

## Operation Pawan

Operation Pawan was a military operation undertaken in 1987 by the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) to take control of the Jaffna Peninsula from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The operation, though resulting in higher casualties for the Indian forces, ended in an IPKF victory. However the consequences of Operation Pawan would inadvertently change Indian politics in the years to come.

This article will shed light on the events and results of operation Pawan within the context of the UPSC Exam.

### Background of Operation Pawan

The Sri Lankan Civil War began in 1983 between the minority Tamil population and the majority Sinhalese. The LTTE (also known as Tamil Tigers) had emerged as a leading rebel faction with an aim to carve a Tamil homeland in northern and eastern Sri Lanka.

Their clashes with the Sri Lankan military led to high civilian casualties from both the Sinhalese and Tamil population. India intervened in the civil war through diplomatic and military means.

Following lengthy negotiations, the Sri-Lankan Accords were signed in Colombo on 29 July 1987. The accord stipulated that the Sri Lankan government would give the nation's provinces more autonomy and power, while withdrawing its military. The Tamil rebels on the other hand were to surrender their arms.

The accord was not accepted by many Tamil groups as they had not participated in the talks and refused to surrender to the Sri Lanka government. Their refusal led to active confrontation with the IPKF. Soon the Indian military engaged in a police action against the Tamil Tigers in order to enforce the Sri Lanka Accords.

Eventually the rebels would make their stand at Jaffna on the northern coast of Sri Lanka. To take Jaffna, the IPKF would launch operation Pawan.

### Objectives of Operation Pawan

By 7 October, the Chief of Army Staff (CoAS) had issued directives to the IPKF, laying down its operational parameters. It was to:

- Destroy or Seize enemy communications networks such as TV and radio stations.
- Raid LTTE camps and checkpoints.
- Capture and question key LTTE personnel to gain information.

- Carry out further actions to consolidate key holding gained by the IPKF in the region

Operation Pawan was expected to neutralize the offensive capabilities of the Tamil Tigers within the Jaffna peninsula. In eliminating the command structure of the LTTE, it would leave the rebels directionless in the face of an assault on LTTE by the IPKF

On 10 October the Indian 91st Brigade led by Brig. J. Ralli also began its push into Jaffna.

## Events during Operation Pawan

The opening moves of Operation Pawan took place with a heliborne assault on Jaffna University. It was the headquarters of the LTTE. The attack was led by a detachment of the Indian Para forces on the night of 12 October.

The initial plan was to capture the LTTE leadership in a swift commando raid and link up with the 4th battalion of 5 Gorkha Rifles of 72 Brigade and the Sikh Light Infantry groups on the ground

The helidrop ended in a catastrophe when the LTTE intercepted radio transmission of the commando force. The helicopters came under intense anti-aircraft fire forcing them to abandon the mission halfway through. The commandos lost two of their number out of the total 17 and while the supporting Sikh Light infantry lost 29 out of 30.

## Events following Operation Pawan

Despite Operation Pawan suffering a setback, the ground operation of the IPKF proceeded regardless. Despite having tactical and numerical superiority, the IPKF advance was slowed by resistance from the Tamil Tiger who employed guerilla tactics to slow down the advancing Indian military.

The LTTE used improvised explosive devices to extract a toll on men and material. Nevertheless the IPKF advanced steadily across Jaffna.

On 15-16 October the IPKF stopped its advance to stabilize the front. Reinforcements and vehicles were airlifted into the warzone by the Indian air force including T-72 tanks and armored personnel vehicles.

After being reinforced, the IPKF resumed their operations. Although the tanks gave much protection from anti-personnel mines, the advance slowed down in the face of withering sniper fire from LTTE guerillas. They would target Indian officers and signalmen. Soon the IPKF adapted quickly, removing their officer pips and wearing slouch hats to pass off as common infantrymen

IPKF communication lines were extensively mined by the LTTE, which further compounded the sometimes perilous situations that the Indian troops faced.

In the end, the IPKF wrested control of Jaffna and its major cities, but most of the LTTE retreated to the jungles in the south.

In the Jaffna sector, the LTTE harassed the IPKF's efforts to consolidate its positions. The IPKF later changed its tactics under Brig J.S. Dhillon relies on small highly mobile units instead of large static formations to combat LTTE's guerilla tactics.

## Aftermath of Operation Pawan

Despite the apparent success of Operation Pawan, Sri Lankan nationalist sentiment against the presence of the Indian forces on their island began to bear fruit.

The Sri Lankans demanded that the Indian Army withdraw but despite mounting casualties for the IPKF, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi refused to do so. It wouldn't be until his defeat in the Indian parliamentary elections in December 1989, would the IPKF be withdrawn on the orders of the new Prime Minister V.P. Singh on 24 March 1990.

Support for the LTTE in India dropped considerably in May 21 1991, after the assassination of ex-Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by a female suicide bomber.

India remained an outside observer of the conflict, after the assassination.

The Sri Lankan Civil War would only end on 18 May 2009 with the surrender of the Tamil Tigers to the government forces.