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THE DRIFT IN JAFFNA:

THE URGENCY OF A POLITICAL SETTLEMENT & THE IMPORTANCE OF LARRY WIJERATNE'S LEGACY.

Brigadier Larry Wijeratne's Legacy

Dismantling the legacy

Effects on Jaffna peninsula as a whole

30th May 1998: Incident at Gurunagar

Failure of Rehabilitation and Militarisation

A Case of Political Neglect

Brigadier Larry Wijeratne's Legacy

The most remarkable event in the whole war is surely the manner in which the Vadamaratchy sector remained in two years of military control what an outsider described as 'a breath of fresh air' in the entire war-torn North-East. Of course there were confrontations, search operations and some army misbehaviour as was to be expected. But the people remained confident under their brigade commander Larry Wijeratne, that their interests, their dignity, and their well-being would receive greater consideration than any short-term advantage to the Army. People said very enthusiastically that 'as long as Wijeratne is here, we have nothing to worry about'. To Wijeratne himself this involved hard work and several risks. He frequently went out, conferred with people, tried to help out with their problems, and kept himself abreast of what was going on in his brigade division from not just a military man's angle, but also from a human perspective. Even militarily he took calculated risks in the interest of winning the support of the people. He made a case for handling the situation in a humane manner and stopped the Special Forces Brigade, who were reputed to be ruffians, functioning in his area. He had minors released who were caught helping the LTTE. On his own initiative he initiated schemes to help youth who showed themselves capable in studies and also arranged programmes for the youth of Vadamaratchy to interact with youth from the South. All this paid military dividends too, but that is a different story.

Although a prime target, the LTTE could not get him while he was alert on active duty. The people were confident that if there was any problem, they could go direct to him. The LTTE tried spreading rumours to discredit him, such as the blatant lie of his involvement in the Kokkadichcholai massacre of June 1991 [Our [Report No.8](#)]. About a month before he was killed, the LTTE's overseas networks were full of a story of a woman being raped by soldiers in Vadamaratchy, and her sister who went to complain being burnt along with a shop. The story was without substance.

The LTTE were able to get him on 14th May, when he had ceased to be on active duty, while attending farewell functions hosted by the people and his guard was down. The LTTE was initially annoyed that the Pt. Pedro traders' association were giving him a farewell lunch. It is conceivable that they later stopped interfering and merely monitored the arrangements to set a trap.

When he returned from the lunch a large group of people were waiting to meet him a short distance from the camp. One lady for example was a widow whose son had been helped with educational arrangements by the brigadier. As he passed this group, he exchanged greetings. The vehicle then turned from the town square into the road leading to the camp when an explosion was heard. The suicide bomber was said to be a youth of about 21 who was loitering about that area in a rain coat - it being a rainy day - and was not taken much notice of. Many civilians through sheer grief rushed to the area, which was about the entrance to the camp. Finally a soldier had to slap a civilian to clear the place for an army survey team from Palaly.

A particular significance of the event should not be missed. This was the first time since the breakdown of communal relations that the death of a Sinhalese soldier had been so deeply and spontaneously mourned by the Tamil population. Instead of recognising the momentousness of Larry Wijeratne's Legacy, some in the Army started talking and behaving as though the people were responsible for the murder, which was absolute nonsense. As subsequent events indicated, the threat to this valuable legacy was very real. [\[Top\]](#)

Dismantling the legacy

Colonel Sarath Karunaratne, Brigadier Wijeratne's replacement had two meetings with a cross-section of Pt. Pedro's citizenry later in May. He spoke only for 5 minutes at each meeting. He said, **"I overheard someone saying that they were checked three times. You will not be checked three times, but ten times". What he then said was darkly threatening: "If you want to be safe, you must make sure the Army is safe. I have told my son, if someone hits you, you must hit back. The soldiers under me are like my sons to me"**. Someone later got up at the meeting and praised Larry Wijeratne. Karunaratne responded, **"I was not born to Wijeratne's father!"**.

He then proceeded to inform the civilians that he would, unlike Wijeratne, not be meeting civilians. He said that he had nominated three captains at three locations with full powers to take decisions on civilian affairs. No one should come to him, he said, and if it is necessary to see him, one of the captains would fix an appointment.

The new commander's message brought dismay as the news quickly spread that he had threatened reprisals. It affected civilian morale throughout Jaffna and rendered the Army more isolated.

It is incomprehensible how the Government blundered here by sending a man with a record for harshness in the Trincomalee District, with no understanding of what had been achieved in an area and needed to be preserved, to further the Government's stated political goals. His appointment is an insult to Larry Wijeratne.

The language used by Karunaratne is the language of an alien and brutal army of occupation. It is the language of a Rip van Winkle waking up after a long slumber from the 80s not

knowing what such attitudes had cost the country. In the situation of persons from the political establishment of any standing never visiting the area, the military commander also becomes in effect the representative of the President, his commander-in-chief. Such language, also, in the context, had communal overtones even if not intended. It is an indication of the extent to which the Government has lost its bearings in its handling of the problem.

In Vadamaratchy itself no notable violations have taken place to date under Karunaratne. There was a rumour of a rape in Yakkarai and of two dead bodies being sited at Nelliady. As far as we were able to check, these rumours are without substance. But again under the present dispensation a cover-up would be much easier. A complainant can go only as far as the local captain or major. Only at their discretion can the complainant go higher. Earlier, the smallest person had the confidence of being able to go straight to Wijeratne. It would make it easier now to intimidate complainants and suppress reports of misdemeanor.

There are frequent cordon and search operations and persons are taken to Polikandy camp for questioning and are sometimes released in the night with passes to go home. There have so far been no reports of beating or mistreatment. We also do not know how many, if any, have continued in detention. There are frequent check points along the Jaffna Road, which strike people as punitive rather than rational. For example, at Puloly check point soldiers recheck those they have seen being checked at Saraiady, 250 yards away. Earlier movement within Vadamaratchy was unhampered by check-points compared with the rest of Jaffna. Today's situation is the reverse. People generally travel through lanes avoiding the main roads.

The most significant difference is the change of psychology. People, especially those with children, have been applying for permission to fly to Colombo with the intention of going for good - from Colombo to India and then to the West with the help of relatives. Others have been looking for houses in Jaffna town. Those who were earlier happy to visit Vadamaratchy are now reluctant. After what the new commander spoke, there is fear that the LTTE may try some major provocation in the hope of large-scale reprisals. Most people clearly remember how the situation became intolerably worse after the Indian Army went on a course of reprisals from June 1988. Then even small boys started signalling the LTTE on the Indian Army's movements, making life difficult for them. Some do not learn. [\[Top\]](#)

Effects on Jaffna peninsula as a whole

The situation under the Army outwardly looked fairly stable until the LTTE killed Larry Wijeratne and the Jaffna Mayor Sarojini Yogeswaran in quick succession [May 14th & 17th]. Around Jaffna town and in Thenmaratchy LTTE infiltrators have followed up with provocations in an attempt to unsettle the Army. New infiltration on a larger scale was facilitated by thinning down troop numbers, moving seasoned soldiers who were quite competently able to maintain order for offensive operations in Killinochchi, and replacing some of them with re-inducted deserters. Known LTTE spies in Jaffna have also been seen to be more active. With the civilian population scared and unnerved by the two murders, the LTTE moved to try to rebuild its network and reassert its control through terror. Thooyavan, the LTTE leader in Pungudutivu, wanted Namasivayam, Secretary to the traders' association to collect several crores of rupees from the traders [Namasivayam was later killed by the LTTE].

The situation would have remained more promising if the Army had kept its balance. In 1996 people were praising the Army for ensuring the safety of civilians before responding to the

LTTE's calculated provocations, such as throwing bombs or shooting at the Army in crowded places. As a general rule the civilians too were confident that there would be no reprisals. One cannot say that the general rule prevails today. There are too many exceptions where civilians have been beaten up or worse. When the Army tries to cover up, which is inexplicable after all this experience, its credibility is dangerously eroded. For the first time in more than two years there have been reports of recruitment by the LTTE in Jaffna, even if the numbers are small. We take one incident which illustrates how things can go wrong. [\[Top\]](#)

30th May 1998: Incident at Gurunagar

About 6.30 PM, two women tiger infiltrators cycled towards the Graveyard junction sentry point and shot dead two soldiers. The soldiers then went on a rampage, according to local sources, assaulting 'infants, men and women'. These are the indisputable facts. There were two statements issued on the incident by the Army HQ in Palaly, on 31st May and 2nd June. The first of these statements says that the Army returned fire in the direction in which the Tigresses were escaping and that 5 civilians were injured by the explosion of 3 grenades thrown by one of the attackers.

The second statement also mentioned the grenades thrown, but later gives the names of 4 injured civilians whom it claims were injured during cross-fire (Uthayan 3.6.98). This would suggest that they were injured when the Army opened fire without being too particular about who was going to get hit. A fifth girl who was injured, Thanarajah Suganthi, was admitted to hospital by a man [named Victor], says the statement, was found to be a confirmed Tigress. A search of her home in the Thiddy area (formerly occupied by conservancy labourers) is said to have produced a pistol, grenades and other accessories. The man is also under arrest. The day after the incident, Brigadier Mendis, the Town commandant, met the civilians at St. Thomas' Church and apologised for the Army's behaviour.

Yet, a most tragic aspect of the incident is being covered up with scant regard for consistency or accountability. This is the fate of the 19 year old girl Thevathas Jethina (Subajini) of Passayoor. The first statement from the Army Command (31.5.98) claims that when the Army searched the area after the incident, a Tigress tried to escape and the Army opened fire, and subsequently recovered her body. The reference is no doubt to Subajini as she was the only civilian killed in the incident.

The second statement mentions Subajini by name, but tells a different story: "... [Subajini] got into an auto (three-wheeled cab) and tried to get away from the search party. A civilian who recognised her as a member of the LTTE informed the troops, who then arrested her. During her interrogation, she tried to grab the weapon of a soldier. When the concerned soldier shot the maiden, she expired".

Any intelligent person would detect several absurdities in the second story taken by itself, and the two taken together are without any credibility.

The truth is that the girl from Passayoor went to visit her married sister living near the water-tank in Gurunagar. Her brother-in-law was taking her back home on the bicycle when they were stopped by soldiers at the Graveyard junction at 7.00 PM (half an hour after the incident). Mariyathas, the brother-in-law, was beaten and chased away, while Subajini was detained. The following morning Mariyathas who went to the hospital, apparently to get himself treated, was told of a female corpse in the mortuary and identified the corpse as

Subajini's. The Army wanted her mother to certify her daughter as having been a Tigress before taking the body. She refused and later received the body after the magistrate's order.

Another circumstance further highlights the Army's gross insensitivity and indifference to the truth. Subajini's father and brother, when the LTTE was in control, had been arrested and done away with, for having been supporters of the EPRLF. It appears that to the high command in Palaly, when it comes to covering up, any old story would do, even if it means different stories at different times.

There are several more reports of death and injury which need to be investigated and reported by groups functioning locally. Why this is not happening has nothing to do with the Army - it is a home-bred paralysis. The Human Rights Commission has so far not made any visible impact. The LTTE too is using the poorest sections of the population - many of them returned from the Vanni - to bring about destabilisation. In our Special Report of April, we draw particular attention to the alienation of coastal folk. The Army carries on regardless.

The fact that the Army Commander in Vadamaratchy can threaten reprisals and the command in Palaly could issue nonsensical statements and pretend that things would get back to normal, suggests that there is a very dangerous drift.[\[Top\]](#)

Failure of Rehabilitation and Militarisation

The most immediately worst affected in the present drift are the communities that had been traditionally oppressed and are at present without economic means. One of the girls in the pistol gang involved in the Gurunagar incident appears to have come from Thiddy, an area of the kind referred to. Almost unnoticed by the outside world, baneful tendencies are taking root. A year ago [Jaffna Survey, [Bulletin No.14](#)] we quoted an observation by one familiar with the Gurunagar area that vice and illicit liquor which substitute for a livelihood, will eventually drive the Army which is tasked with maintaining security there, to go to pieces along with the community itself. There is a very urgent task of rehabilitation here that has not been addressed. Bureaucrats functioning from Colombo do not even seem to appreciate the urgency. An order from Colombo has now gone out to significantly cut the number of those receiving dry rations. This would have been justified if there had been a commensurate improvement in the economic base. The reality is quite different.

Mine-clearing which should have begun two years ago is only beginning now. Many lands which provided work for the depressed folk cannot be worked because of mines, the Army's bunds running through them, or because the owners do not want to invest capital amidst political uncertainty. For the large fishing population, restrictions and undisciplined attacks by the Navy being as they are, things remain bad. In the case of the Vanni returnees, again a large section of the population, after deprivation and continual illness, many of the breadwinners are unable to do much physical labour. For two years now hardly anything has been done to revive economic activity among these groups.

We have in the meantime received reports of the EPDP recruiting in deprived areas. Several of these areas can be identified around Jaffna. In Pt. Pedro for example there are three areas occupied by descendants of conservancy labourers - in 3rd Cross Street, Punithanagar east of Katkoyalam and near Manthikai Hospital. The EPDP has recruited about 4 persons in the latter area and some from Santha Thottam, an area occupied by a toddy tapping community in

Puloly East. In a particular area, EPDP cadre walked into the village and asked some young men of about 18 years to come with them. In the EPDP office they were promised a salary and dry rations for their family if they joined. A mother anxious to get her son out said that the manner in which it was carried out hardly gave the son an option. In another case the recruit is said to receive a monthly salary of about Rs.4000/=, but it is deemed too risky for him to come home. The LTTE too has long fished in such areas. The delays in genuine rehabilitation and a political solution are thus driving these oppressed communities towards further violence and misery.

It is hard to see how the Government's patronage of certain groups with several faces, as MPs, security operators with blood on their hands, extortioners, and collectors of illegitimate taxes in certain areas, can offer the people a healthy political direction. The most questionable of these activities have the connivance of the security forces. [\[Top\]](#)

A Case of Political Neglect

The main fault, as many observers in Jaffna see it, and as we see it, lies with leaving an Army cooling its heels in Jaffna without any serious political task to co-ordinate with. With the political package having lost its momentum there is no linkage between what goes on in the highest political circles in Colombo and the needs of the North-East. Disagreements among the major parties on the political solution, puerile skirmishing about snap presidential elections, and the present Government's dilly-dallying, have very unhealthy repercussions in the North-East. People began to wonder if there will ever be continuity of policy in Colombo.

Lessons need to be learnt quickly from what has been going on in Jaffna. The local council elections in January stirred up enthusiasm because the people believed that the Government was serious about a revival of political activity through reconstruction and that this would also help them to assert themselves. Then there were severe shortcomings in fund allocation and Mrs. Yogeswaran was left too isolated a target, which enabled the LTTE to dampen all hope by shooting one individual. On the other hand a strictly followed time table for devolution would have had its own impact on revival of political activity which the LTTE would have found difficult to confront. The present manner of drift and the loss of faith in the continuity of government policy would also dampen the commitment of army officers who want to see something constructive achieved. Today, it is like asking these officers to plod on, feeling cynical about the Government and with an end nowhere in sight. The conduct of the Army from April to June 1996 reflected an admirable sense of purpose. Now that is mostly gone.

What has amounted to an almost total bar on ministerial visits to Jaffna has also been largely instrumental in the loss of any sense of urgency. The security services have had enough experience in VIP security over the last 5 years and providing security in Jaffna is no more demanding than in Colombo. Larry Wijeratne's death was largely avoidable. With the loss of attention, the rehabilitation exercise is out of joint. The body created for this purpose by the President, the RRAN, had very little, if any, input from local experts who would have been happy to contribute. It was largely a UNDP funded bureaucratic exercise from Colombo that has so far made no significant impact.

If there was political will to go ahead with devolution, much more could have been accomplished, bringing further political dividends. The present approach to rehabilitation and reconstruction may turn out to be an exercise in shutting the stable door after the horse had bolted.

The speech of the new Pt. Pedro brigade commander referred to is again a reflection of the absence of any serious thinking on what such a person should do in a very sensitive political environment. This should not be left to the whims of individual officers. The kind of cover up we have referred to in the Gurunagar incident points to the near absence of checks. The arrangements proposed by the new commander in Pt. Pedro are unprecedented. Entrusting authority to local captains or majors with no appeal to higher authority will no doubt encourage corruption and abuse.

The Government needs to do something quickly to reassure the people of Jaffna, and particularly the people of Vadamaratchy that the high standards set by Brigadier Larry Wijeratne will be maintained. The judgment in the Krishanthi Kumarasamy rape and murder trial, where the convicted received maximum sentences, is a welcome one. One of those convicted alleged in court that a large number of the bodies of those who disappeared in 1996 are buried in the same location. To give substance to the President's pledge to probe the disappearances impartially, it would be more immediately meaningful to appoint an independent body to go into the allegations made by the convicted man. There is good reason to believe that there is truth in what the convicted man said.

It must also be kept in mind that the only rationale for deploying the Army on the streets today, is to hasten the day there will be no need for it in maintaining order. Only then can there be a real settlement of the problem - that is when the people have the democratic space to assert their dignity. It is a task calling for political wisdom. This task also calls for much more serious reflection in the South, particularly among the intelligentsia and the press. As long as there is a strong inclination to treat devolution as unnecessary, and the problem as one of law and order concerning a congenitally recalcitrant people, it would also sustain the dangerous illusion among a significant section of Tamils, that as much as they dislike its ways, it is only the LTTE that can extract a solution from a government in Colombo.