

MAN BEHIND THE COUNTRYâ€™S DEFENCE STRATEGY

Posted on



A few years ago, he was just another retired army officer, a little-known brother of a politician with a promising future, and a name referenced infrequently, if at all. Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa, today, is not just the President's brother, but the man who carries on his shoulders the aspirations of a nation yearning to be rid of a terrorist menace; a man who is on the verge of accomplishing what was thought to be impossible by many; a leader, a strategist, defender of the nation, a man who has done time in the trenches and who spends sleepless nights, so citizens can slumber in the comfort that someone is watching over them. Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa spoke candidly with Business Today, reflecting on terrain already covered and along the way articulating inter alia some inconvenient truths.

By Malinda Seneviratne
Photography By Sanka Sammana

You were appointed Defence Secretary by President Rajapaksa at a time when a ceasefire agreement was in operation. Officially there were no plans to engage the LTTE militarily at the time. What was your brief and what were the initial goals you set yourself?

Yes, there was a Ceasefire Agreement. However, as any expert on military affairs will tell you, it is the duty of every state to be prepared for any eventuality, whether in times of peace or war.

My first task was to obtain a complete military assessment of the situation, so that I could brief the President about the situation on the ground, what was to be expected and what contingencies needed to be taken.

My first action was to request from the commanders of the Army, Navy and Air Force detailed reports as to the present and future agenda of the LTTE.

In particular, I wished to be briefed on their strengths, weaknesses and most importantly what actions the LTTE had been engaging in following the CFA of

February 2002.

It became immediately apparent to me that although the LTTE had engaged in talks with the then Government from time to time, both before and after that the organisation unilaterally chose to withdraw from negotiations, its leadership had operated in a manner antithetical to the professed desire for a negotiated settlement to the conflict.

The Hallmarks Of The New Radical Approach Included The Appointment Of Tried And Tested Commanders; Leaders Who Were Brave And Had Battlefield Experience.

It was clear that the rhetoric regarding a negotiated settlement notwithstanding, the LTTE was preparing for an outright military victory over the Government.

First of all, the LTTE had enhanced its military strength, both in terms of numbers (recruitment) and military hardware. This was validated, when we secured the Eastern Province from the grasp of the LTTE.

We recovered massive amounts of arms and ammunition, including heavy artillery and mortars and we are still in the process of recovering further concealed weaponry from the East.

Not forgetting that the LTTE would certainly have smuggled significant amounts of arms and ammunition out of the area by the time the security forces moved in.

The kinds of weapons we are currently encountering in the Wanni battlefield are also indicative of the massive procurement and deployment of weapons by the LTTE.

Even today, the weapons deployed by the LTTE to stop the advancing troops in the North, testify to the military build-up by the organisation post CFA.

It was during the CFA, that the LTTE also acquired rudimentary air power, which, although incapable of inflicting major damage, has a psychological impact in the overall battle, an element of concern even to date.

Another indication of the true intentions of the LTTE is the establishment of its camps, that have been strategically positioned to surround key military bases and most importantly, the main logistical centre for all operations in the North, Trincomalee and if this were to fall, some 40,000 troops stationed in the Jaffna Peninsula would be completely cut off as a result.

In addition to this, military training for civilians was continuing and was further organised with the establishment of the Makkal Padai, complete with civilian weapons training. This also shows that the LTTE was from day one of the CFA in a 'war mode' in terms of concrete action on the ground.

We must remember also that in accordance with the articles of the CFA, the LTTE was allowed to set up 'political offices' in Government-controlled areas.

Looking back this was essentially sanctioned infiltration. These 'offices' were manned by LTTE cadres with military training and under the guise of political activities, intelligence gathering was the order of the day.

In fact, upon later reflection it was discovered that the LTTE had infiltrated the city of Colombo in order to set up safe-houses, establish a network of handlers and helpers, deploy suicide cadres and store weaponry including explosives. All of this a background to a plan to be put into action as and when ordered by the LTTE hierarchy.

Ultimately, It Is Not The Weapon That Counts, But The Person Behind The Weapon. This Is An Aspect That Has Been Underlined In The Overall Thinking. It Is After All The Soldier Who Wins The War For You.

Having found all this, what did you do next?

Despite being a pragmatist who was familiar and cognizant of the LTTE's past, the

President was keen on engaging in talks and wanted to give the LTTE one more chance to come to the negotiating table and hammer out a settlement. Having paid heed to my brief, he also, however, said that even as he pursues the path of negotiation, we should be ready for any eventuality.

We were aware that the LTTE had always strengthened itself whenever there were 'peace talks' and that whenever the security forces went on the offensive they suffered many setbacks as a result.

We also knew that there was a pattern and tradition of letting our guard down whenever negotiations were taking place or whenever there was a ceasefire.

On such occasions, we have stopped recruitment, training and even ceased all procurement activities. In this instance, however, our approach was radically different.

The hallmarks of the new radical approach included the appointment of tried and tested commanders; leaders who were brave and had battlefield experience, purchasing of new weaponry alongside an increased and fervent recruitment and training agenda.

When the LTTE finally switched from provocative tactics such as claymore attacks and ambushes to open confrontation, we were thus ready. Although it was possible that they underestimated our preparedness, I must stress that, had we not been ready, it could have very well ended in a disaster.

It was, however, not too difficult to prepare once we realised that the LTTE did not harbour genuine intentions with regard to the peace process.

What was the turning point?

Amidst limited operations against the LTTE, we suddenly had to face up to the closure of the Mavil Aru anicut by the LTTE. This action that denied fresh water to some 20,000 families was totally unacceptable to us and we retaliated by initiating a limited military operation with a humanitarian agenda to regain control of the anicut.

This situation was further agitated when the LTTE attacked Muttur, Kattaparichchan and Thoppur and attempted a landing at Kayts. We had to initiate counter-measures. This was how we arrived at the decision to clear the East.

Once the President decided that we had to finish off the LTTE militarily, we shifted to a different level of operations. First of all, we launched a recruitment drive. We needed 50,000 more troops, roughly 30% of the existing strength, because we would have to hold the East for some time after clearing that province.

Whereas recruitment had always been a difficult task, in this instance, it was very smooth given a campaign to motivate people and because there was a general feeling that the LTTE could be defeated. Citizens felt that the political leadership was both determined and capable.

Having furnished all the requirements of the three forces, including necessary weapons and other military hardware, we also made sure that the welfare of the soldiers was assured. This is very important because morale is a vital factor.

The Navy, in particular, played a vital role in destroying the LTTE's supply ships, making the groundwork of the troops more easy.

They destroyed 10 big ships and many other small vessels. For the first time, the Navy ventured out to the deep seas to locate and destroy LTTE ships. Supported by excellent intelligence, they located many floating warehouses and destroyed them. This was a major blow to the LTTE.

Any military outfit requires a steady and reliable supply of arms and ammunition and the Navy denied the LTTE of this.

You must understand that, whilst a government does not find it easy to purchase weapons, a terrorist organisation is forced to go to the black market, purchase at a higher price and then smuggle in the weaponry.

The LTTE was also hampered by the global push toward zero-tolerance toward terrorism, post 9/11. Under these circumstances, even a single shipment being stopped was a major setback for them.

There was also a difference in the way that the Navy confronted the enemy. Earlier, they used fast attack crafts, Dvoras. This time, they introduced the 'small boat' concept. These were manufactured in Sri Lanka itself. In fact, the 100th such vessel was commissioned recently.

The result is evident when the LTTE puts out five boats, we put 20 boats out to take them on. In the last one and a half years, we have hardly heard about Sea Tiger operations. This is the reason.

Take the Air Force. The most important concern for us was accuracy in bombing. The correct identification of targets and precision in attack are both important because our number one concern has been minimising civilian casualties. In order to achieve this, we put in place an improved surveillance system and enhanced capacities for precision strikes through intensive training.

Before a target is engaged, the pilots brief themselves thoroughly about the location, using pictures and information from reconnaissance. The results themselves indicate the degree of success; maximum damage to the enemy and minimum harm to civilians.

It is the same with the Army. We were able to confront the enemy on many fronts because we had increased our strength well ahead of time.

We have Task Force 1 operating on the Mannar-Pooneryn front, 57th Division operating on the Madhu-Thunukkai front, Task Force 2 on the Mankulam axis and 59th Division on the Welioya axis. In addition, we have two divisions positioned at Muhamalai, constantly threatening the enemy. During this period, the role of the three service commanders has been critically important. This is the first instance that we have had commanders who have faced

the enemy from the beginning of their careers.

All of them have been part of major operations and have brought that experience and knowledge into the equation. They were able to read the battle accurately.

All of them exude supreme confidence, are highly motivated and possess exceptional skills. They all have a good understanding of the capabilities of their subordinates and therefore are able to select the proper officers to carry out specific tasks.

As an example, the Army Commander went for ability over seniority, selecting officers he knew could fight, putting them in charge of specific divisions.

Even the lower level officers have demonstrated a high standard in their operations and the soldiers have had the necessary training. All three commanders understand that training is a vital piece of the operation and there is intense training, even during operations.

Ultimately, it is not the weapon that counts, but the person behind the weapon. This is an aspect that has been underlined in the overall thinking. It is after all the soldier who wins the war for you.

The soldier's morale is an extremely important element and amidst all of this, troop morale has been maintained at a high level. The soldier must have supreme confidence in the leaders and, of course, confidence in himself. They have to be confident that the officers fighting with them are capable of making correct and responsible decisions.

The way to obtain this confidence is to have capable officers fighting with the men. When you know there is a man behind you who will get you out of any difficult situation, your morale gets a huge boost.

They also have to be convinced that they are doing the right thing and identify totally with the cause.

Today, the soldier is very clear about the mission. The soldiers know that they are backed by a solid leadership, both military and political, and are conscious of the

fact that they are part of a superior fighting force.

This Will Be The First Time In Many Years That There Will Be A Land Route To Jaffna, Linking The Peninsula With The Other Parts Of The Country.

We have been hearing reports that the troops are on the verge of capturing Kilinochchi for several weeks now. We also hear about pistol gangs and killings in the East. Then there are the aerial attacks. What is the current status of the battle?

The commanders are confident that we can emerge victorious and the operations are going according to plan with a proper understanding of the terrain.

Citizens who don't know much about military matters think it is just about marching forward; however, we have our plans and we are executing them. We expected them to resist at certain points and they did. So we had to stop, take stock and proceed. These are inevitable delays.

We are not interested in real estate, even though we did end up clearing a considerable area of land previously held by the LTTE. We are more interested in taking assets and eliminating key leaders and this has been proceeding well.

We have the will and we believe that our approach has been correct. In analysis, preparation and execution of plans, we have scored many successes and ultimate victory is certainly within our grasp.

Overall, we have adopted a strategy of weakening the LTTE through air strikes and ambushes.

As you are probably aware, we confronted a bund and a ditch that stretched from the West coast to the A-9 highway. Such obstacles are to be expected as the ground realities cannot be ascertained by simply looking at a map.

We have successfully engaged the enemy, negotiated this obstacles and are

proceeding according to plan.

At present, we are now only seven miles from Pooneryn. This is a key part of the overall strategy. The task at hand is to open a land route to Jaffna. Very soon this will happen.

This will be the first time in many years that there will be a land route to Jaffna, linking the peninsula with the other parts of the country. This is a major achievement and they failed in their endeavour to stop our forces.

It is a major setback for them to concede the entire West coast. If they could have, they would have stopped us from proceeding to Pooneryn. We are also threatening other key points such as Paranthan, Kilinochchi and eventually Mullaitivu.

As for the East, it is natural for the LTTE to do everything possible to destabilise the situation.

They will try to destabilise the capital, create incidents, explode bombs and create anarchy, however, we must remember that infiltration is not impossible, especially in a democracy where there is freedom of movement.

There will be sporadic incidents, yes, but it is not that we didn't expect it. We are dominating every inch of the Eastern Province, this is the most important thing to remember.

These incidents will gradually stop once we take the Wanni as well. Ultimately, they will realise that it is useless to engage in such acts. Of course, we need to take complete control of the area so that they can't regroup. This is important. This has happened in the East and will happen in the North as well.

It is very important to continue, without wavering in your intention. We cannot afford to give in to any kind of pressure when dealing with the LTTE, which is armed to the teeth, has been engaged in these activities for 20 years, replete with suicide

cadres.

Above all this, they are ruthless and they want to achieve their goals by any means with no concern for civilian life.

One has to accept the fact that there will be civilian casualties because the terrorist, intent on destabilising and causing mayhem, will find a way of exploding a bomb, however stringent the security measures in place may be.

When this happens, the political opposition naturally tries to make political capital. Politicians typically think about returning to power thus they will therefore put pressure on the incumbent Government. This is only natural in a multi-party democracy.

It puts pressure on the leadership. This is why it is important to have an individual with the conviction and courage to see this process through to the end.

To defeat a terrorist outfit like the LTTE, one must have courage, determination and character to withstand all kinds of pressures and never stray from the chosen path.

You mentioned civilians several times. There have been allegations of scant regard for civilians and about civilians getting caught in the middle. How serious is the commitment to ensure the minimum harm to the civilian population?

We are very serious about it. We distinguish innocent civilians from terrorists.

Having introduced the 'Zero Casualties to Civilians' concept when we launched the humanitarian mission to liberate the East from the clutches of the LTTE, this concept has now evolved to become the first line in all military/operational briefs. This is an example to other armies in the world fighting a similar war. So, everyone, from the top command to the ordinary soldiers, is committed to this principle of 'Zero Civilian Casualties.'

This is not a conventional decision and indeed it simultaneously increases the risks

we have to face. Remember that this policy restricts dramatically the use of direct fire; that is artillery, mortar and air strike options that would help reduce our casualties. It also costs us time.

We all want to end this quickly, but such concerns for the welfare of civilians force us to exercise utmost restraint whenever possible, subsequently putting our troops at risk and spending an inordinate amount of time for all operations.

It is in the midst of such constraints that we have achieved so much in the past year and a half. We have taken every possible precaution in this regard. It has not been easy and it is not easy now either, but we remain committed to the principle. We have imposed restrictions on our operations. Unfortunately, these things have not been reported adequately and the outside world does not know about the extreme precautions we have taken to safeguard the civilians, even though engaging one of the most ruthless terrorist outfits in the world.

Then there is the issue of IDPs. There have been many instances where we have taken many risks, even stopped operations, to send food and medicines to people trapped in uncleared areas.

During the battles at Vakarai and Thoppigala, we sent convoys of food and medicine to the civilians, knowing very well that the LTTE could and would pilfer what was meant for non-combatants. It is the same in the Wanni.

Our major concern is the civilian. Since the LTTE is using innocent civilians as a human shield we are very keen that they attempt to reach Government-controlled areas in order to better facilitate their welfare.

In this regard, the United Nations, the international community, the media, NGOs and INGOs, and all who are talking about peace, have an important role to play.

This is the time that they should pressurise the LTTE to release the people and allow

them to move to Government-controlled areas where we can take care of them and begin the resettlement process.

I firmly believe our track record with respect to IDPs has been exemplary. Within one year, we resettled 90% of those who were displaced in the Eastern Province. The delay in resettling the other 10% is due to landmines. Landmine clearing is being handled by UNHCR and there are certain standards to be met and relevant certification to be obtained before we can resettle people.

We can do this in the North as well. This is why it is very important that all the above-mentioned organisations should work towards getting the LTTE to release the people in the Wanni.

Having Introduced The 'Zero Casualties To Civilians' Concept When We Launched The Humanitarian Mission To Liberate The East From The Clutches Of The LTTE, This Concept Has Now Evolved To Become The First Line In All Military/Operational Briefs.

No one said it was going to be easy, of course. Could you dwell a little on the overall political context and how it impacts your efforts, positively or negatively?

You might remember a time when people said this is a war that cannot be won. We were told that if we dared launch any military operation against the LTTE, Colombo will be blown to pieces. But nothing is impossible, if you have the will, if you have the correct analysis and you execute your plans correctly.

Knowing that the LTTE was a ruthless terrorist outfit, we took precautions. We have put in place a good security system and have minimized incidents that cause damage to life and property.

The security forces and the police have been doing a very difficult task to control the infiltration of suicide cadres and movement of explosives. We cannot appreciate them enough.

As a nation, we have to understand that the more we pin the LTTE down in the North and East, the more they will try to execute suicide attacks and such in other parts of the country in order to destabilise the populace.

It is our task to prevent this. Everyone needs to understand that certain control measures have to be put in place. We have put in place these controls in order to minimise such incidents.

Along the way, there are many constraints. As I pointed out earlier, in a democracy, there is freedom of movement. Anyone is free to go anywhere and settle anywhere.

Remember that there are over 50,000 persons from the North and over 10,000 from the East currently residing temporarily in parts of the Western Province.

Some of them could very well be trained LTTE cadres, including intelligence operatives, suicide bombers, helpers and handlers.

Our task is to ensure that the entire civilian population is protected. We have to provide security to everyone. We have to prevent bus bombs. To do all this, we have to implement controlling measures such as roadblocks, searches, detention of suspects and questioning.

Despite such restrictions and controlled measures, inconveniencing the population, we continue on this path, as it is necessary, if we are to protect the innocent citizens of this country.

When a bomb goes off, it is the innocence of humanity that is taken away. Individuals even children who have no stake in the conflict are the first to suffer and it is the duty of the security forces and the police to ensure such actions do not occur.

Many who criticise our actions are ignorant to the fact that the LTTE is a shrewd organisation that will do everything to protect themselves, cover themselves and

get away.

If we had failed to place control measure, then also we would have been criticised, but the measures we have put in place alongside the efficient actions of the police have ensured minimal LTTE infiltration across the country. The situation could have been far worse and the destruction far more deadly, if no measures were in place.

Given the system of issuing national identity cards is not full proof, we see many gaps that can be exploited by the LTTE. There is a systemic flaw when it comes to identity cards.

All suicide cadres, operatives, handlers and helpers have forged IDs. We know this. This has been proven. When we look at these operations, it is also clear that mobile phones are the main mode of communication among LTTE operatives.

When we traced the numbers we found that they were all registered under different names. So the investigations cannot proceed beyond a certain point along those lines. So there is a big flaw in the matter of registering phones. The dealers are either negligent or are conniving with the LTTE.

LTTE cadres do not willingly surrender or confess and take maximum precautions in advance. Thus, it is not an easy task for the police to arrest and question people, and get information.

On the one hand, there will always be lawyers who will submit FR applications supported by human rights organisations that don't have to worry about national security.

They are not required to understand that hardcore LTTE cadres hardly ever talk. They ask 'why are you detaining such and such a person without producing him in court after detaining him or her for three months?'

They do have a law point. The law point, however, is inadequate and it has been proven inadequate. The hardcore of the LTTE very rarely break as they buy time for their operation to continue or operatives to flee.

A terrorist is fundamentally different from an ordinary criminal. There have been instances where the legal system has released suspects who have after their release turned up as suicide bombers.

As an example, it took us two years to find a lead to unravel the case of the attack on me. The law requires us to produce detainees in court within three months. Very often it is not possible to conclude investigations within this period. However, we do produce and release them, nevertheless.

I Firmly Believe Our Track Record With Respect To IDPs Has Been Exemplary. Within One Year, We Resettled 90% Of Those Who Were Displaced In The Eastern Province.

It is not like dealing with your average day-to-day criminal and everyone should understand this. The FR lawyers must understand that we do not enjoy arresting individuals and it is not a game.

What if the particular suspect is a suicide bomber or is part of a team sent to the city to orchestrate a major attack? Then the blame falls on us for not providing adequate security, for not ensuring 100% safety and the Police is castigated.

Everyone has to realise that this is not a game. This is no fun for any of us and we don't enjoy arresting people.

We have to weigh and see if the lives of innocent people or the inconvenience is more important?

Everybody knows that all the Tamil people are not terrorists, but unfortunately 98% of the terrorists are Tamil. Although many members of other communities are now involved albeit in a smaller scale.

In the West, after 9/11 and even more so after the threat on Heathrow Airport, people are forced to remove belts and shoes, and even forced to empty perfume

bottles and medicines by airport security.

No one complains, no one cries foul. Ardent human rights activists in Sri Lanka do this whenever they go abroad. You don't hear them complaining that their civil liberties are being infringed?

So, in these things, we have to have a sense of proportion and a sense of balance. We have to weigh things against the task at hand and the degree of threat we face.

We must all understand that this has been going on for close to 30 years and that we need to put an end to it. We all need to understand that defeating the LTTE military is the first and necessary step towards bringing about a permanent peace in our country.

We Distinguish Innocent Tamils From Terrorists, Although It Is Unfortunate That Close To 98% Of The LTTE Cadre Strength Happen To Be Tamil, But This Certainly Does Not Mean We Confuse One With The Other.

What is the role of the media in achieving this end result?

In all this, the media has an important role to play in convincing Tamil people that this is not an exercise against them.

We distinguish innocent Tamils from terrorists, although it is unfortunate that close to 98% of the LTTE cadre strength happen to be Tamil, but this certainly does not mean we confuse one with the other.

The country must come first. The media has to ensure that the morale of the security forces is not harmed. We need the support of society and the public and this is something that the media can muster.

The media has to create awareness about the difficulty of the task at hand and it has to make sure that society in general does not undermine the morale of the forces.

The target is the terrorists and not the Tamils.

We need to convince the Tamil population that despite everything that is broadcast, we are on an agenda of dealing with terrorists and not minorities.

PROFILE - Gotabaya Rajapaksa is a career soldier. Having joined the Sri Lanka Army in 1971, he subsequently went on to spend over two decades in service to his motherland. He completed his basic officer cadet training at the military academy at Diyatalawa and later completed a young officers' course at Rawalpindi, Pakistan. During this period, he also underwent advanced training in counter insurgency and jungle warfare in Assam, India and later graduated in advanced infantry training from Fort Benning, USA. As a staff officer, Rajapaksa completed a course at the Defence Services Staff College in Wellington, India in 1983; went on to obtain a masters degree in Defence Studies from the University of Madras, India. He was the Deputy Commandant of the Sir John Kotelawala Defence Academy in 1991 and as a Lieutenant Colonel, Rajapaksa was the Coordinating Officer for the Welioya area from 1990 to 1991, before taking up an appointment as the Coordinating Officer of the Matale District and later as the Commanding Officer of the 1st Battalion, Gajaba Regiment from 1989 to 1990. Having commanded many anti-terrorist operations in the North and East in different capacities, Rajapaksa is no stranger to the challenges and realities of military conflict. The special operations Vadamarachchi in 1987 and Thrividabalaya in 1990, launched to wrest the Jaffna Peninsula and the Jaffna Fort from terrorist control, witnessed Rajapaksa leading the 1st Battalion of the Gajaba Regiment as its commander. During his tenure, Rajapaksa was amongst the elite who received much praise for his service to the national cause. He was a recipient of a Presidential Commendation letter from then President J R Jayewardene, in addition to being bestowed the Rana Wickrama Padakkama and the Rana Sura Padakkama (on two occasions) medals for valour in combat, from incumbent Presidents, Ranasinghe Premadasa and Dingiri Banda Wijetunga. Prior to his departure from Sri Lanka to the USA, Rajapaksa, having formally retired from military service, read for a postgraduate degree in Information Technology from the University of Colombo. By 1994, Rajapaksa was employed by the Loyola Law School as a Unix System Administrator, a post he was incumbent until he returned in 2005 to aid his brother who was campaigning to be President of the nation.