

# Situation Report Yearsof living

BY IQBAL ATHAS

One night in February 1998, a group of well-built men, all clutching Browning automatic pistols, forced their way into my house at Wijerama in Nugegoda.

One of them stormed into my bedroom in the second floor, cocked his pistol and placed it on my left temple. My wife Anoma and daughter Jasmin, then seven years old, watching television together with me froze in shock and horror. A second intruder walked in to thrust a loaded pistol at my back. They forced me out of my bedroom.

Outside the door, I saw others with their weapons in hand busy with the household staff. They were poring over their National Identity Cards or interrogating them. When they tried to force me down the stairway, my

daughter, fearing she was going to lose her father, raised loud cries. One of them ordered a female help to move with her into a bedroom nearby and shut the door. Instead, she thrust her hands around my neck in a hard bind and screamed "my thathi, my thathi." The cries could be heard from the road outside.

For some inexplicable reason, three more armed men rushed upstairs shouting "api yamu, api yamu" or let us leave. They withdrew. I rang the Police Emergency at Mirihana. A mobile patrol arrived to ask a few questions but left hurriedly. Word of the incident spread and we could not lie on our beds that night. The telephones rang incessantly. One of the callers was Mahinda Rajapaksa, then Minister of Fisheries. He was championing human rights issues and was kind enough to assure support. Others included highly placed sources in the military establishment and the Police. Some offered to come over. I forbade them for fear of exposure. Yet, there were a few who defied.

The wheels of justice did not move. Not until Bill Richardson, then United States Ambassador to the United Nations visited Colombo. He came for six hours as Special Envoy of President Bill Clinton. The US Embassy got in

touch to say he wished to meet me. When I did, Mr. Richardson said that during talks he raised issue with President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga about the ordeal I had to face. "She has assured a full investigation," he told me. He later announced this at a news conference.

Within days, the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) launched investigations. My wife and I were invited one afternoon to an identification parade at the Magistrate's Court in Gangodawila. I identified the man who placed the pistol on my left temple. He was the chief bodyguard of a former Air Force Commander. My wife

identified another officer, who headed a special unit.

After a legal trial lasting four years, the two were convicted to nine years rigorous imprisonment. One died whilst in jail. The other won bail. The case was later dismissed on legal technicalities.

An year before, in November 1997, my sources within the military establishment tipped me off about a bizarre encounter I would face. One of them said that a service intelligence arm was coaching a Tamil civilian in a military camp in Vavuniya. He was to come on television and identify himself as the English translator of Tiger guerrilla leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran. He was to "confess" that his task every week was to translate the Situation Report column in the Sunday Times. The news reached me on a Monday morning. The next issue of the newspaper was six days away. The TV appearance was to take place in-between. There was an urgent need to have this information in the public domain.

Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe was good enough to raise issue in Parliament on a Tuesday. A detailed report appeared in the next day's Lankadeepa, our sister Sinhala daily. That notwithstanding, Senthinathan appeared on Rupavahini, the national television network. In footage repeatedly broadcast, Senthinathan declared he translated the Situation Report every week for the late Mr. Prabhakaran. It seemed that was how a deadly terror outfit like the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) conducted a separatist war — only after reading the Sunday Times every week. The column was read by the two protagonists to the war, the LTTE and the military, with equal interest. One or the other was displeased at different times over the content. Yet, if Senthinathan was correct, none of the investigative arms of the State questioned me and pursued the logical course — charge me in Court. That was not the idea. It was to silence me. I became an irritant to politicians of successive governments who painted rosy pictures of victories and poured billions in public money, some to the war effort and some to help themselves. Millionaires, both in and out of uniform, were born. It later transpired that Senthinathan was a man of unsound mind.

The final chapter to this encounter came from my friend and then Military Spokesperson, the late Major General Sarath Munasinghe. He knew I was readying to write a book on the Third Eelam War. Whilst documenting the sequence of events, I had often consulted him to double check on various matters. One night, at dinner together with another senior General, the subject of discussion was Senthinathan. At news conferences, as spokesperson, he had to defend what the so-called LTTE translator said. He looked distraught. "I am ashamed to do things like this," he said. He confirmed to me details I had already learnt about the men who trained Senthinathan. He also told me something I did not know. The so-called translator had told his handler in the intelligence arm "Sir, I have done what you have told me. Now, please look after me." Another was the fact that the "handler" flew every now and then from Ratmalana to Vavuniya for meetings with Senthinathan during the coaching sessions. "You can write this after I die. The public should know," Maj. Gen. Munasinghe said.



Iqbal Athas, Consultant Editor: The Situation Report

Earlier, in 1993, the Army launched an operation Wanni leading to disastrous consequences. I had about what would follow including a possible attack. What I forecast came right leading to an unusually high number of casualties. A floral wreath was sent to my residence with a card purportedly from the unit that faced the debacle. This drew angry protests from media organisations.

In 1994, I won the International Press Freedom award from the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). I remember the ceremony in New York's Grand Central Station for many reasons. As I walked down the steps after my speech, the first to congratulate me was retired diplomat the late Richard Holbrooke. He was later President Barack Obama's Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan when he died of illness. Others included Turner, the man who launched CNN, his wife, and Jane Fonda, millionaire businessman George Soros, and anchors Peter Jennings and Dan Rather. There were humorous moments too.

After the ceremony I returned to my hotel in New York Avenue to take the lift to the penthouse, allotted to me because the hotel was full. It was the first time I wore a tuxedo. The CPJ had paid \$ 150 to hire a limousine. Covering the late President J.R. Jayewardene's death in the US in June 1984, I had instead opted for a silk night dress, again for the first time, to cover the White House dinner hosted by the late President Ronald Reagan. On the lift this time there were three Americans. One of them, obviously in very good spirits, asked me "You were at this hotel?" One moment, you are at the zenith of professional glory. The next, you get mistaken

I have had to face what I believe is more than my share of ugly encounters. This is because the Sunday Times is the pioneer in specialised reporting on matters related to both defence and security. This is through the Situation Report column. It is not an exaggeration to say most other media followed suit and began to have their own Defence Correspondents thereafter.