

# For him no sacrifice was too great for the objective of Eelam

Prabakaran had successfully transformed the Tigers from an archetypal guerilla outfit into a conventional army. But this may ultimately have proved to be his downfall.

Tom Farrell

Under the leadership of Velupillai Prabakaran, who has been killed aged 54 during fighting with the Sri Lankan army, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were moulded, and refined, into one of the world's deadliest insurgent groups, and rigid discipline was instilled through his personal example. The LTTE of Sri Lanka, the "Tamil Tigers," would become the progenitors of modern suicide bombing. They also developed their own navy and air force as they masterminded the art of weapons procurement in a globalised, post-cold-war world.

For Prabakaran, no sacrifice was too great for the objective of "Eelam," a Tamil state in an island of mainly Sinhalese Buddhists. This has been particularly evident during the last four months, before Sri Lanka's President Mahinda Rajapaksa formally declared victory on Sunday. During this time, according to U.N. estimates, more than 6,000 civilians have been killed as the LTTE have been pushed from their northern territories into a "no fire zone," consisting of a few kilometres of north-east coastline. The government has accused the LTTE leadership of using tens of thousands of civilians trapped there as human shields.

Prabakaran was born in Valvettiturai, a fishing town almost on Sri Lanka's northern tip. The son of a minor civil servant father and a religious mother, Prabakaran was said to have been a dutiful, introverted child. The mainly Hindu Tamil minority, concentrated on the northern and eastern fringes of the island, had done well before independence, flourishing in business and the colonial bureaucracy. The British had also imported thousands of low-caste Tamil labourers from mainland India to work the hill country tea plantations, although their lot was grimmer.

But within a few years of the British departure in February 1948, Sinhalese politicians were banging the drum of ethnic chauvinism. Sinhala became the island's official language and discriminatory laws affecting entry to university and the civil service alienated moderate Tamils. The teenage Prabakaran formed the Tamil New Tigers (TNT) in 1972. By then demands for reform by Tamil parliamentarians were being sidelined by youthful, militant separatists.

Already known to the Jaffna police, Prabakaran became a wanted man in July 1975 when he gunned down Alfred Duryappa, mayor of Jaffna, en route to a Hindu temple. The killing of Tamils belonging to rival organisations then became integral to his *modus operandi*.

Within months, the TNT had morphed into the LTTE. Prabakaran, now a fugitive in the Indian city of Madras (now Chennai), drew up its charter and helped design the LTTE crest, a roaring Tiger atop two crossed rifles and a halo of bullets set against a blood-red background. The Tiger had been the symbol of the Cholas, a Tamil dynasty which had dominated medieval south Asia. Inspired by a young militant who had taken cyanide while in police custody, Prabakaran compelled each LTTE member to wear a necklace with a cyanide capsule to be consumed in the event of capture.

By the late 1970s Junius Jayawardene's centre-right United National Party (UNP) government in Colombo was adopting a more pro-U.S. foreign policy. From the early 1980s the Indian government of Indira Gandhi began to tolerate sanctuary and training for Tamil rebels,



**VELUPILLAI PRABAKARAN:** *Ruthless in eliminating any rival Tamil politicians.* – PHOTO: AP

some of whom opened political offices in Chennai. New Delhi denied that it was seeking to divide Sri Lanka, but it was alleged that Prabakaran received secret training from India's intelligence organisation, the Research and Analysis Wing. Photographs that later emerged from the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu showed LTTE training camps. There were other Tamil militant groups, but the LTTE would marginalise or simply exterminate most of them.

Prabakaran developed the obsessive traits that stayed with him the rest of his life, refusing to drink bottled water not his own and sleeping with a pistol under his pillow. A lifelong devotee of Hollywood, he once cited Clint Eastwood as his role model. He watched action movies for inspiration, often using them as a training tool in Tiger camps.

Full-scale war erupted in the wake of Sri Lanka-wide pogroms against Tamils in July 1983. These sent thousands of young Tamils to Indian training camps.

Many wealthy Tamils fled to the west and their contributions, not always voluntary, played a large part in funding the Tigers' arsenal. The LTTE maintained a fleet known as "Sea Tigers" and carried out air raids using Czechoslovak-built propeller-engined trainers.

In July 1987 Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Jayawardene signed the Indo-Lanka accord in an attempt to staunch Tamil nationalism. But Prabakaran, addressing more than 100,000 people that August in a rare public appearance in Jaffna, vowed that only a separate state could offer a permanent solution.

The 100,000 Indian peacekeeping troops, mostly come to protect the Tamils from Sinhalese extremism, were soon at war with the LTTE. During this phase of the war Prabakaran lived in a massive fortified camp in the thick jun-

gles of the northern Vanni region. By this time, despite the LTTE's cardinal rule of celibacy, Prabakaran had taken a wife, Mathivathani Erambu. Accordingly, the rules were amended for his cadres, Tigers were allowed to marry with Prabakaran's sanction. But the Tigers' code remained austere. Tobacco and alcohol were forbidden and the vial of cyanide remained.

The first LTTE suicide bombing came in the northern town of Nelliady in July 1987. Prabakaran had formed the "Black Tigers," a group of male and female suicide bombers whose explosives-laden belts would later be copied by Palestinian, Chechen and Iraqi groups. The missions were preceded by months of intelligence gathering and Prabakaran held secret audiences with the bombers before they departed for their targets. With the departure of the Indian army in March 1990, having lost 1,200, Prabakaran unleashed his vengeance against all perceived enemies, internal and external. In May 1991, the former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi and 16 others were killed by a female suicide bomber at an Indian election rally.

Between 1990 and 1995, the Tigers ran the northern Jaffna peninsula as a mini-state with Prabakaran as its absolute ruler. Suspicious that his once-powerful deputy Mahatiya had been suborned by Indian intelligence, Prabakaran had Mahatiya, his cousin, demoted, then arrested and tortured to death along with dozens of his associates. In late 1995, Sri Lankan forces launched a massive campaign to retake the rebel-held north. The LTTE were expelled from Jaffna but 60,000 government troops found themselves hemmed in over the next few years as the Tigers captured large areas of the Vanni and the eastern province. The south was also hit by a spate of savage Black Tiger strikes.

But by late 2001, with a new UNP administration in power, both sides called a ceasefire with Norwegian mediation. It was speculated that Prabakaran had come to realise that post 9/11, the LTTE's complex overseas network of weapons procurement was likely to come under severe pressure if the war dragged on.

The Tiger leader, fanatical about his personal security, seldom gave interviews. His mouthpiece was usually Anton Balasingham, a former journalist with dual British-Sri Lankan citizenship.

But in April 2002, with the Vanni territories reopened after a decade, Prabakaran called a press conference attended by dozens of local and foreign journalists. With Balasingham translating, he called the killing of Rajiv Gandhi "a tragic incident" but did not apologise outright. The image he presented had changed. Middle age and a reputed fondness for Chinese cuisine had swelled his girth; a safari suit had replaced his striped combat fatigues.

But, after nearly four years of brittle peace, fighting again erupted between the government and the LTTE. Balasingham's possible moderating influence ended when he died of bile duct cancer at his London home in December 2006.

Prabakaran's autocratic rule over the LTTE was a factor in the defection of Vinayagamoorthi Muralitharan, alias Colonel Karuna, and several thousand eastern cadres. They were reorganised as a pro-government paramilitary with a similarly dubious human rights record. In the years since the Indian intervention, Prabakaran had very successfully transformed the Tigers from an archetypal guerilla outfit into a conventional army. But this may ultimately have proved to be his downfall. When fighting again erupted in mid 2006, the Tigers were now compelled to fight the Sri Lankan forces on their own terms. By the summer of 2007, the government had recaptured all of the LTTE's eastern territory, forcing them back into their Vanni heartland. On 2 January 2008, Sri Lanka formally withdrew from the Norwegian-brokered ceasefire and exactly one year later, the de facto Tiger "capital" of Killinochchi was recaptured by the government.

In the intervening months, the LTTE carried out numerous bomb attacks across the island. This still prompts fears that even if they are, as it now appears, defeated as a conventional force, they will continue an underground war.

Prabakaran was not an ideologue. Although some of the LTTE's founding members, such as Balasingham, described themselves as socialists, the Tamil Tigers have always essentially been a secular nationalist organisation. Ironically enough, before the Iraq war, their tally of suicide attacks surpassed that of any Islamist group.

Prabakaran would address the population of the LTTE's territory on *Maveerar Naal* (Great Heroes Day) and his rotund features were ubiquitous on LTTE posters and literature. He had two sons and a daughter and was said to have been grooming his elder son, Charles Anthony, as his heir, but he has apparently also been killed.

Prabakaran's death leaves Sri Lanka's Tamil minority facing an uncertain future. It is unclear whether LTTE hardliners will revert to guerilla warfare. Prabakaran was ruthless in eliminating any rival Tamil politicians, while the emigration of educated Tamils abroad leaves the long-suffering community in a precarious position. — © **Guardian Newspapers Limited, 2009**