Army’s determination, not only to crush Tigers but also to save civilians: BBC’s Radio 4

Wednesday, 13 May 2009
Last Updated Wednesday, 13 May 2009

Walter Jayawardhana Summing up his radio broadcast from Colombo, the respected BBC Radio 4 reporter Andrew Hosken in Today program said Sri Lanka Army’s determination is not only to put an end to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam but also to save the trapped Tamil civilians. He said in his broadcast, the Army knows this is a fight not just to obliterate the Tamil Tigers but to save the lives of perhaps many thousands of innocent men, women and children caught up in the storm of war.

He said, although over the last two decades Kilinochchi has changed hands several times, its fall on January 2 signalled the end of the Tigers - who now control just a small coastal strip, 40km from Kilinochchi. Excerpts from the broadcast; For years, the town of Kilinochchi was the headquarters of the Tamil Tiger rebels, which the Sri Lankan government describes as a brutal and ruthless terrorist organisation. Now it is the HQ for the Sri Lankan Army which says it is on the verge of finally destroying an organisation it has fought for more than 30 years. When Kilinochchi was finally captured by the Army earlier this year, there were widespread celebrations, particularly in the country’s southern capital, Colombo. Although over the last two decades Kilinochchi has changed hands several times, its fall on January 2 signalled the end of the Tigers - who now control just a small coastal strip, 40km from Kilinochchi. Both the Sri Lankan government and its Army clearly want nothing to come between them and the total victory they expect. We arrived at the HQ of the two main infantry divisions that have now encircled the Tigers, the 57th and the 58th. Major General Jagath Dias, who commands the 57th, captured Kilinochchi for the government. “It was the proudest moment of my career,” he said. But when the general finally raised the Sri Lankan flag in Kilinochchi, it fluttered over a ruined ghost town. Scarcely a building or piece of infrastructure remained intact. Even the vast jumbo jet sized concrete pipe that carried water to many people in the region is wrecked. “This was deliberately destroyed by the terrorists,” the General said, shaking his head in vigorous disapproval. “Do you think we did it?” The general’s defensive question perhaps reflects a view widespread in the Army and in Government circles - that the western media has given succour over the years to the LTTE. On the road between Kilinochchi and Paranthan, we travelled through several abandoned towns and villages that had been virtually obliterated. The Army’s press conference also made clear its view that what it sees as a gullible foreign media has been a part of the Tigers’ weaponry since its violent campaign for a separate Tamil state in the North and East of Sri Lanka first took shape in the mid 1970s. Recently, the Sri Lankan Navy destroyed three so-called “Sea Tiger” vessels, including two suicide boats. Twenty-three Tigers died. Heavy losses Eleven LTTE cadres have died for every soldier, the Army’s commanders told us. The Army was keen to show the media some of the arms and other items captured from the Tigers in recent months - including a tank, heavy artillery, assault rifles and home made landmines. We were taken to the hamlet of Paranthan, the place closest to the “no fire zone”, the small coastal area currently held by the last of the Tigers. Although we were only 2 to 3km from the area, mainly made up of paddy fields and smallholdings, we could hear no signs of fighting. Only later could we discern what sounded like mortar fire, but it was not clear whose mortars they were. In what by any standards has been a vicious conflict, there have been claims by the LTTE of alleged Army breaches of the government’s no fire zone pledge. After our stay with the Army ended, we heard of an alleged artillery attack on a makeshift hospital in the no fire zone, killing more than 60 people. A pro-Tamil website accused the military of shelling the hospital. But military spokesman, Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara denied there had been any such attack. What was clear from our visit was the scale of the destruction. On the road between Kilinochchi and Paranthan, we travelled through several abandoned towns and villages that had been virtually obliterated. Everywhere there were smashed buildings and vehicles. We saw no civilians. Crops go untilled and livestock wander the fields untended. What is far from clear is the scale of the humanitarian crisis. Neither the true figure of the total number of Internally Displaced People (IDPs) is known nor the number of people allegedly held as LTTE hostages within the no fire zone itself. Courtesy: dailynews.lk