

A TRAGEDY THAT COULD HAVE BEEN AVOIDED

Sinhala villages in the Kebithigollewa Divisional Secretariat Area first came under LTTE threat during the Eelam 111 war and these threats intensified and several villages were attacked on or about 1990. Villages such as Kelebogahawewa, Konwewa and Veherawewa that were in the Padaviya Divisional Secretariat Area were the northern most villages of the Anuradhapura district, which were bordering the Vavuniya district. These were the first to be attacked by the LTTE during the Eelam 111 war and several innocent villagers were hacked to death. These threats and attacks were extended southwards and many villages such as Mahakollewa, Kudakollewa, Siyambalagaswewa, Nambakadawewa, Nelligollakadawewa, Hammillapotanawewa, Hettiagamawewa, Walalubindawewa, Kuda Hettigamawewa, Manewa, Nikawewa, Kandagahawewa, Meneriwewa, Maha Etambagaskada and Indigollewa were abandoned.

On or about 1993 during the Eelam 111 war the threats and attacks by the LTTE were next felt in villages such as Dikwewa, Yakawewa, Maha Kanugahawewa, Palu Hammillewa, Halmillawetiya, Puliyankulama, Kongollewa, Maha Kandigala, Kuda Relapanawa, Kuda Kandigala, Maha Relapanawa, Maha Halmillewa, Kuda Halmillewa, Viharahalmillewa and even in Sinhala villages on the Kebithigollewa Vavuniya main road such as Kunchuttuwa, Olugaswewa and Kele Puliyankuluma. Many Sinhala families therefore left these villages and moved into camps put up close to the Kebithigollewa town for internally displaced persons.

On or about 1995 Talgahawewa, Maha Nikawewa, Morakewa, Herath Hammillewa and Tammannewa were attacked and several villagers were massacred to death by the LTTE and the main road from Kebithigollewa to Padaviya was threatened. To make this main road safe a bunker line was constructed from Kebithigollewa to Bogashandiya a distance of approximately 25 kilometers. However, the Jaya Sikuru operation of 1997 resulted in the establishment of a forward defence line from Kanagarayankulam to Nedunkeni and all the villages south of this line were rendered safe from LTTE threats and attacks. Therefore the people from the villages named above who were until then living in camps for internally displaced persons in Kebithigollewa returned once more to their original villages. Even the villages of Kele Bogahawewa, Konwewa and Veherawewa in the Padaviya Divisional Secretariat Area were resettled.

With the collapse of the forward defence line from Kanagarayankulam to Nedunkeni in November 1999, the Sri Lanka Army requested the villagers of Kele Bogahawewa, Konwewa, Veherawewa and Kambilliyawa to withdraw to Padavi Parakramapura and these villages were abandoned once more. Thus a situation was once again created wherein LTTE was able to threaten and attack all the villages mentioned before. However, due to the so called cease fire agreement of 2002, LTTE refrained from attacking the villages in the Kebithigollewa area. These villages came under LTTE threats and attacks once more in May 2006 and the last incident on 15th June 2006, where a claymore mine attack on a passenger bus, which claimed sixty four innocent lives has shown the imperative need to prevent further LTTE attacks on these villages at Kebithigollewa.

The lack of security to these villages, which are all in the Anuradhapura district far south of the so called LTTE controlled area, has to be addressed without further delay. These villages are terrorized by small groups of LTTE fighting patrols that are able to infiltrate into this area due to the fact that there is no forward defence line between Padavi Parakramapura in the Anuradhapura district and Mahakachchakodiya in the Vavuniya district. The present police posts along the Kebithigollewa Madukanda road that are south of the villages under consideration or the bunker line along the Kebithigollewa Bogaswewa road that has been constructed east of the villages under consideration, would be of little use to prevent any LTTE infiltration leaving aside protecting the villages from threats and attacks. The maximum these police posts or the present bunker line will be able to do is to give some form of protection to the road by first clearing the road each morning and then stationing pickets to prevent possible claymore mine attacks.

A comprehensive project proposal was submitted recently to the Secretary of Defence to establish a forward defence line of 14 miles in length, between Pirappammaduwa and Buddhangala. The police personnel and home guards now deployed to protect the Madukanda Kele Puliyankuluma stretch of road 8 miles in distance and the Kebithigollewa Bogashandiya stretch of road 15 miles in distance could be redeployed to meet the man power requirement of the new forward defence line. Since the suggested forward defence line will traverse a distance of only 3.5 miles in the Vanuniya district, which also happens to be in the Vavuniya South Sinhala Divisional Secretariat Area and the balance distance of 10.5 miles will be in the Anuradhapura district, there is no reason for the non implementation of this defence line, as it is well within the government controlled area. Such a defence line will not only give total security to the villages now threatened but will also make it possible to resettle the villages that have been abandoned. It will also make it difficult if not impossible for LTTE terrorists to use a land route from Mullaitivu district to the Trincomalee district through Anuradhapura district.

In May 1995 when I was the Officer Commanding Troops in Anuradhapura, I submitted a letter to the Divisional Commander of the Second Division, Sri Lanka Army then headquartered at Ranasevapura, Anuradhapura. The relevant part of that letter is reproduced below.

DEFENCE OF BORDER VILLAGES

The three cardinal principles of defence, a) All round defence, b) Mutual support, c) Defence in depth, were incorporated for the first time by 2VIR troops at Ulukkulama where bunkers were constructed at every 50 meters with each providing its own all round defence and mutually supporting each other. Defence in depth was achieved by sitting a Platoon Headquarters at a considerable distance in depth followed by the Company Headquarters and then a Battalion Headquarters. This concept is now followed from Kudakachchikudiya to Thantirimale a distance of 35 to 40 miles with approximately 750 to 800 bunkers. This form of defence has proved successful over a period of three years reducing troop casualties to a bare minimum and causing no casualties among the civilian population since inception.

This however is a troop intensive method, which if extended from Periyapuliyalankulam in the Vavuniya district to Padavi Parakramapura in the Anuradhapura district, covering a distance of approximately 10 miles, would provide a complete defence to numerous Sinhala villages in the Kebithigollewa Division of the Anuradhapura district. Six miles of the ten miles could be manned by relocating the bunkers from Periyapuliyalankulam to Kuda Kathcchikudiya leaving about 80 more new bunkers requiring about 500 troops. The advantage of such an action would be making the Police Post at Kelepuliyankulama, Puduwa and Dutuwewa redundant, together with the detachment at Indigollewa and Etambagaskada. The Police Stations at Kebithigollewa and Padaviya will also be safe from future possible attacks and further more will also make the main supply route to Padaviya completely safe for use. The road from Vavuniya to Kebithigollewa could also be made usable.

Due to non-availability of troops this proven bunker line method has been substituted by locating Police Posts or Army Detachments in the border villages of Kebithigollewa, Padaviya, Horowupotana and Pemaduwa Divisional Secretariat Areas of the Anuradhapura district for the purpose of providing village security.

While the Detachments or Police Posts thus established are able to provide for themselves all round defence, through the construction of mutually supporting bunkers around the established camp, defence in depth and mutual support from the closest reinforcement point has always been lacking, either due to non availability of adequate resources or the distance involved.

This point was well demonstrated when Kelepuliyankulama was attacked on 10th May 1995. The closest point of reinforcement the Kebithigollewa Police Station six miles away was unable to rush reinforcements in time to avoid the disaster.

The Detachments or Police Posts that are located in such isolation are targets inviting enemy attacks. As a result of seeking administrative advantages and camp comforts lives have been lost in many of these isolated detachments and Police Posts. This trend will continue, unless alternative methods are adapted. The Police Post or Detachment when overrun creates fear in the minds of villagers and they tend to leave the villages causing an exodus of population southwards.

The alternative to living in isolated Police Posts or Army Detachments is for the personnel to form independent mobile groups that could live under canvas tents which could be moved from location to location. This type of group could be moved into border villages where while half perform duties as buddy pairs in fortified bunkers the other half could rest in the canvas tents, which could be relocated from time to time thus never offering a fixed targets to the enemy. The resting troops could reinforce the troops on duty in the event of attack. This method will make the enemy who use concentration of force to achieve success vulnerable, as the resting reinforcements could attack the enemy concentration rapidly.

The Police or Home Guards must also be trained by attaching them to Army buddy pairs thus building confidence in them to face the enemy threats and attacks from well fortified bunkers at the outer perimeter of each village. As the Police and Home Guards gain enough confidence the Army could be withdrawn to be relocated forward of the village in the jungle to kill the enemy before they approach the village. In such a deployment the troops will work as buddy trios, with the Army groups never permanently located at a jungle base, but shifting their location from time to time. This action will confuse the enemy and enable the troops to dominate the jungle forward of the border village. These suggestions if implemented will contribute towards saving valuable life and equipment. I therefore sincerely hope they will receive your consideration with a view for future implementation.

However, maybe due to the lack of resources, these suggestions made by me were never implemented. I was subsequently appointed as the Manpower Mobilization and Disaster Relief Coordinator in the Second Division. One of my duties was to ensure that there was no exodus of people from the threatened villages southwards. By October 1995 the situation was becoming very critical in the villages of Kebithigollewa. Many villages had been abandoned and there was a very large camp for internally displaced people functioning in the Kebithigollewa town.

On 25th of October 1995, I wrote my second letter in Sinhala to the Divisional Commander recommending once more the establishment of the forward defence line between Periyapuliyankulam and Padavi Parakkramapura. I went to the extent of obtaining two thousand roofing sheets from a Sinhala Youth Organization in the Abu Dhabi and these were donated to the Sri Lanka Army to be utilized for the construction of this bunker line, but nothing happened. I still have in my possession a signal received from the Divisional Command dated 10th November 1995, wherein it is stated in Sinhala that my letter of 25th October 1995, which was addressed to the Divisional Commander with regard to the Security of Sinhala villages had been received and that my ideas and suggestions had been forwarded through the Army Commander to the Deputy Minister of Defence.

Had my suggestion received the necessary attention and had the forward defence line been established then, or even subsequently, after the forward defence line between Kanagarayankulam and Nedunkeni collapsed, many valuable lives of innocent villagers could have been saved. The villages in the Kebithigollewa area would have been very stable as of today, never to be affected by the many tragedies that were to follow. The last of which was the claymore mine explosion that claimed the lives of sixty four innocent men women and children. Learning from the past mistakes of political leaders, I sincerely hope the Secretary of Defence will be able to persuade the present political leadership to seriously consider the proposal submitted by me to alleviate the plight of the innocent people living in these LTTE threatened Sinhala villages, without further delay.

Lt Col A.S.Amarasekera.
26th June 2006.

