

SENIOR SUPERINTENDENT OF POLICE - C N WAKISHTA

Posted on



The Terrorism Investigation Division (TID) is the main investigative arm in countering terrorism in Sri Lanka. Established in 1997 to face the challenges posed by the LTTE, the TID has made great strides in destroying the LTTE networks within the country. Director of the Division, SSP C N Wakishta spoke to Business Today about the many achievements of the TID in countering terrorism.

What is the role of the TID in combating terrorism in the city of Colombo?

The Terrorism Investigation Division started its operations in 1997. Due to the increased activities of the LTTE, a need for a separate division was identified. We are the main division in the Police Department focusing on investigation and combating terrorism. Though we conduct investigations independently, we also work in coordination with other divisions as well. Through our investigations, we have been able to capture many male and female suicide bombers, as well as recover a large quantity of weapons, explosives, and high-tech weapons of the C4 class. This is how the TID has played a large role in countering terrorism in Colombo, as well as the country.

During the year 2006, we were given a large responsibility. At that moment we all became one team. The CID, TID, Military Intelligence units and the Police Intelligence units - all became one. Defence Secretary, Gotabaya Rajapaksa took the initiative. He involved the high ranking as well as the low ranking officers in the Police and the Armed Forces in all decision making processes. Usually our organisation operates by the lower divisions following instructions from high ranking officers. However, the Ministry of Defence was aware of this shortcoming and the Defence Secretary took measures to overcome this. Once communication was established with all levels, coordination between and among units was very successful. Through this we were able to dismantle many LTTE networks in Colombo City.

I have been involved in terrorist investigations since 1981, but this is the first time I have seen a Defence Secretary who has such dedication to the task at hand. He works with us as one. If we miss something, he looks into it. He is committed to combating terrorism. He gives us, excellent and timely guidance. He put in place mechanisms for us to have good coordination with all divisions. That's why we have been able to operate so successfully. Through proper coordination, not only the Armed Forces and the Police but also the public are working as one team which has been paramount for our successes. This is why we have been able to bring Colombo to where it is today. We have had a series of high-level public functions such as SAARC and National Festivals in Colombo; the programmes went ahead without any incident because of the dedication and the hard work of all involved. Whatever harm the LTTE may have caused, it has been limited to a few areas out of Colombo.

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Many people thought that the war would come to Colombo. What are the preventive measures taken by the TID to safeguard the city?

We have investigative as well as intelligence units. We receive clear guidance from the Inspector General of Police Jayantha Wickramaratna. He ensures that we maintain complete reports everyday and keeps pushing us to show results. He never postpones anything and is always up to date on the progress of the investigations. Furthermore, we have a team with Colombo Senior DIG Nimal Mediwake team which is involved with the Intelligence Network. A civil intelligence network was also formed in the city, which has never been done before. The TID is actively involved in this initiative as well. Our officers have been monitoring activities throughout the day. From the Senior Officers' end, instead of just sending the officers and waiting for them to return as we did before, we also went and checked if the monitoring was done properly.

Usually terrorists come in groups of three to five for a mission. An environment was created so that those who came for a mission were unable to go on the streets and conduct their activities. Through our intelligence networks and monitoring activities we have been able to prevent many of the LTTE plans. This is confirmed by the case in Moratuwa, where the LTTE cadre found it very difficult to organise transport from Colombo to Moratuwa as there was good security, they had to keep changing their route.

Our officers used the latest technology of telephone analysis and were successfully able to apprehend a suspect through which we were able to recover a large amount of explosives. The recovery included 345 Kg TNT and 65 Kg of C4 explosives which had been shaped to fit a vehicle.

For the first time in history, we were able to apprehend approximately 50 LTTE cadres as a group, who were from the Hill Country plantation area and had been trained in Killinochchi. They were based in Colombo and the plantation area as sleeping cadres. They become active only when there is a mission. It was a great achievement in being able to break that link. If not I cannot imagine what would have happened. We were able to sever the LTTE Hill Country links through these investigations. The LTTE had organised three suicide bomber teams and had sent them from Killinochchi to the Hill Country plantation area. They had planned to execute mass explosions using a small van and bicycle fitted with explosives. There was an engineer in the team who was in charge of the technical aspects of the operation including assembling the explosives and setting them off. We were able to completely destroy this unit. Through this investigation we made a breakthrough by identifying that both operations were handled by one LTTE cadre.

With the investigation that led to the recovery of four suicide jackets in Chilaw we were able to find information about a wanted person, unfortunately he is not in our custody because he managed to reach uncleared areas after committing the crime. However we did not stop our investigations. We were able to find the van he used, the method he used to transport

these explosives, and we conducted the investigations according to scientific methods, which proved our case. Through the coordinated efforts by our technical and intelligence operatives we were able to apprehend the culprit's brother who was also a LTTE cadre residing in England. Our counterparts in the Western Province Intelligence Unit established a link and were able to obtain information and recover 280 Kg of explosives, which were hidden in a water tank in Wellawatte. This is a good example of our excellent coordination. Our aim is to implement an even more successful security programme. Why do we say this? When the LTTE loses territory they will try to use other people and destabilise the country again. We are working day and night to prevent this.

We Do Not Detain People Unnecessarily. We Don't Harass People Simply Because They Are Tamil. I Need To Emphasise That Every Tamil Is Not Part Of The LTTE. Therefore We Try Our Best To Identify The LTTE Cadres.

You mentioned the case involving the arrest of the sleeping cadres; can you elaborate on this?

The LTTE considered the Hill Country as a safe area. They established themselves there, but the operations were in Colombo. Even though they bring the Hill Country teams here, for them to conduct an operation with a suicide bomber was not enough. To provide transport for him, to provide information, and lodging there must be more people. Sometimes those who provide lodging don't know that they're harbouring suicide cadres. That is what the LTTE sleeping cadres are; they have various functions. To give an example, one of them joined a Hill Country Police department as a Police Officer. We caught him during the training period. Similarly, these people infiltrate the Armed Forces to accomplish their missions.

Can you tell us how the TID coordinates with other Divisions?

There are intelligence directorates in all the Armed Forces. We regularly communicate with them and also have coordination meetings chaired by the Secretary of Defence. At this meeting a good check and balance is done for the entire week. On top of that we have coordination meetings at a provincial level where the entire Western Province is covered. Now coordination is 200%. Because of that, there is a link from person to person. Before, everything was channelled through a senior officer. Now, there is a man-to-man link - so if there is any problem, they inform the other, and within a minute or two our network is activated. This was the largest benefit to us. Therefore if anyone escapes, we are able to track him or her down.

Then we work very closely with the public through vigilance committees. These committees are formed in all areas. Our intelligence operatives are linked with them. On top of that in uniform we have our team who work closely with the three forces so we all work together

and do surveillance and patrolling together. Similarly we have an exchange of information. We have been able to implement this at the ground level very successfully. Therefore on top of preventing terrorism we have been able to prevent normal crimes as well. This has been an advantage for us in maintaining law and order.

The TID has also established networks with international intelligence units all over the world. Through this we have developed a coordinated mechanism to counter LTTE activities globally as well.

Detention and registration of persons has caused a lot of controversy, can you explain the rationale behind these measures?

The LTTE has networks within the prisons as well. Therefore a mechanism was put in place where we separated the detainees in order to improve security. With that intention we opened the Boosa Detention Camp, where special investigations are done. People who are arrested under suspicion undergo full screening, after which unsuspicious people are released. We do not detain people unnecessarily. We don't harass people simply because they are Tamil. I need to emphasise that. Every Tamil is not the LTTE. Therefore we try our best to identify the LTTE cadres. It is difficult for us because we are racing against time. At times we have to face court cases as well. While facing such Human Rights cases we try our best to ensure that the basic human rights of everyone is ensured. We maintain humanity and make the arrest. Therefore if someone says that everyone is being arrested, in the same way we have released so many. We don't release anyone without doing a thorough screening. There have been instances where we have had to rearrest a person after further scrutiny.

There is a registration system that was put in place under the Emergency Regulations. Through that we were able to identify LTTE suspects. Now today in Colombo if there is a person living legally, then we know about them and it provides security to that person as well. In the year 2007, there were 407 arrests, in 2008, 254 arrests. In 2009 the number of arrests have reduced even further. The TID would effect an arrest only with sufficient evidence, not merely on suspicion. During surveillance duties officers on the field may effect an arrest on the grounds of the behaviour and activities of a person, however in such instances all steps are taken to ensure that the person is set free as soon as possible after a thorough screening. By doing so we have been able to dismantle many LTTE cells.

Since the links have been destroyed one LTTE person doesn't know where the explosives are hidden. There are so many incidents like that. For example the LTTE have hidden armouries in Killinochchi, Batticaloa and Ampara. Just like a crow hides food and can't find it the LTTE now can't find where they have hidden their stocks. This is also a security threat because, if unscrupulous elements get hold of these weapons there will be a very big problem. Therefore we are working very hard for disarmament.

We register people under the Emergency Regulation Section 23 where it has been requested that everyone should register their families including the head of the household. It is applicable to the entire country, but in Colombo we are stricter because it has been a benefit for us in ensuring security in Colombo. Even a person who wants to do a wrong is dissuaded. The law is there to prevent people from doing something wrong. This is crime prevention. We have a lot of preventive mechanisms. Therefore since prevention and investigations are going well together, we have been able to come to this level of security in Colombo.

The Time They Sacrifice In Detention Should Be Considered As A Contribution To Maintaining Law And Order In The Country.

Can you elaborate on the preventive mechanisms?

Prevention includes surveillance, registration, collection of intelligence and arrests. Through this we have been able to break the LTTE networks. People might say that we are hindering them through this process and we apologise for that but there is an immense service being done by following this mechanism. They should not think that by staying in detention that their freedom was curtailed. In most instances the security officers are unable to complete the screening process within 24 hours. Thus a person may be detained for a longer period. The time they sacrifice in detention should be considered as a contribution to maintaining law and order in the country. In the sense if there is a link through a person, then by being in detention the LTTE network would be destroyed. That is how we see it and we try our best to explain that to them. We do apologise for the inconveniences caused. We tell them that they have done a service to the country by being in detention. It is very important for them to know that.

Can you tell us of any investigations that have been essential in ensuring the security of Colombo?

We arrested a man who came from Malaysia. He was a criminal and we managed to arrest him while he was in hiding. Now when he was arrested we didn't know that he was planning something. We questioned him and were on a constant watch about his travels, telephone calls and bank balances. Through our investigations we found another suicide cadre, we recovered his suicide jacket and the cyanide capsules from him. Actually these were investigations that originated from the arrest. It was a successful investigation; there are plenty of examples as such. We coordinate with the Army, Navy and Air Force. We give the information we receive to the relevant armed services. Through the information we provide the Armed Forces are able to engage with the targets in the operational areas. We conducted a successful operation last September where we attacked an extensive bunker that belonged to the hierarchy of the LTTE. It was given a huge amount of publicity by the

media. I don't want to mention individuals, however such coordinated operations have taken place which have contributed immensely fight against terrorism.

In 2006 we began an inquiry, on a radio set that was brought to Sri Lanka. It was a communication set. The set was presented as a network communication set for a rent-a-car service. A year passed after the set was brought to Sri Lanka. I am telling this incident to reveal why we are obliged to retain suspects for a long period of time. The suspect was a Sri Lankan Tamil but he had obtained British citizenship. We found the link after a yearlong investigation and rigorous cross-questioning. That link enabled us to uncover a substantial procurement point of the LTTE including a shipping network (two ships) and radar equipment. This happened overseas. However, this breakthrough resulted in an enormous break in the LTTE procurement. Apart from that, during a similar investigation, we questioned a suspect and we were able to recover a stock of GPS equipment and an enormous stash of communication equipment. Thus our coordinated efforts enabled us to minimise the threat to Colombo, the North and the North Eastern Province.

Generally, you can load around 50 Kg to 300 Kg of explosives onto a van. Just imagine if 50 Kg of explosives combust what the impact would be, then imagine 350 Kg. There were two vans with the same registration number in Sri Lanka. We recovered both vans. Both vans were loaded with explosives. These were scheduled to explode in Colombo. Just imagine the scale of the destruction if that exploded, but this was prevented because we recovered the explosives on time.

Furthermore our division was able to recover nine suicide jackets. Recovering a single jacket means the end of one explosion plan. Stopping one explosion means saving 20-30 or more lives. They didn't bring the jackets to Colombo to take it back to Jaffna. They said that while the war is going on in the North, they would cause destruction here. Why was it not possible? Because of our successful investigations and intelligence services.

There are instances where we may not have recovered explosives but we have captured suicide bombers. All these suicide cadres were planning to explode. When Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar was assassinated, two girls were sent here on a suicide mission.

There was a team of six with them. They lived in Kotahena. The leader was in Colombo. They carried out the assassination. While this was being carried out, another LTTE cadre in the team brought a vehicle laden with explosives to Colombo. There were more than 50 Kg of explosives; in this instance the vehicle used was a van. The girl was given the task of exploding in front of a VVIP in Homagama. However, this girl started a love affair with the operator and she gave up the operation. The local police arrested her. Then she was brought to the TID. She was in custody for six months, but she did not speak. After repeated interrogation she confessed. However the van was already in Vavuniya since six months had passed. The girl narrated the story to us, the courts had released the van with the explosives. They had taken the van to be fixed and the bomb had exploded killing the driver

and the operator. Three people died; two innocent people and the terrorist. What if it had exploded here? How many deaths? The plan was to attack the Army and a VVIP. We have also arrested the culprits behind the assassination of General Parami Kulatunga and Major Mutalif.

The Police and the three Forces are like a single strong chain that works together. Actually, we appreciate the strength given to us by the Secretary of Defence. Furthermore, the Inspector General of Police has confidence in us; therefore he gives us all the support that we need. This is the truth.

Even before investigations were done. What is different now?

The TID has grown in numbers since its inception. Mobility and communication was developed. Working capacity was improved. Morale support has also improved. We sent our staff on training programmes overseas and in Sri Lanka. More and more technical and investigational training programmes were given. We want to have a forensic lab here as well. Furthermore, the appreciation shown to the Officers has been a great motivation. TID officers have received awards and promotions. We reward our informants as well. The Inspector General Police has put this system in place. The constant motivation that we receive from our superiors has been a key to our success.

Wars occurred in the past when kings ruled. Even then the best combination worked out. The other thing is, the current situation is not about race. All races assist us including Tamils and Muslims. Perhaps you remember even in those days people from all races have supported the intelligence services. We work that way. Therefore, this is not about ethnicity. This is the unique identification in our operation. We need everyone's help to counter terrorism. That is why we are able to move forward like this. We are combating terrorism. Not to destroy the Tamil population. We are all citizens of this country. As a professional policeman it is the best possible achievement to see an end to this terrorist problem that has gripped our country for more than two decades. His Excellency the President has given us the strength and leadership that we need to end this menace. The dawning of peace in Sri Lanka is at hand.

