

Operation Cactus : Indian Intervention in Maldives – Nov 1988

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It was 0815 hours, on a fine 3rd November 1988 morning. The RAX secret telephone was ringing urgently in my bedroom as I was about to leave Army House for my office at the South Block. It was Ronen Sen (later our ambassador to the USA), the young and friendly foreign-service officer at Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's office (the PMO). Our conversation went somewhat like this : -

"There is an emergency at the Maldives Islands, Sir. The capital, Male Island, has been taken over last night by some 100-200 terrorists apparently from Sri Lanka; President Gayoom is in hiding in a civil home, his headquarters palace and the security services headquarters have been captured and a number of his ministers taken hostage. We have an SOS for immediate help, on a tenuous satellite phone from their tourism minister's house. We are trying to hustle the NSG (National Security Guard) for this task, but can the army help?"

"Of course we can help, Ronen. We will start working on it right away. You better hold onto that communication channel all day. When can we brief the PM at the Operations Room?" (ops room).

He suggested 1100 hrs and I agreed. As I reached the first floor of South Block, Roddy (Lieutenant General Rodrigues – the Vice Chief of Army Staff, later the Chief of the Army Staff) was waiting at the lift door. He had been urgently called for discussion by Mr Deshmukh, the Cabinet Secretary. I said that could wait as I knew the problem and asked Roddy to come with me to my office for a few tasks he could order before meeting Deshmukh.

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As briefed, Roddy instructed the Director General Military Operations (DGMO), Lieutenant General VK Singh to begin operational planning and immediately, send maps of the Maldives to my office; to alert the Air Force and Navy staff and the Parachute (para) Brigade for operations. He also personally rang the Parachute Brigade at Agra to place the brigade tactical headquarters and one parachute battalion on two hours notice to move ex-country by air transport for urgent operations; the brief problem at Maldives was indicated with detailed plans to follow by the DGMO. Before leaving for the Cabinet Secretariat, Roddy came back to me to say he could not speak to the para brigade commander as he was out on a para-drop exercise with one of his battalions; a Major Bhatia (later Lieutenant General Vinod Bhatia, former DGMO) the Brigade Major (BM), was not accepting the 'two hours notice' as the brigade was in peace station, troops were on various out-station duties and leave; they must have three days' notice to collect and prepare a battalion before they could be given a two-hour notice for operations. I told Roddy the officer was correct and I would take that on.

Unfortunately, at that time India did not have any 'quick reaction' army units or formations prepared and ready to move for operations at short notice. There were no plans to raise such units or coordinate with the Air Force and Navy for immediate ex-country military operations for selected and pre-planned prospective targets. This was perhaps due to the lack of defence finances and political or military planning. Much of this rapidly changed only after the successful Maldives operations were over.

Commander Para Brigade was Brigadier Balsara who was an efficient and likable officer and had served under me in Sikkim, when I was commanding the division in 1980-82; he was then a lieutenant colonel commanding the 4th Battalion, The Parachute Regiment. I had found his battalion to be one of the very best, winning most of the inter-battalion competitions both at the division and corps levels. We knew each other well and were good friends. I instructed the DGMO to ask the BM at Agra to send a personal radio message from me to his brigade commander to request some 'bending' of standard procedures to meet this urgent operational situation, especially as we were dealing with terrorists and time was of the essence. We had to attain total surprise for air landings at the Maldives to ensure success which may not be

possible if the terrorists had occupied the airfield or captured the President; responsibility for any failure would be mine and not his. I got a positive response from Balsara and he called off his para-drop exercise and hastened back to Agra by helicopter to get his troops organised for the task by mixing certain available sub-units of various units to create the required force level under the Commanding Officer 6th Battalion, the Parachute Regiment (6 PARA); this is normally never done in operations.

Meanwhile I had used the RAX to request the Vice Chief of Naval Staff, Vice Admiral Gulu Hiranandani and the Vice Chief of the Air Staff, Air Marshal Nirmal Suri (later Chief of the Air Staff) to join me in my office to plan for an immediate operational task. The Chiefs of the Navy and Air Force were both on tour abroad. The Vice Chiefs were with me by 0845 hrs; both were close friends and gave me full cooperation, allowing frank discussion. The DGMO had not been able to raise any map of the Maldives so Gulu fetched naval charts from the navy operations room showing the various sea passages and islands of the Lakshadweep, Minicoy and Maldives. The islands were depicted in outline devoid of physical features. We were surprised to see that the capital Male Island was some two nautical miles distant from Hulule, the small coral airport island. The runway of the airport extended half its length into the ocean. Ronen was immediately contacted at the PMO and asked to enquire from the tourist minister at Male as to the location of all boats used to convey tourists and visitors from the airport to Male. The boats were found to be all at the Male docks as the international tourist flights had arrived that morning. Instructions were passed to discreetly move all available boats at Male back to Hulule without raising suspicion and for all boats to remain at the airport till further instructions. This would restrict movement of terrorists to Hulule.

We decided the brief outlines of the plan. We had to maintain complete surprise to permit landings at Hulule and move troops swiftly to Male by boats. Should the lead transport plane be met by hostile fire and difficulty in landing, the troops must parachute onto the airfield; this would be very dangerous in any case and perhaps impossible at night due to the small coral island and surrounding seas, hence landings must be attempted by daylight. Since the total flying distance was some 3000 Km, with about

2000 Km from Agra to our last airfield at Tiruvanthapuram in Kerala State and another 1000 Km across the ocean to Hulule in the Maldives Islands, the transport fleet would require refueling en route to allow for aircraft to return to Thiruvanthapuram, if landings were not possible. Nirmal also said that Hulule was a foreign airfield and his pilots would have to use international coordinates and air routes to locate it. In case daylight landings were not feasible then runway lights must be switched on just before the landings to maintain surprise. Gulu wanted a role for the navy. We decided he must have naval air surveillance established by first light next day and selected warships on stand-by for contingencies based on the way the situation developed. The crux of the plan was the successful landing of our aircraft at Hulule; we were confident our pilots would succeed.

The PM Rajiv Gandhi and his colleagues of the Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs (CCPA) arrived at the army ops room at 1115 hours, with the cabinet secretary and secretaries of the concerned ministries. KC Pant, the Raksha Mantri (RM) - the defence minister and Arun Singh the Raj Raksha Mantri (RRM) - the deputy defence minister were present, as were the Navy and Air Force Vice Chiefs with their operations staff. Roddy and the DGMO briefed the meeting on the outline plans on the naval charts. I found the PM talking animatedly to Deshmukh while our proceedings got held up. I turned to Arun Singh to ascertain the problem, he whispered that it must be about the NSG. Apparently, the NSG team had been delayed moving to the Delhi airport and then some time had elapsed to get an aircraft for them; they had taken off for the Maldives but were untraceable, hence the PM's angst. I interceded with the PM suggesting that the military must have his political decision to go ahead very quickly for preparations to proceed; I also said that a positive political decision was the right course and must ensure open and public use of our military and not clandestine forces such as the NSG which may give a false view to the international community of our intentions in a foreign country which had sought our help.

We finished the briefing. The PM raised questions on our chances of success in restoring the situation in the Maldives, the time by which the parachute battalion would be ready to take off for the task and how many casualties were expected. I explained

that there was no delay from the Air Force as they had arranged for the expected load with a number of their heavy transport aircraft which would be positioned at Agra airfield shortly. I said there would be some delay with army troops as they were being reorganised in view of availabilities at their peace station and should be ready by early afternoon. I said we expected total success and complete surprise and perhaps no casualties at all; if things went wrong, there would be some casualties. The PM asked for the maximum casualties possible and I stated these could be from none up to a thousand if a para landing was enforced at night or some aircraft was shot down. He said that many casualties were politically unacceptable and would I, as the Army Chief, be prepared to take that risk. I said it is he who needs to take the political risk both for the consequences of mounting this operation and for all casualties that might ensue. We accept the military risk as we are determined to do this task with total success no matter what the cost; we also do believe, we must not be fearful and be confident of our capability. I reiterated that I expected no casualties at all. Rajiv smiled and gave us his assent. His colleagues never said a word. After they had all departed we got down to the nuts and bolts of the operation and various orders.

I left the headquarters at 1330 hrs for a quiet lunch and rest at home nearby, leaving instructions with my staff not to be disturbed for two hours. Nirmal rang up at about 1500 hrs to say all his aircraft were ready and positioned at the airfield at Agra but there were no signs of the Army. Roddy informed me that Brigadier Balsara insisted that he must carry his six 75/24 pack howitzers which required to be lashed on platforms for para-drop and would take some six hours more for preparation; despite being explained that he would be dealing with terrorists who were unlikely to have any mortars or guns. I suggested to Roddy to let Balsara go ahead but with only four guns to save time, as it was his responsibility to succeed in this operation and we did not really know what awaited us at the Maldives. Then the young Major at the ops room rang up that Defence Secretary Seshan was in the ops room chastising the DGMO and some staff officers for the delay in take off of troops as the Chief himself had assured the PM that troops would be ready and depart by early afternoon; this was delaying planning and procedures at the ops room. I told the Major to take two stalwart soldiers from the army guard of the ops

room and escort Seshan out, saying this was on my express orders and he should talk to me for any problems. This led to the RM ringing me up at home to question why our troops were delayed since the whole point was for speed to ensure surprise and no presence of hostiles at Hulule, also that the PM was frequently ringing him to confirm take off. I requested him to relax and let us get on with the job; that some unforeseen delay was likely but we were still going ahead even with an enforced night landing; that once the government had given us the go ahead nothing could stop us and we will take the delay in our stride. 'So what do I tell the PM?' he asked. 'Exactly what I just said, I will keep you updated', I replied.

I was back in my office by 1600 hrs and ready for the night. The staff was told to take rest by turn. There had been a call from the Foreign Ministry that their diplomatic representative at the Maldives was in Delhi and could he be of help. The DGMO had arranged for him to reach Agra by an Air Force aircraft to coordinate with Balsara. He flew in the lead aircraft with the Brigade Commander and was indeed of great help at the Maldives as he personally knew everyone there including the President and was our contact man for both governments. There had been a call from Bill Clark, the US ambassador who wished to see me. He came to my office at about 1630 hours and asked what India was doing about the Maldives SOS to all nations; obviously he had got wind of some activity by us. I said India is a poor third world incapable country and he should instead be telling me about what the great US super power was doing to save a poor small democratic country in our neighbourhood from nasty terrorists. He told me that they had already moved two warships each from Subic Bay in the Philippines and the Gulf; to this I said that in some three days when these ships arrived at the Maldives that poor country would be ruled by terrorists and all the US could do was to shell them to little effect. He was a friend and left after a hot cup of coffee and some humourous banter. Later next morning he was back for more coffee and deep compliments as a US maritime surveillance plane at dawn had observed our transport planes and activity on Hulule. That enhanced the close relations and respect between the two nations and indicated India's unique capability to ensure freedom of Indian Ocean Island countries and protect international sea routes against terrorist action.

The Para Brigade contingent was able to take off at about 1800 hrs; they staged through Thiruvanthapuram civil airport where the Air Force had taken over the air traffic control and established arrangements for refueling, maintenance and final briefing of air crew and troops. Information regularly came in to the ops room till the take off of the transport planes across the ocean to the island of Hulule. After some meticulous navigation and expert flying in a dark night the huge lead Il-76 transport piloted by Group Captain Anant Bewoor came in vicinity of Hulule. The pilot's request for switching on the runway lights was efficiently conveyed to the air control through the Maldives tourism minister. The landing shortly after midnight was efficiently executed with no ground opposition and the remaining aircraft of the transport stream flew in at regular intervals. The Para Battalion quickly secured the airfield and commandeered all available boats for crossing the sea to Male.

The terrorists at Male were in panic when they saw the landings of large transport planes at Hulule. They took immediate action to round up their armed personnel and board their merchant ship. They took all hostages, including about five ministers of the Maldives Government on board and made haste to sail away towards Sri Lanka. The Paratroops saw this and attempted to engage the ship with anti-tank recoilless guns across the sea from Hulule but with little effect. By the time our troops were able to reach Male Island, the ship was out of range. Gulu (VCNS) was tasked to intercept the hostile ship and he took on the problem with great enthusiasm having got a viable task for the Navy. At first light next morning the ship was located by maritime surveillance planes well out to sea sailing in the direction of southern Sri Lanka. Two frigates—the INS Betwa and INS Godavari were tasked for this job, one sailed from Kochi Naval Base and the other was returning from a ceremonial visit to West Australia and happened to be rounding the southern coast of Sri Lanka, sailing for Kochi. Both frigates closed in at full speed and were able to intercept the hostile ship. The terrorist captain initially refused to surrender and threatened killing the ministers and scuttling the ship. After some adroit handling of the situation by the Captains of our warships, including some effective firing which damaged the bridge and disabled the communication and control systems, the hostile ship surrendered. It was boarded and towed back to Male with the ministers and hostages safe and the terrorists in captivity. The

ship and all terrorists were handed over to the custody of Male authorities and hostages returned to their homes.

President Gayoom profusely thanked PM Rajiv Gandhi and requested that the Commanding Officer 6 PARA and essential troops be permitted to stay on in Male to train and reorganise his security forces for protection of his Country. This was agreed to and these troops were eventually returned to India a year after completing this task and making many friends amongst the Maldivians.

Operation Cactus was India's most successful tri-service military intervention across the ocean in a foreign country on its plea for help. It was executed brilliantly without a single mishap, with great speed and no casualties, with all military objectives efficiently achieved. The operation succeeded despite no forces or procedures existing for rapid deployment and execution of military tasks, no maps, no actionable intelligence and on a dark moonless night. It was made possible by the fact that there were very quick and firm political decisions and directions at the highest level, total cooperation between the defence and foreign ministries, the three armed services headquarters and all troops involved. Above all, good personal relations and humour between political leaders, the service chiefs, diplomats and concerned bureaucrats. There were tremendous 'guts', quick initiative and bold effective action among junior commanders and troops. Our success vaulted India into the ranks of great powers who could respond with speed against criminal acts against weak independent nations well beyond our borders. This achievement was politically and militarily adroit and backed by all powerful countries including the USA and the Soviet Union, who were unable to act themselves in support of democratic Maldives. There is no doubt that India can achieve any task with such cooperation amongst all stakeholders. Luck also favoured us as also the bold plan. As Napoleon said, "success in battle is 10 per cent hard work and sweat, and 90 per cent luck."