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'LTTE chief wanted to live to fight another day'

COLOMBO: The LTTE chief Velupillai Prabhakaran died fighting in an islet in the Nanthikadal lagoon on the morning of May 19, 2009. But to die fighting was his last option. He wanted to escape and live to fight another day.

Prabhakaran had a number of escape plans in his mind, says Prof. Rohan Gunaratna, Head, International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.

USE OF SHIP BASED CHOPPER

Gunaratna told Express that one of Prabhakaran's daring plans was to get the vessel Christina to come near the No Fire Zone (NFZ) in Mullaitivu district, and get picked up from the shore by a chopper based on the vessel.

Ravishankar Kanakarajah, alias Sangili, of Canada, had arranged the ship and kept it in readiness in Indonesia. But one Achchutharan, who was put in charge of arranging for the chopper, failed to get one, Gunaratna said. Christina was secured by the Sri Lankan navy after the war.

The second option was to sneak out of the NFZ and head for the Yala game sanctuary in the deep south, and use the less patrolled southern coast to escape from the island.

The third option was to escape to hideouts in the Eastern Tamil-dominated district of Batticaloa, with the help of Ram, who, according to Gunaratna, had managed to survive in the East despite losing the war there in 2007.

But none of these three options could be exercised because the Sri Lankan forces had blocked all land and sea routes. By May 16, the entire Mullaitivu coastline was in the army's hands and the naval blockade was impregnable.

BREAKING INTO THE WANNI

The fourth option was to break through the thick Lankan cordon on the west bank of the Nanthikadal lagoon and find sanctuary in the Wannai jungles. There, the LTTE had, with foresight, buried its weapons before withdrawing.

In trying to breakthrough, a 140-strong Tiger unit led by Pottu Amman and Charles Anthony, Prabhakaran's elder son, first pretended to be civilian refugees but soon opened deadly fire and unleashed 30 suicide bombers on the Lankan guards. The Tigers breached the army's forward lines but were eventually crushed. Among the dead were Pottu Amman and Charles Anthony.

At another point, the LTTE's political chief, Nadesan, Peace Secretariat chief Puleethevan, and military wing leader Ramesh were killed in a crossfire. Reporting this controversial incident, the state-owned Sunday Observer of May 24, 2009 said: "Although there was speculation that they had expressed their willingness to surrender, there was no such indication as they had engaged in fierce fighting and (got) killed."

REFUGE IN AN ISLET

Prabhakaran and his bodyguards had, in the meanwhile, begun trekking along the banks of the Nanthikadal lagoon from Vellmullivaikkal to Karayamullivaikkal, to find a point where they could mingle with civilian refugees and cross the lagoon. But according to the weekly Nation a starving Prabhakaran got into the lagoon and took shelter in an islet on the night of May 18. As he was standing knee deep in the muddy water, a grenade hit his chest and a gun shot ripped through his skull. Troops of the 4 Vijayabahu Regiment found his mud soaked body at 10 am on May 19.

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