

Tigers can no more fight a conventional war: Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers have lost their ability to wage a conventional war, but it would take another year to 'completely defeat them militarily', army chief Lt. Gen. Sarath Fonseka said Monday.

Fonseka also told the Foreign Correspondents Association here that his men had killed about 9,000 guerrillas since August 2006, and added that the Tigers still had about 5,000 fighters.

'Even if the army finished the war and captured the whole of north, the LTTE still might survive as long as there are people who believe in Tamil nationalism,' Fonseka said in the heavily guarded army headquarters where he narrowly survived a Tiger suicide attack in April 2006.

'The LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) has lost the capability of fighting as a conventional army. Although they are (still) fighting us, they (are) not in the same manner as was in the past... That type of resistance is not there any more,' he said.

The army chief, who has commandeered many military operations against the LTTE over three decades, said although the LTTE's fighting capabilities had been badly weakened, it would take another one year or so for the army 'to completely defeat them militarily'.

Claiming that government troops fighting the rebels in the Wanni jungles over the past one year had become 'one of the best jungle fighters in the world', Fonseka said his men 'are now working on the overall plan of completely defeating the LTTE militarily', not just capturing fresh territories.

'We do not just go for terrains, but we go for the kill. This is the difference between the military operations in the past and the present,' he said.

He added that the military had got 'the right guidance and leadership' from President Mahinda Rajapaksa and his government. Fonseka was named the army chief in December 2005, a month after Rajapaksa took power.

Commenting on the military operations in the north, the army chief said the troops had regained several hundred square km where the Tigers held sway. He said the troops were only four kilometres short of the LTTE's strategic Sea Tiger base at Vidattativu in the northwestern coastal belt in Mannar district.

'I am sure the LTTE will totally lose even their present capability in less than one year. Then they will resort to totally different type of tactic,' Fonseka said, indicating that the rebels could operate as small groups and go back to their initial hit-and-run tactics.

Placing the number of LTTE cadres killed since August 2006 at 9,000, he said that 1,700 soldiers have also been killed while nearly 4,000 had been wounded during this period.

'According to intelligence reports, the LTTE still has about 5,000 fighting cadres. We are killing about 400-500 LTTE cadres a month. But they will also recruit another couple of thousand cadres as the fighting goes on,' he said.

He said even if the government troops captured the entire north, the army 'might not be able to kill

the very last LTTE member', and warned that the rebels might continue as insurgents for a long period.

'Even if the army finished the war and captured the whole of north, the LTTE still might survive as long as there are people who believe in Tamil nationalism and with Tamil diaspora who are supporting them.

'As long as those people are there, the LTTE might survive even for another two decades with 1,000 cadres joining them. It might even continue as an insurgency group for ever, like insurgencies all over the world. But it will never be able to fight in the same manner as now,' he said.

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