

JUNE 2009

Expert Talk



The Uncertain Future of the LTTE

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Newsletter by World-Check, the recognised authority on reducing risk through intelligence.

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The official demise of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam last month appeared strangely sudden despite its apparent projected inevitability. The LTTE was widely regarded as one of the most ruthless and professional terrorist entities in the world. Banned in 32 countries, the LTTE at its zenith had de facto control over large parts of Sri Lanka. The Tamil Tigers appeared so inextricably linked with Sri Lanka's past and future that this apparent crumbling of the giant has opened up a wide range of hitherto unexplored opportunities for the Sri Lankan state in general and the global Tamil community in particular.

It appears prudent to recall the events that led to this historic event. Sri Lanka's hard line President had made his disillusionment with the LTTE and their peace rhetoric quite clear after assuming power in late 2005. His systematic use of the Sri Lankan army to isolate and crush the Tigers took around three years and came with a huge human and economic cost. But he achieved what many analysts across the globe are referring to as a victory. As things stand today, the LTTE has been severely hampered as a conventional military force. Its leadership has been decimated totally and it no longer controls any territory.

It is indeed difficult to predict which way the Tigers are headed in future. The number of variables to factor in are numerous and interlinked. This paper examines some of the major ones which will likely affect the future path of the LTTE and the Sri Lankan state. First is the role of the Tamil diaspora and its commitment to insurgent violence in Sri Lanka. The LTTE still enjoys massive support among the diaspora and despite irreversible losses on the ground, it reportedly controls massive logistical and financial resources around the world with an estimated budget of \$200-300 million a year. How the diaspora reacts is clearly linked to how the Sri Lankan state treats the Sri Lankan Tamils from now. The Tamils are still seething over the high loss of civilian life in the war and unlike the wider international community, they know exactly which side to blame. Any hesitancy in integrating the Tamils in the political arena could prove to be critical. The same holds true for the way the Sri Lankan state treats the Tamils in the "welfare" camps.

The role of the international community can never be ignored. India, Pakistan and China have shown varying degrees of explicit and implicit support for the Sri Lankan government. The west appears confused and uncertain at the moment since the strong Tamil community and the active civil society players are not letting them forget its "commitment" to protect human rights across the globe. The policies of western governments may well prove crucial to the way the diaspora deals with the crisis.

The war

The Sri Lankan state used overwhelming military power to crush the Tigers. It is arguably one of the rare occasions in which a conventional army has dealt so conclusively with a terrorist entity in such a conventional manner. The Sri Lankan state had to deal with a number of factors which were crucial in their reluctance to go all the way before this phase.

The Tigers were no ordinary terrorist group. Its guerrilla forces could well be compared to a conventional army. They had a potent air force and navy and a cadre of suicide bombers known as the Black Tigers who had time and again proven their effectiveness. Defeating this entity required a tremendous amount of resources and an unusually strong political will. Sri Lanka is nowhere near a developed nation and its economy was fragile to say the least. In



The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

this period of global economic recession, military spending was more than doubled by Rajapakse over the past three years. Military spending occupied a staggering 20% of the government's budget or 5% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the year 2009.

Despite the expected euphoria now surrounding the Tigers defeat, the Sri Lankan state would have undoubtedly taken into consideration the cold sobering truth. That this war would push the Sri Lankan economy to the edge of a precipice from which only a fortuitous combination of luck, astute economic planning and ample doses of unconditional international aid could help draw back. The Sinhalese majority is now rejoicing on the streets and showering accolades on their President. But their satisfaction and patriotic fervour may slowly become replaced by a sense of despair and anger unless the economy recovers. Their anger may well direct itself at a government which spent too much on defence when the economy was in shambles.

The Sri Lankan state also accounted for and largely ignored international restraints for a ceasefire in what could turn out to be a very smart or a very dumb move indeed. They would have foreseen that it would be close to impossible to hide the reality on the ground. That even if they did not allow journalists access to the war zone, it would be difficult to completely stifle the voices and the images in today's interconnected world. The calls for ceasefire were loud and clear. It came from the highest echelons of power including the American president and secretary of state. But they were dismissed.

The civilian casualties are staggering to say the least. A report in The Times estimated that up to 20,000 civilians were killed by the Sri Lankan army in the final stages of war. The number is too high to ignore even for a state projecting itself on the receiving end of a reign of terror for three decades. The growing clamour for a war crimes investigation in Sri Lanka was also inevitable even if largely ceremonial.

But the Sri Lankans probably strategized significantly here. Situated at a geopolitically crucial point, the country has long been regarded as part of India's sphere of influence. But the Sri Lankans successfully used China's and Pakistan's desire to reduce Indian influence to garner not only their support but also India's. This led to all three countries supporting Sri Lanka not only militarily but also diplomatically. India was close to silent in its criticism of the Sri Lankan government despite its significant Tamil population. Even after the war, the three countries signed a self-praising resolution submitted by the Government of Sri Lanka before the scheduled UN Human Rights Council emergency session.

The Sri Lankan state also had to account for the massive reconstruction costs that would inevitably come with the war. The LTTE controlled areas are completely destroyed and they have close to 30,000 civilians to care for. How the Sri Lankan state proceeds from here will have a deep impact on its future with regard to the Tamil issue.

A possible future

Assessing LTTE's future would appear to be difficult at this stage. A closer understanding of the following factors sheds light on the possibilities.

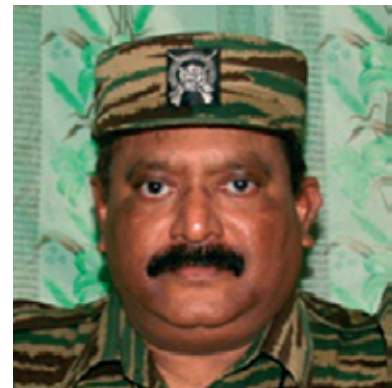
The Sri Lankan Tamils

A crucial factor on which hinges the future of the global Tamil community is the fate of the Tamils currently inside the so called welfare camps set up by the Sri Lankan government. These welfare camps house the Tamils that managed to escape the crossfire between the Sri Lankan army and the Tamil Tigers. The global Tamil community in particular is watching closely and initial signs are not encouraging. United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon described the conditions in the camps as appalling. The government claims it is trying to weed out the Tigers hiding among the civilians. It is rejecting appeals by humanitarian agencies for unrestricted access to the displaced. It turned back a Mercy Mission organised ship "Captain Ali" which carried humanitarian aid worth 800 tonnes for doubtful reasons.

Whether the President indeed plans to fulfil the promise of integrating the Tamils into the political process and granting them much needed political autonomy will be crucial as well. Sri Lanka's reconciliation minister Vinayagamoorthis Muralitharan or Col Karuna has promised elections as soon as the displaced Tamils are resettled. The hope is that the polls would address the grievances of the Tamil minority.

Tamil Diaspora

The Tamil diaspora and their reactions will have a major impact on how and in what ways the LTTE tries to stage a comeback. The expatriate Tamils commitment to "Eezham Tamil nation" has rarely been in doubt. They may have differing views on the way the LTTE has used terror tactics to achieve their goals, but their opposition to what they perceive as blatant Sinhalese chauvinism is obvious. The Tamils are an angry lot these days. They are a community which has empathised the most with their brethren back home and to see so many



*Velupillai Prabhakaran
Founder and leader of the LTTE*

of them being killed by Sri Lankan "aggression" has infuriated them significantly. Their global protests should be taken seriously. It would be childish to take their disbelief and shock at Prabhakaran's death as a sign of surrender. The pro-LTTE news service Tamil Net is regularly exhorting the diaspora to back the "formulation of the much-needed political structure" even if it is currently "bereft of territory."

The Tamil diaspora has a strong presence in the western countries such as the United Kingdom, USA, and Canada. These countries have vibrant democracies and a strong civil society. They also have a much hyped commitment to protect human rights across the world. The Tamils in these nations have significant political clout

VELUPILLAI PRABHAKARAN

(26/11/1954 – 18/05/2009)

Prabhakaran was the founder and leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. For over 25 years, the LTTE waged a violent secessionist campaign in Sri Lanka that led to it being designated a terrorist organization by 32 countries. Prabhakaran was wanted by Interpol for terrorism, murder, organized crime and terrorism conspiracy. He also had arrest warrants against him in Sri Lanka and India.

and have the ability to take the government to task for any laxity in upholding these high moral standards. They have already started flexing their muscles on the issue. Sri Lanka badly needs a loan from the International Monetary Fund to recover economically. The loan is the country's largest ever of \$ 1.9 billion. The USA and the United Kingdom have been holding up the loan as a means of exerting pressure on President Rajapakse to change conditions on the ground such as access to the internally displaced Tamils. The Sri Lankan state directly accuses the Tamil lobby of pushing USA policy on Sri Lanka. The pro-government Asian Tribune directly accused lawyer Bruce Fein of working for the Tigers in stalling the IMF loan. Fein was accused of influencing politicians such as Hillary Clinton, Senator Patrick Leahy (current Chairman of the Judiciary Committee), and Senator Robert Casey (Chairman of the Foreign Relations Sub-Committee). It is just one example among many that can indicate the political influence of the Tamils abroad.

But it would be interesting to see how the diaspora reacts in the absence of any well established leadership in Sri Lanka. The diaspora was completely dependent on its leaders to guide the way. With the death of Prabhakaran and 18 of its top leaders, the LTTE has been effectively decapitated and currently looks disorganised at best. It is in this context that KP assumes supreme importance.

A future leadership

LTTE is in a flux with no clear hierarchy. Kumaran Pathmanathan or KP is widely emerging as the most senior figure of the LTTE alive. How he tries to guide LTTE from now on will be extremely crucial to the Tigers future. KP is believed to be the "the most powerful and influential Tiger abroad" according to D B S Jeyaraj, a Toronto-based Sri Lankan Tamil who is an expert on the LTTE. In January of this year, he was made the international chief of the LTTE by Prabhakaran.

But some have questioned the support that KP enjoys among the overseas LTTE. A section of them headed by Castro and his hitherto unheard of Department of Diaspora Affairs (DDA) appeared to be distancing them from KP. Apart from denying Prabhakaran's death, this faction also appeared to be disillusioned with KP's claims of renouncing violence and entering the democratic process to achieve self determination for Tamils. Despite the apparent objections, Jeyaraj believes KP will overcome the obstacles with the passage of time.

Another complicating factor appears to be emerging recently. LTTE's intelligence chief Pottu Amman's missing body has triggered heated debate. While parading the bodies of other senior leaders like Prabhakaran, Sri Lankan defense officials have admitted their inability to identify his body as among the dead. While their claims that Pottu Amman is dead are likely true, it does indeed raise interesting possibilities. If he is indeed alive, he could try to revive LTTE's violent strategy and be a serious threat to KP's aspirations for the LTTE throne. As head of the strikingly effective Black Tigers suicide unit, his return may well lead to a wave of political assassinations which could potentially cripple the already unstable Sri Lankan state and definitely lead to a return to violent conflict.

Conclusion

President Rajapakse has brought one of the most seemingly intractable conflicts in modern times to a violent end. The Tigers looked indestructible. They were responsible for thousands of deaths among the civilians and soldiers of the Sri Lankan army. That the deaths included Tamils in significant number speaks volumes about their disregard for human life even of their own brethren. Their suicide bombers were as effective as they were ruthless. Their leaders were known as much for their astute planning as for their cold sadistic nature. The Tigers are now militarily wiped out. There are a number of possible scenarios for the Sri Lankan state and the Tamils from here onwards.

A lot depends on the actions and perceptions of the powerful Tamil diaspora. Their actions in turn hinge partially on Rajapakse's policies with respect to the Sri Lankan Tamils. If Rajapakse's policies were perceived to be against the Tamils in his country, then it may lead to a potentially disastrous scenario. This may unfold if there is no immediate improvement in the appalling living conditions of the Tamils currently living in the camps. This crisis can also be precipitated if there is no genuine effort on the part of the Sri Lankan government to integrate the Tamils into the political process as has been promised.

The diaspora will also look for guidance from the remaining senior leaders among the LTTE. That in turn depends on which leader eventually manages to rise above and unite the remaining LTTE cadre both in Sri Lanka and more importantly abroad. The most likely scenario that would emerge is of KP taking over the LTTE reins. As of now, he appears to be the most senior LTTE leader alive. KP appears to be going for a peaceful political struggle to achieve the goal of self determination for Tamils. KP's ascent to the LTTE throne will have a major impact on the way the diaspora perceives the struggle. In a less likely scenario, Pottu Amman will pose a challenge to KP. This depends first and foremost on the extremely doubtful assumption of his surviving the Sri Lankan army shelling. If indeed he emerges out of the wild, Pottu Amman may well aim at reviving the violent ways of the LTTE.

The way the international community deals with the Sri Lankan crisis will also affect its outcome. In the worst case scenario, the Sri Lankan state can be isolated and financially crippled by a lack of diplomatic and financial support of the global community. This will in turn push Sri Lanka into a deep economic hole from which it will take many years to recover. This will adversely affect the living conditions of the Tamils in the camps besides lowering the living conditions of the average Sri Lankan. This may lead to a potentially unstable Sri Lanka which may create the very conditions needed to rekindle the violent Tamil struggle.

One of the more optimistic scenarios would be a situation in which Sri Lanka is helped by the west and its immediate neighbours to recover quickly and efficiently from this economic crisis and enable it to focus on placating and integrating the Tamils. This would require deft political maneuvering and a strong political will to cajole and convince the international community and to tackle the root causes of Tamil disillusionment. This scenario may possibly be consistent with a permanent solution to the Tamil problem. Thus the Sri Lankan state and the Tamils have a unique chance of making history here. It remains to be seen what path they choose to take.