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Sri Lanka: The capture and execution of JVP Leader Rohana Wijeweera

Friday 11 December 2020, by [JEYARAJ David Buell Sabapathy](#) (Date first published: 25 November 2020).

Patabandi Don Nandasiri Wijeweera known to the world at large as Rohana Wijeweera was killed 31 years ago on 13 November 1989. The revolutionary leader of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) or People's Liberation Front was 49 years old at the time of his death.

The mastermind behind two bloody insurrections - in 1971 and from 1987 to 89 - was taken into custody on 12 November in the Kandy District and brought to Colombo. With Wijeweera's capture and execution, the second JVP insurgency petered down gradually and ended.

The second JVP insurgency lasting for more than three years resulted in thousands of people being brutally killed by both the JVP as well as the counter insurgency forces comprising Police, paramilitary and security personnel. While no reliable estimates are available of the number of killings done by security personnel and other agents of the state, there are official figures of the killings done by the JVP.

During this three-year period, 487 public servants, 342 policemen, 209 security personnel, 16 political leaders, and 4,945 civilians of other descriptions were said to have been killed by the JVP. This tally included 30 Buddhist monks, two Catholic priests, 52 school principals, four medical doctors, 18 estate superintendents and 27 trade unionists. It also includes family members of 93 policemen and 69 servicemen.

While all this mayhem and carnage was being unleashed, the supreme revolutionary Leader of the JVP posing as a planter named Nimal Kirthisiri Attanayake was living comfortably with his family and two servants in Ulapane, Kandy.

Given the enormity of the violence caused by the JVP and the boiling anger among the Police and security personnel towards the JVP Leader, it is widely believed that Rohana Wijeweera was killed in what is euphemistically termed as an 'officially sanctioned unofficial execution'.

The official version was that Wijeweera and another senior JVP Leader H.B. Herat had been taken to a house in a Colombo suburb being used as a clandestine JVP office to seize some documents. However Herat had shot at Wijeweera while pretending to take out some papers. The security forces had shot both and killed them. They were later cremated.

AP report in New York Times

A news report filed by the Associated Press and published in the New York Times of 14 November 1989 under the heading 'Sri Lanka Forces kill leader of Sinhalese group' outlined the Sri Lankan Government version as stated by the then Deputy Defence Minister Ranjan Wijeratne.

It is reproduced below: "The Leader of the Sinhalese group that has been waging an anti-

Government campaign of terror was shot to death today by Government forces while in custody, the Foreign Minister said.

“Rohana Wijeweera, Leader of the People’s Liberation Front, was arrested Sunday afternoon in the central hill district, the official, Ranjan Wijeratne, said at a news conference.

“The Foreign Minister said that Mr. Wijeweera subsequently agreed to lead Government security men to one of the front’s offices in a Colombo suburb.

“Once in the office, Mr. Wijeweera instructed a member of the front’s Politburo, H.B. Herath, to relinquish some documents, the Foreign Minister said. Mr. Herath pretended to do so, but instead pulled a gun and fired at Mr. Wijeweera. Government forces opened fire, killing both Mr. Wijeweera and Mr. Herath, the Minister said.

“President Ranasinghe Premadasa has ordered an investigation into the shooting. Mr. Wijeratne, who is also Deputy Defence Minister, said security forces had already cremated the bodies of Mr. Wijeweera and Mr. Herath under emergency regulations that allow them to dispose of bodies without further inquiry.

“The circumstances of Mr. Wijeweera’s death, if uncorroborated, seemed likely to prompt charges that he was murdered by the security forces. Such charges could aggravate the violence in the Sinhalese heartland.

“Mr. Wijeweera’s organisation accuses the Sinhalese-dominated Government of selling out the country’s Sinhalese majority in an effort to make peace with ethnic Tamil guerrillas. More than 6,000 people have been killed in the past two years in the struggle between the Government and the People’s Liberation Front.

“Mr. Wijeratne, reading a statement from the Army Commander, Hamilton Wanasinghe, said Mr. Wijeweera was detained with his wife and five children Sunday afternoon in Ulapane village near Kandy, 55 miles northeast of Colombo.

“According to this account, the soldiers suspected Mr. Wijeweera’s identity, even though he had shaved his beard, trimmed his hair, gained weight and looked younger than his age. Mr. Wijeweera, who was born in 1943, acknowledged his identity and was taken to Colombo, the statement said.

“Mr. Wijeweera, who once studied in the Soviet Union, founded the People’s Liberation Front. The group has Marxist roots. The Government has blamed the front for most of the killings in the group’s campaign of terror. But human rights advocates and opposition politicians say many were revenge killings by Government forces or pro-Government vigilantes.”

Last hours of Rohana Wijeweera

The Sri Lankan nation suffering terribly in the climate of JVP violence and counter violence was greatly relieved at news of Wijeweera’s death. Under the circumstances prevailing then the country was quite willing to go along with the official version trotted out. In private very few believed it. As is customary in such situations, the rumour mills worked overtime and very many tales of the last hours of Rohana Wijeweera began circulating.

The version accepted widely was that Wijeweera had been shot dead on the Colombo Golf Course premises in cold blood after being ordered to run. A senior Police official whose family members had been brutally massacred by the JVP had allegedly done the firing with senior Army officers watching. Later on the two bodies had been incinerated at night in Kanatte. A macabre twist to this version

was that of Wijeweera not being fully dead at the time of this cruel cremation.

Subsequent writings and media interviews by informed persons provided greater insight into the arrest and death of Rohana Wijeweera. The following excerpts drawn from different sources pieced together reveal the story of how the JVP Leader was captured and executed 31 years ago. Interestingly enough these excerpts indicate that much of the 'grapevine buzz' about Wijeweera's demise were indeed substantially correct.

Major General Sarath Munasinghe

Officially there have been no eyewitness accounts of the final phase of Rohana Wijeweera. There has been one authentic account relating to the final few hours in Rohana Wijeweera's life prior to his death in the public realm. This was narrated by Major-General Sarath Munasinghe in his autobiographical work 'A Soldier's Story'. Relevant excerpts are reproduced in full below:

"On 12 November 1989, I paid a courtesy visit to my superior Colonel Lionel Balagalle, the Director of Military Intelligence. The time was around 8 p.m. and the colonel was relaxing at home. While discussing activities of the JVP and also the LTTE, we had a few drinks. If I remember right, both of us had two each. The telephone rang. It was the Commander of the Army. The Commander had an important message.

"Both of us were summoned to the residence of President Premadasa. Rohana Wijeweera, the JVP Leader, had been arrested at Ulapane in Kandy by some Army personnel, who had proceeded from Colombo.

"After the telephone call we became cold sober. We were both in civilian clothing. Still we had to go. Mrs. Balagalle was quick to give us a few cardamoms to neutralise the 'aroma' of the liquor. We were well received by the security staff at the 'Sucharitha,' the residence of President Premadasa. Both of us sat close to each other at the conference table.

"Five minutes later, HE the President arrived with a smiling face and shook hands with us. We got into conversation. I was trying hard to remember all about Rohana Wijeweera and his JVP. But, to our dismay, His Excellency fired a barrage of questions about the LTTE. We managed to answer all questions. Just then, General Cyril Ranatunge, Secretary of Defence walked in, followed by Army Commander Lt. Gen. Hamilton Wanasinghe. Gen. Wanasinghe informed the President that Rohana Wijeweera had been brought to Colombo, and that both of us were required to question Rohana Wijeweera. HE the President thanked both of us and we followed the Commander and accompanied him in his car.

"The time was 11:30 p.m. We reached the premises of 'Operation Combine HQ'. There were many officers of other services too. We were conducted to the conference table where Rohana Wijeweera was seated. I was given a chair just opposite Wijeweera across the table. I commenced having a conversation with him. Mr. Zernie Wijesuriya, Director, National Intelligence Bureau, his Deputy and some others were present. I spoke to Rohana Wijeweera at length.

"Whenever I questioned him in English, he answered in Sinhalese. In fact, he asked me whether I knew the Russian language. I replied in the negative. Rohana Wijeweera told me that his second language was Russian. He told me all about his personal life, initially at Bandarawela and later at Ulapane in Kandy. He was reluctant to talk about the activities of the JVP.

"While this discussion was going on, the 'Operation Combine' Commander was with his Deputy in the adjoining room, which was his office. Just past midnight, Deputy Defence Minister General Ranjan Wijeratne walked in and sat at the head of the conference table. Gen. Wijeratne asked a few

questions, but Rohana Wijeweera did not respond.

“Gen. Wijeratne joined the ‘Operation Combine’ Commander in his office. We continued with our conversation. We had many cups of plain tea (dark tea), while talking. I made a request to Rohana Wijeweera to advise his membership to refrain from violence. He agreed after persuasion. So we managed to record his words and also his picture in still camera.

“After some time, a well-known Superintendent of Police arrived at the HQ Operation Combine. As the Police officer walked in, he held Rohana Wijeweera’s hair from the rear and gave two taps on Wijeweera’s cheek. Wijeweera looked back, and having identified the officer said, ‘I knew it had to be a person like you.’ The Police officer joined the Minister and Operation Combine Commander.

“We continued with our conversation. Wijeweera related a few interesting stories. One day, a group of JVP activists had visited the residence of Nimal Kirthisri Attanayake [Rohana Wijeweera] at Ulapane. They demanded money for their movement. Wijeweera responded quickly by giving Rs. 100. The youngsters did not have a clue about their Leader. Wijeweera was full of smiles when he divulged this story.

“The time was around 3:45 a.m. on 13 November 1989. I was informed to conclude the questioning and to take Rohana Wijeweera downstairs. Together we walked downstairs and were close to each other. Wijeweera held my hand and said, ‘I am very happy I met you even at the last moment. I may not live any longer. Please convey my message to my wife.’ Rohana Wijeweera’s message contained five important points. They were all very personal matters concerning his family.

“Moments later, Wijeweera was blindfolded and helped into the rear seat of a green Pajero. Two people sat on either side of Wijeweera. There were others at the rear of the vehicle. Just then a senior Police officer arrived near the vehicle. I politely rejected his invitation to join them. The Pajero took off. I joined Col. Lionel Balagalle standing near the main entrance of the Operation Combine HQ building. We also went home thinking of a good sleep.”

Beard added to Wijeweera’s photograph

“Late in the morning I was busy getting Wijeweera’s photograph printed. No one would recognise Wijeweera without his beard. So I had to seek help and add the beard to Wijeweera’s photograph. It was done very well. Late in the afternoon there was a press conference at the Joint Operation Command.

“Minister Ranjan Wijeratne briefed the press: ‘Wijeweera and H.B. Herath [another JVP Leader] had been taken to a house just outside Colombo, where the JVP had hidden part of their treasure. While the search was in progress, Herath pulled out a pistol and shot Wijeweera dead.’ The Minister went on to give more details. Subsequent to the killing of Wijeweera, violence by the JVP ceased gradually and there was peace in the country, except in the north and east.”

The above account by Gen. Munasinghe describes the penultimate stages of Wijeweera’s life to some extent but is dependent on the press conference in revealing details about how exactly he died. There is also little information about how Wijeweera was apprehended, presumably because the General was not directly involved in that exercise.

C.A. Chandraprema

A short yet precise description of the circumstances leading to Rohana Wijeweera’s capture was provided by journalist and writer C.A. Chandraprema (our designated envoy to the UN in Geneva) in his book ‘Sri Lanka: The Years of Terror – The JVP Insurrection 1987-1989’. Here are the relevant

excerpts:

“Piyadasa Ranasinghe and H.B. Herath were arrested in Galaha. These were the two JVP Leaders who met with Rohana Wijeweera frequently. Herat had told the whereabouts of Wijeweera after a brief interrogation. A few hours later Wijeweera was arrested at Ulapane, Kandy, at his well-appointed estate bungalow where he lived, masquerading as a planter under the name of Attanayake.

“When the party had arrived at around 2 o’clock in the afternoon, Wijeweera had been taking a shave. The Army team climbed over a gate and surrounded the house. Wijeweera had come out saying, ‘I am Attanayake and you have no right to come here. I am a peace-loving man.’

“Col. Janaka Perera had got flustered by the confident air put on by Wijeweera and thought they had come to the wrong place. Still he had cocked his pistol, put it to Attanayake’s head and asked, ‘Oya Wijeweerada?’ ‘Attanayake,’ fearing that the colonel would pull the trigger, had admitted that he was Wijeweera and said, ‘I will come with you, but don’t harm my family.’ There were two women servants in the house other than Wijeweera’s wife, and all the women had started wailing as Wijeweera was led out.”

Lance Cpl. Indrananda de Silva

This then was how Rohana Wijeweera was arrested in Kandy and later brought to Colombo. While in custody an Army cameraman filmed Wijeweera’s ‘voluntary appeal’ to the JVP to lay down arms and halt violence. This photographer Lance Cpl. Indrananda de Silva was attached to the Military Police at that time.

Twenty-five years later Indrananda de Silva was interviewed by Udeni Samankumara for the Ceylon Today newspaper and in that lengthy interview de Silva recounted details about Wijeweera’s final moments and alleged that the JVP Leader was alive and groaning when thrown into the incinerator. The ex-soldier admitted to being a JVP sympathiser and referred to Wijeweera as “comrade” in the interview. Here are the relevant excerpts:

Q: Did you go to the place where Wijeweera was shot and killed?

No. We went directly to the cemetery. When we went to the gas plant, Comrade Wijeweera had just been brought there after being shot at the Golf Course.

Q: Was it the crematorium on the other side of Devi Balika Girls’ School?

That’s right. Comrade Rohana was brought and placed on the cement floor.

Q: Did you go there and see?

Yes. There was some light. He was lying face up.

Q: His clothes?

Same shirt and trousers.

Q: Eyes?

Blindfolded.

Q: Did you see the wounds?

Yes. They had shot him on the chest. The shirt was soaked in blood.

Q: Was blood oozing?

Blood was flowing on the cement floor.

Q: Hands?

They were not tied. They were dropped sideways like in a normal dead body.

Q: Wasn't the body moving?

No. The custodian of the crematorium was brought. He said, 'I cannot do it like that. I am performing a duty here.' Major Thoradeniya kept the pistol to his head and ordered, 'Give the key, you dog. I'll kill you otherwise.' He gave the key humbly. The way to burn the body was also learnt from him.

Q: Was Wijeweera's body taken in on something?

No. It was ordered to throw his body in. Two personnel took him and threw him in but he knocked on the wall and fell on the ground.

Q: Then?

He groaned loudly. All heard that painful groan. My heart burnt within. Everybody knew that Comrade Rohana Wijeweera was not dead. Somebody shouted, 'You cannot do a job right.'

Q: Who shouted?

I did not see properly. I think it was Major Muthalif. He was swung in the second time and the gas switches were put on. We did not wait there for more than two minutes.

Q: Who actually shot Rohana Wijeweera?

I was not there. I went to the cemetery. Therefore, I did not see. But, I visited the Ops Combine often then. I know the soldiers who joined the task. From them, I knew that an Army Major and a Superintendent of Police had shot him.

D.B.S. Jeyaraj

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