken overall, General Mehta's analysis of the LTTE is informed and insightful. Quoting security expert Zachary Abuza, Mehta emphasises the tremendous originality and inventiveness which had been the secret of the LTTE's phenomenal success for so long.¹⁰⁹

Although it may have had its parallels elsewhere, the employment of the suicide bomber as an offensive weapon both as a political and military tactic was one of the unique characteristics of the LTTE's modus operandi. Mehta tells us that the number of suicide attacks launched by the Tamil Tigers was far greater in number than Hamas and Hezbollah combined.¹¹⁰ As far as the LTTE were concerned, it was a regular part of their armoury, which they deployed time and time

again with devastating effect. The use of suicide as a weapon on the battlefield demands further study, for it has relevance for fighting forces all over the world.

General Mehta draws our attention to the LTTE genius for improvisation.¹¹¹ This found its outlet in the great variety of mines, booby traps and improvised explosive devices, which were invented out of the most basic materials, with the simplest technology. The LTTE's ability to camouflage, disguise, surprise and trap was one of their greatest strengths and it was the rationale behind many of their fortifications and defences. While General Mehta mentions the ditch cum bund,¹¹² there were also many other types of defences: the elevated sniper points, the tiny armoured bunkers, the tank pits and the booby traps. This is yet another area which deserves further attention and study. Surely there are lessons to be learned here?

The use of the media is a subject which has become a vital theatre in the global concern with terrorism. The Tamil Tigers were particularly skilled in harnessing this resource and it is an area which calls for further research. There has already been pioneering research in this field by Dr Harinda Vidanage, who has looked at the use of cyberspace by the Tamil diaspora.¹¹³ The western media's reporting of the LTTE had always been a factor which the Tigers felt that they could count on. Military operations were reported in terms of human tragedies causing untold loss and suffering to civilians. As an example:

Artillery pounds wounded Tamils trapped on beach

A thousand amputees were among the wounded and dying waiting to be rescued from a beach in northeast Sri Lanka yesterday, according to aid agencies. Frightened Tamil families, the latest victims of the country's 26-year civil war, were hiding in makeshift trenches as they came under artillery fire while waiting to be evacuated from Puthumathalan beach.

Marie Colvin, The Times (London), 22 March 2009¹¹⁴

The objective was to demonise the Sri Lanka army and humanise the guerillas. Not surprisingly, any advance by the military was drowned in a chorus of condemnation, as reports of army atrocities were swiftly relayed around the world, setting off a storm of protest, concern and sympathy ¹¹⁵

By cutting off the media pipeline, the government of Sri Lanka made it possible for the army to proceed. This was something the Tamil Tigers had not foreseen. The western media was so powerful an arm, that the LTTE took its freedom for granted, assuming there was nothing the Sri Lankan government could do to control it. They believed that the media would provoke so much outrage in south India and the west, that sooner or later there would be foreign intervention. The timing of the huge mass protests in western capitals like London is revealing. The closer the end came, the larger and more desperate the protests became.

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