

SRI LANKA

number of encounters had fallen to 11; in 2008 just four encounters with the Sea Tigers were registered by the SLN.

According to Vice-Adm Karannagoda, since 2006 not a single LTTE supply or replenishment vessel has been able to bring its material into Sri Lankan waters, dealing a serious blow to the resistance effort.

Latterly, the Sea Tigers resorted to sporadic surprise attacks, deploying mines and using frogmen with semi-submersibles to destroy SLN vessels: a dangerous method of attack that naval officers believe was a final desperate attempt by the LTTE to swing the balance in its favour.

However, two naval vessels — a Colombo-class FAC and the auxiliary logistics ship *A520* — were lost to underwater explosions in 2008. Following the capture of the LTTE's final urban stronghold of Mullaitivu in January 2009, the Sri Lanka Army discovered a construction site containing four underwater vehicles, including one 35 ft armour-plated submersible and three "pedal-driven" suicide boats.

It is unclear whether the submersibles were used in operations against the SLN. The navy says it recognises that an FAC and IPC fleet is too mission-orientated and that a modern navy requires a much more balanced fleet, now that the struggle with the LTTE appears to have been won.

"What we are trying to look for are frigate-sized ships, but being a small country we cannot expect state-of-the-art new vessels, so we are buying offshore patrol vessels second-hand and using improvisation to turn them into warfighting vessels. We have some OPVs and are expecting to acquire more in time to come," says Vice-Adm Karannagoda.

New priorities

The reason for the SLN's recent interest in much larger vessels is the discovery of oil resources under the seabed off the western coast of Sri Lanka. Vice-Adm Karannagoda expects the role of the navy to expand in the coming years along with Sri Lanka's claim for a larger maritime boundary and EEZ extending 700 n miles from the south-east of the island. Additional responsibilities for protecting resources and patrolling requirements over larger sovereign areas will mean a need for larger, more capable ocean-going vessels.

"We are still trying to acquire certain types of large naval guns as we have a requirement," the admiral says. "You can easily put a 76 mm gun on an OPV, but not all our OPVs have this gun. In the meantime, we improve our offensive capability using land-based guns and mortars for operations."

Jane's reported in December 2008 that Sri Lanka's parliament approved a naval budget of LKR22.6 billion (USD198 million) for operations and a further LKR4.9 billion for procurement for Fiscal Year 2009 (FY09). This allocation will come from the national defence budget of LKR177.1 billion, which was approved on 4 December.



The 18-year-old *Sayura* is the largest patrol ship in the SLN. Without a main gun, the OPV was equipped with a 105 mm artillery piece to destroy the LTTE's warehouse ships. Built by Hindustan Shipyards in Visakhapatnam, India, *Sayura* was in Indian service from 1991-2000.



According to the SLN, the LTTE's use of underwater vehicles makes it "the first terrorist organisation to develop underwater weapons" and introduce naval and air arms to a conflict.

Although inflation is running at 20 per cent, the defence budget has risen by 6.4 per cent compared to FY08. The FY08 budget was 20 per cent more than that in FY07, which had seen a 46 per cent increase over FY06. According to Vice-Adm Karannagoda, the substantial increases in defence expenditure is explained by a lack of investment in previous years.

"During the years 2002 to 2006, the armed forces budget allocations were drastically reduced and there were no acquisitions during that period because of the ceasefire. So there was a requirement to increase allocation to compensate for what was not purchased during those four years," he says.

"Whilst the LTTE continued to upgrade and bring in equipment, and became stronger with these supplies, the Sri Lanka armed forces got nothing. We had to increase our budgets accordingly to meet this threat."

The SLN played its part in keeping naval budget requirements to a minimum. Vice-Adm Karannagoda says the indigenous

construction of small boats reduced costs, along with a strong naval R&D unit implementing improvisation and innovation skills in vessel construction and outfitting.

Naval strength has now reached 48,000 personnel, with at least 15,000 deployed in a ground role and tasked to hold territory taken from the LTTE by the Sri Lanka Army. This enables the army to deploy its combat-proven units in mopping up the LTTE's remaining positions. SLAF, SLN and Sri Lankan police units have moved in to secure the captured areas, indirectly contributing to the army's fighting power.

Throughout the conflict, the political dimension has been as important as the military sphere. Vice-Adm Karannagoda emphasises the necessity of strong leadership during the war: "The political leadership has been absolutely unwavering. The president with the secretary of defence have kept the armed forces together and galvanised the support of the people behind them. Their resolve never shook and this was one of the most crucial factors."

He believes the SLN has much to offer other navies in terms of recent fighting experience, in particular the development of strategies and tactics for defeating a modern four-dimensional terrorist group (operating on land, in the air, on the surface of the seas and underwater). In its war with the Sea Tigers, the SLN has fought a well-armed, experienced and determined enemy using a wide range of vessels, from small boats to floating warehouses. "Internationally, maritime terrorism is a new threat that is developing in the Indian Ocean," says Vice-Adm Karannagoda.

While the conflict with the LTTE is approaching its conclusion, the application to extend Sri Lanka's EEZ and the discovery of oil resources means that the SLN will play a vital role in the reunified country's future maritime strategy.