

Indian Armed Forces Spearheaded Operation Cactus At Maldives



Lt.General Vinod Bhatia (Retd.)

By Lt.General Vinod Bhatia (Retd.)

- **Remembering the nostalgia of the Indian armed forces under the tricolour accomplishing the mission**

New Delhi. 09 April 2020. 3rd November 1988, at around 0600 hours, the Joint Secretary at MEA received a frantic call from Male, Maldives, asking for help to save President Gayoom from an armed coup by mercenaries. Government of India, moved at a speed unheard in the annals of Indian history. Mired in Operation PAWAN, Srilanka, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) mobilised the Indian Armed Forces. Spearheading the operation the 50 Independent Parachute Brigade of Army, 44 Sqn Indian Air Force and Indian Navy lead by Brig "Bull" Bulsara, a fearless, tough, no nonsense leader of men, lands at Hulhule Airport at 2148 hours, flying four and half hours covering 3500 KMs. In a daring plan hatched on the fly with little or no information available, the President of a friendly country is safely rescued by 0210 hours on 4 Nov 1988. Mission accomplished from a cold within 16 hours of the first indication of an impending operation without a single casualty. Op Cactus Maldives positioned India as a global power capable of projecting and protecting its National Interests and those of our neighbours.

Without being modest, I as the Brigade Major of 50 Independent Brigade was central to the planning and execution of the operation under the directions of a great military leader and soldier Brigadier FFC Balsara, ably supported by the then CO 6 PARA Brigadier SC Joshi, and Maj RJS Dillon among others who rescued President Gayoom on that fateful night of 03 Nov 1988. The credit in equal part is also due to the Indian Air Force and in particular Group Captain Bewoor for landing the Spearhead on an unknown airfield among many uncertainties. The Indian Navy mobilised INS TEER, to show the flag reaching Male on 04 Nov Morning and INS GODAVARI and BETWA intercepted the Coup leaders on High Seas. The three services operating in concert executing a well synchronised surgical operation. OP CACTUS despite positioning India as a net security provider and demonstrating Indian Military capabilities continue to be one of the least known and studied operation.

In the early hours of 03 Nov 1988, 55,000 residents of Male (the capital of Maldives) awoke to the reality of an armed coup, hearing gunshots all round for the first time in their lives. Till

then the Maldivians had hardly ever witnessed crime leave aside violence (unlike now). The last murder in this island nation was reported in 1976 and that too of a German murdering his girlfriend and the one before that was way back in 1793. Abdullah Luthufi a rich businessman with the help of mercenaries from the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) had taken over the island nation, capturing the Radio and TV stations and the presidential palace. Mr Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, the President since 1978, who had been returned to power with a 98.5% majority for the third time was scheduled to visit India on 02/03 Nov 1988, prior to his oath taking ceremony on 11 Nov. On learning of the coup, the President went into hiding, taking shelter in a safe house in the capital island of Male.

The 1500 strong National Security Service (NSS) whose Headquarter is located adjacent to the Presidential Palace was besieged by the mercenaries, who fortunately failed to enter and take over the armoury. Complicity of a few NSS Cadres was never ruled out. President Gayoom from a safe house requested assistance first from the US followed by the Soviets and thereafter Pakistan to rescue him. The US base at Diego Garcia was the nearest located 1175 kms away, but it was election year with the Presidential elections scheduled for the 8th of November. Not having received a positive response from the three nations, President Gayoom requested India for assistance. It should be noted that India was at that time assisting Sri Lanka with the IPKF deployed in the Northern and Eastern parts fighting the LTTE.

3500 Kms away from Male when this violent drama for power of a small though important island nation was unfolding, another seemingly normal day dawned for the Paratroopers at Agra. However, this was soon to change to an exciting, challenging and historical day. At around 1000h, Brig VP Malik (later COAS) the Deputy Director General of Military Operations (MO) called the Brigade Major of 50(1) Parachute Brigade, Maj (later Lt Gen) Vinod Bhatia, giving the first indication of an impending operation. The instructions were crisp and military like with the urgency in the voice conveying the gravity of an emerging though uncertain situation. The Para Brigade was to move to an Island for operations. One company group to be standby to move at 6 hours notice and a battalion group at 12 hours notice. The Commander Para Brigade with one staff officer to move to MO directorate at Delhi by the evening (time not specified). The first reaction was that it was one more of the numerous moves of the Para Brigades Reconnaissance and Order group to Sri Lanka for another of those contingency plans for OP PAWAN

The next communication from Delhi was at 1040 hours. The Commander Brigadier FFC Bulsara was visiting the Army Airborne Training Area at Kheria and had been requested to fall back to the headquarter. The VCOAS Lt Gen (later COAS) Rodrigues spoke to the Brigade Major in the absence of the commander who was falling back to the brigade headquarters. He gave the following orders:-

- Brigade to move to Maldives.
- One Battalion group to emplane by 1230 hours (ie less than 2 hours)
- Brigade less Battalion group to move to Maldives on night 03/04 Nov.
- Prepare for an Airborne assault on an Island, Paradrop planned on a beach.
- Enemy is equipped with small arms, Rocket Launchers, mortars and General Purpose Machine Guns (GPMGs). There is no Air Defence, though the enemy may possess some surface to air missiles.

- Air effort allotted is 3 IL-76 and 10 AN 32 aircraft.
- First and Second line ammunition to be carried.

Agra being a peace station normal training and administrative activities were being conducted, with not a single battalion at Agra. 7 PARA was out on collective training, 3 PARA had two coys deployed at Lucknow and 6 PARA had two companies providing security at COD Agra. However, 6 PARA and 3 PARA were both mobilised and 7 PARA instructed to move back to Agra. In the meantime, 10 Guards (Mechanised) was also mobilised from Gwalior by MO to move to Agra and marry up with the Para Brigade earliest. Those were not the days of the internet and mobile communications, and hence very little or no information on Maldives except that Male was the capital and the island at Hulhule was the airfield. It was only after Gen VP Malik (then Brig) landed at Agra at around 1515h, with the Indian High Commissioner to Maldives, Mr Ashok Banerjee, that the clarity and enormity of the task dawned on the Paratroopers.

Gen Malik gave out the task and detailed the plan as formulated at MO directorate. The task was categorical “ *To rescue the President of Maldives and escort him safely to India*”. The plan in essence included an airborne assault at a beach at Male and Halule airfield and thereafter airland the balance of the combat echelons. In the event of the airfield at Hulhule island still under control of troops loyal to the President, the two IL -76 aircraft would airland troops at Hulhule, however the airborne assault at Male would go ahead as there was no wherewithal to move the assault echelons to Male island which is about one kilometer away . Code word for Hulule air field if in hands of loyal troops was:-

- On aircraft making vis contact with the ATC, the runway lights to be switched on and off. On aircraft approach for landing, the lights to be switched on and switched off immediately after successful touchdown.
- Radio sig – HUDIYA.

With scant inputs of not only the prevailing situation but also the topography there seemed utter uncertainty and confusion. The only maps available were photocopies of tourist sketches of Male and Hulule islands. It is to the credit of Brig FFC Bulsara, the Commander of Para Brigade, a great military leader and soldier, decisive as ever, comprehending the confusion, took complete control of the situation issuing clear and concise instructions not only to the units of Para Brigade but also to the Air Force and the Military Operations Directorate. He had trained the brigade very effectively so as to achieve all military tasks specially airborne under the most challenging of circumstances . Constantly picking on Mr Ashok Banerjee’s detailed knowledge of Male, Brig Bulsara decided to launch the operation with Brig (then Col) SC Joshi, CO, 6 PARA spearheading the operation. The Plan A was to launch an airborne assault with sixty paratroopers from one IL 76 at Halule airfield, capture and secure the airfield and then airland the remaining troops from that IL and the follow up IL76. The troops to move to Male by capturing and commandeering local boats and rescue the President. The limit of sixty paratroopers was dictated by the availability of packed parachutes with the Air Force on that particular day and time. He, however, instructed that the final decision to land or drop and then land will be taken once overhead Halule or when nearing Maldives.. Air Marshal (then Gp Capt) AK Goel and Commanding Officer 44 Sqn, Gp Capt Bewoor were flying the first aircraft.

The assault echelons of 6 PARA, 3 PARA, 17 PARA FIELD REGIMENT, with sappers, signallers and the medical along with the Commander, brigade major and a GSO3 embarked in the two IL 76 and took off from Agra at around 1730 hours. The four and half hour flying time from Agra to Male was well spent in carrying out detailed briefings of all contingencies, including showing the photograph of the president to all ranks.

On approaching Halule one could only see the vast ocean. Group Captain Bewoor confirmed the codeword HADIYA on radio with the ATC as also the light signal. It was decision time for the commander, the code could have been given under duress or by deceit, as also during landing any of the rebels could as easily position any vehicle on the runway, thus jeopardizing not only the mission but also the lives of 180 troops on board. The other alternative seemed equally dangerous as Male is all but two square kilometers and the assaulting paratroopers would have mostly landed in the sea, with no chance of survival. The drop zone wherein the airborne assault was planned was no more than 200 m by 50 m.

The decision taken to land was taken by the commander and would be discussed in military circles for many years, most self proclaimed experts criticising the decision. Given the task and the situation it was a bold and pragmatic decision, the less risky of the two alternatives and with a better probability of success. The Motto 'Who dares wins' ingrained among the paratroops.

Fortunately the landing was unopposed and the first IL -76 with 6 PARA and the brigade tactical headquarter landed at 2148 hours and secured the airfield in quicktime. The second IL 76 landing after a gap of ten minutes brought in the company of 3 PARA under Lt General (then major) NKS Ghei and elements of Artillery under Col KKK Singh, sappers and medical. Halule was totally abandoned and intermittent firing could be heard at Male. 6 PARA with a company under Major RJS Dhillon after commandeering the boats had moved for the main assault to secure a beachhead South West of Male with the 3 Para company heading straight for the Male jetty as a diversionary. It was around this time that the Troops observed a ship sailing between the two islands and the ATC informed that the rebels had taken control of a merchant vessel and were fleeing with hostages including a minister and his wife. The ship was effectively engaged with all available firepower including RCL guns and machine guns.

In the meantime the commander managed to speak to the president from the ATC who informed him that the situation was desperate as he was surrounded from all sides by the rebels and could not hold out any longer. It is to the credit of the plan and the flawless execution that by around 0220 hours, Col SC Joshi and Maj RJS Dhillon secured the president from his safe house. In the meantime troops had lifted the siege on the NSS headquarters, TV and radio stations and the presidential palace and commenced securing and sanitising the areas. President Gayoom now safe and secure wanted to stay on at Male, whereas the orders were to evacuate him to India. This was also the time that the follow up waves started landing at Halule and by early morning more than 1600 troops had buildup with all support echelons.

By around 0430 hours the NSS headquarters had been fully secured and the president moved, to enable him to speak on a secure link to the Prime Minister of India. The primary task achieved with surgical precision, the brigade was tasked to now help restore the situation and neutralise all rebels. Early morning the IAF fighter air crafts made a couple of passes over Male reassuring all that normalcy had been restored by the Indian armed forces.

At 0800 hours an Indian Navy IL 38 reconnaissance aircraft landed at Halule and after an update on the ship (MV Progress Light) having escaped with the rebels and hostages on board confirmed that while enroute they had sighted a ship listing portside South West of Male. The navy thereafter kept a surveillance over MV Progress light and with INS Godavari and Betwa having moved in on 06 Nov, rescued the hostages and taking the rebels into custody destroyed the ship.

The coup leaders and rebels were brought to Male and handed over to the Maldivian authorities. The authorities requested the Indian Army to take care of the rebels till the legal proceedings could be completed, and accordingly they were taken to a prison Island Gamadoo under the escort of Indian troops. The Para brigade less 6 PARA with two companies de-inducted by 17 Nov. The Indian army thereafter on the request of the Maldivian government took on the task of capacity building and help NSS reform to meet their future security challenges.

The precision timed "Operation Cactus" in which Indian armed forces acted within hours to thwart a coup attempt to dislodge a lawfully elected government on the Indian Ocean Island of Maldives made military watchers sit up worldwide.

On 03 Apr 1989, TIME magazine ran a cover story "Super Power Rising" stating "India asserts its place on the world stage", consequent to the Indian Armed Forces unprecedented success in executing an intervention operations albeit at the request of a friendly government. Op Maldives launched to rescue President M A Gayoom, demonstrated Indian power and capability to be a 'Net Security Provider' in the region. The operations launched from a cold start and executed with surgical precision was successfully accomplished within 16 hours of the first indication of an impending operation, 3000 km from base. The cover story of time magazine by ROSS H Munro flags India's growing military power , quote *"At an air force base five miles from the Taj Mahal at Agra, hundreds of India's finest combat troops (50(1) Parachute Brigade) filed into the cavernous holds of Soviet built IL-76 transporters, whose jet engines were whining impatiently. Soon the transporters were headed into the night, winging southwards across the subcontinent and then out over the Indian Ocean. When they landed four hours later at one of the 1200 coral islands, that make up the republic of Maldives, the paratroopers charged out of the planes, rifles at the ready."*

Operation Maldives launched jointly by the Army, Navy and the Air Force was successfully accomplished without a single casualty. The operation exemplifies the excellent jointness achieved. The success of this operation at home mostly went unnoticed as did a few important lessons learnt. Had it failed, maybe India too, would have created structures and organisations to exploit the full potential of a Special Operations Command to safeguard national interest and assets, much like the the United States which established the US Special Operations Command (USSOC) comprising the SOF of the three services and Marines, in the aftermath of the failure of Operation EAGLE CLAW to rescue American diplomats held hostage at the US Embassy at Tehran in April 1980.

OP CACTUS, Maldives, is undoubtedly one of the most professionally executed military operation in the world, right on top with the likes of operation Thunderbolt – Israeli raid on Entebbe, Otto Skorzeny's rescue of Mussolini, the long range desert patrols of David Sterling

(Phantom major) and Op Geronimo, the Abbottabad raid by US seals to neutralize Osama Bin Laden among a few others.

National security is all about protecting and projecting national interests and a risen responsible India has the requisite capabilities and politico- military will to safeguard the interests.

(Lt. Gen Vinod Bhatia (Retd.) is Director CENJOWS and former Director General of Military Operations(DGMO). The views in the article are solely the author's. He can be contacted at editor.adu@gmail.com)