



Locomotive off the track

Trials and Tribulations we faced to maintain the Railway in East

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After thirty years of conflict resulting in killings and mayhem in the country putting back the economy, destroying the assets, peace has dawned with an unprecedented development programme. It is worthwhile to put on record the trials and tribulations we had to undergo to maintain the essential services before they go into the limbo of forgotten things. I was at Trincomalee from 1982 to 1989 as Assistant Director Engineer and later as District Engineer Railway. Year 1982 was very peaceful with all religious festi-

The next was the bomb blast at Mollipathana between Kantalai and Tampalakaman. The track was badly damaged and the Locomotive and compartments off the track. I was at Galoya when the incident took place. I arranged the Breakdown train and proceeded to the spot and under Army protection repaired the track. The train crews refused to work beyond Galoya without army protection and the track patrolled. Transport of prima flour from Chinabay came to a halt. Transporting by ship caused much delay. Food commissioner brought this to the notice of the Army commander. He summoned a meeting, where the General Manager Railways,

moved the mobile saloon to Galoya and Engineer Nimal Fernando and myself spent the night there. The motor trolley with the Driver was kept there for any emergency. The I P K F (Indian Peace Keeping force) came to Sri Lanka under the Gandhi JR agreement. Trincomalee came under their jurisdiction. They occupied the Trincomalee station and the Tampakamam, foreman's Bungalow. They patrolled the Rail Track for the movement of the Prima specials from Galoya. Sri Lanka Army was confined to barracks.

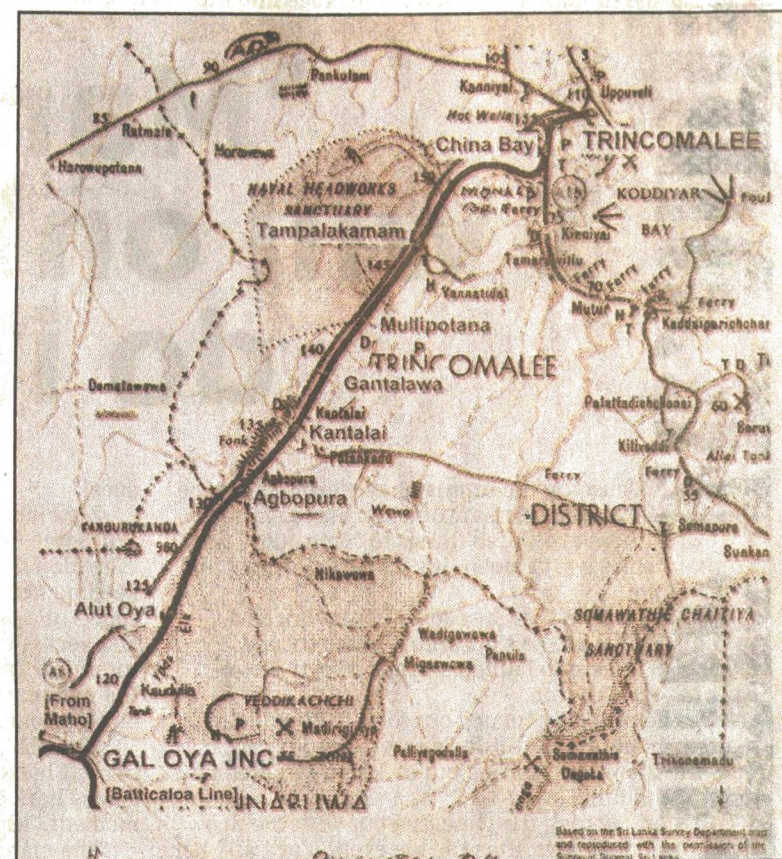
This inspired the LTTE to carry out a campaign to force Sinhalese people to move out of Trincomalee. On 30th September 1987 there was a rumour spread at Trincomalee that LTTE has massacred a bus load of Sinhalese school children at Nilaveli area. This ignited a riot at Trincomalee. Sinhalese people from Uppuveli attacked the District Engineer's office. The Tamil clerks were rescued by the police. The Sinhalese clerks took refuge in their quarters. Watcher Sathyanathan and Rajarathnem and employee of the Building section were stabbed and killed by the intruders. This information was given to the Chief Engineer and General Manager Railways. I was in Colombo when the incident took place. General Manager summoned me to his office and wanted me to take whatever I wanted from Railway stores and establish the office at Galoya. Tables, chairs, stationery and two typewriters were dispatched to Galoya. Following day I went to Galoya and got an abandoned pump-house repaired, provided electricity and toilet and baths. I arranged a special train and got down the Sinhalese clerks who were stranded at Trincomalee with necessary files. They were accommodated in vacant quarters at Galoya. They were very co-operative and got down to the task with dedication. We could make the payment to all employees in the District without any delay whereas in some departments it took about two months. Another major incident was the attack at the police check point at Manampitiya bridge. There were casualties on both sides. We had a building gang stationed there who were engaged on providing a reinforced concrete decking on the Bridge. These employees

ran to Manampitiya Station. Police removed steel sheets and other equipments to reinforce their bunkers at the Police Station. The other major incident was a bomb blast at China Bay jetty when some IPKF troops were there to take ship to India. Some soldiers were injured. Four of our Railway employees were taken into custody by the Indian Army. This triggered a strike of all Railway employees in the District. On instructions from W K B Weragama, Chief Engineer, I went to Galoya with some trade union leaders. JVP activists came to Galoya and threatened the Trade union leaders asking them to get back to Colombo. Strikers wanted a letter signed by those in custody that they were safe. I got the Engineer at Trincomalee to contact the Indian Army official and get a letter and the strike was called off. The other incident that caused shock waves through our nerves was the Army taking Chief Engineer Priyal Silva into custody. Priyal Silva and I went on a Motor Trolley inspection from Colombo to Galoya. On our way there were two places where the sleepers were set on fire. We doused the fire and informed the Foremen platelayers to attend to them. It was late evening when we reached Galoya. The inspectors and others were there to meet us. We had a chit chat and after dinner we went to the saloon and then went to bed. By about midnight somebody tapped at the saloon door to see an Army squad surrounding the saloon. Our inspectors were also there. An army officer asked me whether Priyal Silva is in. When I replied in the affirmative he asked me to call him. I went in and called Priyal Silva. As he came to the door the Army officer wanted him

to dress up and come as they wanted to take him. Though we wanted know why he was taken they did not want to divulge.

We walked up to the station to see Army Jeeps and trucks on the road. The Army officer wanted us to stay back. We walked back to the foreman platelayer's bungalow and discussed as to why he

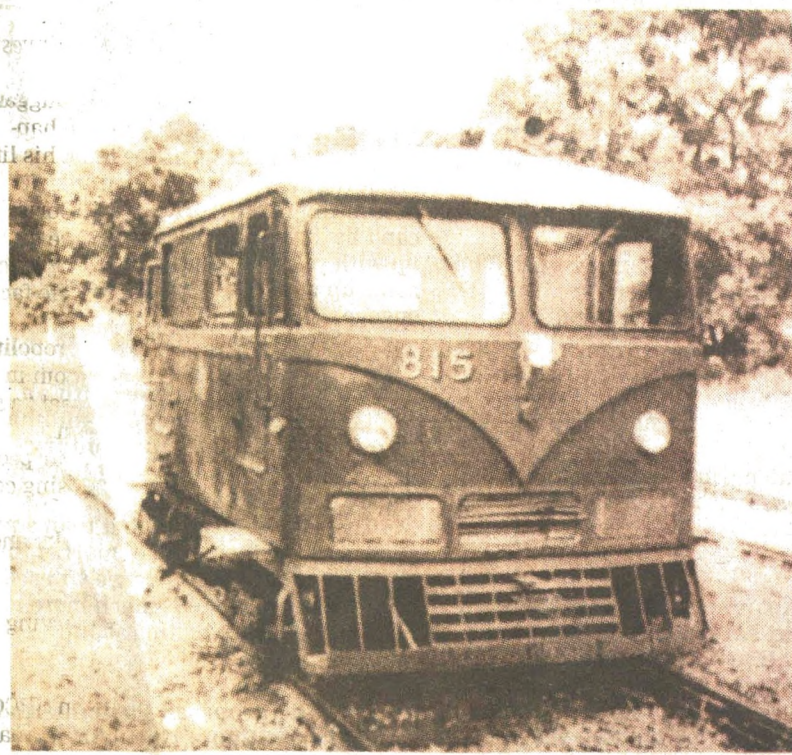
Silva to get back from Galoya as his life was in danger. Mrs. Silva had contacted his father who in turn contacted the additional General Manager Railways Jayasinghe. Jayasinghe who in turn contacted top brass of the Army to make some arrangements. Priyal Silva's brother had also contacted the Army. An order had been given to the Chief at



By courtesy DH

was taken. Sipping some coffee, cracking a joke as an interlude we went on till the sun rays lit up the eastern sky over the Galoya jungles. One of our workers came running and informed us that Priyal Silva is brought back. We all walked up. He related the story. An anonymous telephone call had come to Priyal

the Minneriya camp to get Silva to the camp for safety. Silva told me that he will go to Colombo with the Army and wanted me to come on the motor trolley. On arrival in Colombo, Laxman de Mel Secretary to the Ministry of Transport had contacted Silva and gave the details of the episode.



Motor trolley

vals being performed. Konervaram Temple festival, Vesak with pandals and processions were the highlights. With the beginning of 1983 there were brawls and clashes among the youth instigated by extremist forces. There were stabbing and shooting incidents. Police imposed curfew and organized meetings of religious leaders in the city to bring about peace. There were occasions when Sinhalese people avoided going to the town to buy their provisions. We arranged a train to go to Kantalai on Pola days, to buy their essentials. The first major incident was a bomb blast at Monkey Bridge targeting a train. The train crew was injured. The rail track was repaired and resumed service.

G P S Weerasooriya, Chief Engineer T D S Peiris and self had to attend. We explained about the necessary security arrangements required. The army commander wanted us to put up some additional sheds at Kitulutuwa and Alutoya camps, for him to post at some additional soldiers. On GMR's instruction, I procured the necessary materials from railway stores and despatched them to Galoya. Building foreman Kekirawa was instructed to go ahead with this work. Within a week we were able to complete the work. Army officers of the two camps arranged the necessary protection and we resumed the service with Army escorts, there were occasional disturbances in Trincomalee town. We