

## NEWS

# Brigadier Balraj passes away

Brigadier Balraj, one of the top commanders of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) passed away on Tuesday of a heart attack. The LTTE has announced three days of national mourning for 21-23 May.

In over two decades of service with the LTTE, Brig. Balraj, 43, rose rapidly through the ranks on the strength of his notable courage and shrewdness on the battlefield, fighters who served with him said.

He had been ailing for some time and had been hospitalised for three months earlier this year, reports said. He had undergone a heart-related operation in 2003, during the Norwegian peace process.

The operation was conducted in a Singapore hospital and he had spent several months recuperating in Vanni thereafter.

Throughout his career, Brig. Balraj, one of the most feared LTTE commanders, preferred to lead from the front and had been seriously wounded many times. His healing was often compounded by his diabetes.

LTTE soldiers who served with Brig. Balraj say preferred to direct battles from amid the exploding shells and flying bullets of the frontline - a few hundred meters from the enemy positions - rather than the confines of a command-centre.

He had twice commanded the LTTE's crack Charles Anthony Regiment. He was its first commander for two years from when it was established in 1991 and commanded it again for two years from 1995.

Brig. Balraj came to particular public prominence for his command of a daring LTTE operation in 2000: he led 1,500 Tigers deep into the Sri Lanka Army (SLA) - held Jaffna peninsula to capture and hold a section of the key A9 highway linking the SLA base complex at Elephant Pass with the Jaffna rearbase areas.

The large strike force slipped into the heavily fortified peninsula by sea and trekked inland from Thalaiyadi to the Puthukkaattu Junction on the A9. With complex defences manned by thousands of Sri Lankan troops, such a move had hitherto been considered an impossibility.

It was also considered impossible for a lightly armed strike force, surrounded by thousands of Sri Lankan troops supported by artillery, tanks and airpower to seriously disrupt the key highway.

Brig. Balraj's raid gave the lie to the assumption that no rear depth of defence of a state's conventional army can be seriously threatened by anyone except an armed force with strategic air power.

Holding what became called the 'Vaththirayan Box', a perimeter of a few kilometres deep inside the Jaffna High Security Zone, with no hope of resupply, Brig. Balraj and his troops battled



**In a famous picture, Brigadier Balraj is seen leading Tamil Tiger fighters in one of the most daring missions the LTTE launched. Balraj's strike force is deep inside Sri Lanka Army-controlled territory, on its way to capture and hold a section of the Jaffna-Elephant Pass highway. With only the weapons they carried with them when they infiltrated the Jaffna peninsula by sea, the 1,500 Tiger fighters held their 'cut-out' or 'box' for several weeks against repeated attempts by thousands of Sri Lankan troops supported by tanks and artillery to open the highway. Starved of supplies from Jaffna, the SLA base complex at Elephant Pass collapsed before an LTTE offensive in April 2000.**

the SLA for 34 days with only the light weapons they had carried in or those arms captured from the enemy.

When the LTTE assault on the Elephant Pass base complex began, the garrison there was unable to receive supplies from Jaffna.

The SLA launched repeated ferocious onslaughts against Brig. Balraj's position. As the situation in Elephant Pass became critical, top Sri Lankan commanders converged in Jaffna to mobilise the relief effort, but to no avail: the 'Vaththirayan box' held until the Elephant Pass garrison collapsed before the LTTE offensive.

Balraj (Balasegaram Kandiah) was born on 27 November, 1965. He hails from Kokkuthoduvaay in Mullaitheevu district.

he joined the LTTE in 1983 as a part time member and became a full time member in 1984.

In 1985 he departed for India from Vanni for military training. His batch, travelling under the supervision of a senior LTTE cadre Kandeepan, was confronted by the SLA. Kandeepan and some of the other recruits were killed. Balraj was wounded.

Fellow fighters remark that he had been wounded in combat even before he received his military training: he was in the 9th batch of the LTTE training camp in Tamil Nadu.

When Balraj came back to Vanni, he served with Major

Pasilan in 1986.

Colonel Theepan, Northern Forces Commander of the LTTE, recalled that in one heavy battle at Munthirikaikkulam Balraj took part in an LTTE ambush in which fourteen SLA soldiers were killed and several weapons were seized by the Tigers.

Balraj took part in several ambushes on SLA forces in Vanni during that year, demonstrating

## Commander who rose through the ranks on the strength of his notable courage and shrewdness on the battlefield

considerable courage and battlefield acumen, Col. Theepan said.

However, Balraj's defining moment as a field commander came later during the India - LTTE war. In Jaffna, he fought side by side with Major Pasilan and Major Maran, when the conflict erupted between the LTTE and the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in 1987.

Armed with an AK-47 assault rifle and a Rocket-Propelled-Grenade Launcher, Balraj fought Indian forces at Kopaay, destroying battle tanks of the Indian army.

Later, as the LTTE moved from urban- to jungle- warfare and shifted its base to Vanni, he

moved into the deep jungles of Ma'nalaa'ru, which is near his native place of Kokkuthoduvaay.

Balraj was wounded three times during direct confrontations with the Indian Army.

The Indian military launched its Operation Checkmate in several phases and in one phase deployed the elite Gurkha commandos. At one critical battlefront, Balraj launched a surprise frontal assault on the Gurkhas located in open terrain. The ferocity of the LTTE attack forced the elite commandos to scatter into deep into booby-trapped jungle where they suffered heavy casualties.

Adele Balasingham, wife of the LTTE's late theoretician, Anton Balasingham, recalls Brig. Balraj in her book 'Will to Freedom' based on her experiences of living several years with the LTTE.

"Incredible as it may seem, this fighting hero is a reserved man," she writes.

"Balraj is known, loved and respected not only for his legendary military successes and undisputed and abounding courage, but also for his utter commitment and devotion to the cadres under his command. Sensitive and respectful of the sacrifice and tribulations they have endured, Balraj opts to spend as much time as possible in the camps with them."

"A measure of Balraj's courage revealed itself to us when shrapnel smashed his right leg in the Yarl Devi battle of 1993. A decision not to amputate the limb was made and Balraj suffered excruciating pain of limb repair. Compounding his healing problems was unstable diabetes. After many months in bed and a great deal of pain, Balraj eventually walked again on his leg, but the injury left him with a permanent limp and a recurrent wound infection."

"Nevertheless, he viewed his injury as insignificant compared with the suffering and sacrifices of his cadres and continued to function as a field commander in the warzone."

Reports say that even as he was forced to rest in hospital by bouts of illness this year, Brig. Balraj had engaged himself in Mannaar and Manalaaru war fronts where LTTE fighters are putting up stiff resistance against the SLA.

Speaking in May 2006, soon after the Sri Lankan government had launched its opening offensive against the LTTE in Sampur, Brig. (then Colonel) Balraj observed: "The Fourth Eelam War will be the final war, and a terrible war that will bring the long awaited liberation to our people and our homeland. We are certainly positioned to be victorious. The people are with us and our leader will lead us to victory."