SRI LANKA:

‘KP’ the Man to Watch as LTTE Moves Overseas

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WITH most of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) leadership on the ground decimated by the Sri Lankan armed forces, its vast international network operating some 60 cells among the one million strong Sri Lankan Tamil expatriate population is poised to take over the struggle for an independent Tamil homeland in Sri Lanka.

The man who is expected to lead the battle is Kumaran Pathmanathan (or KP) who has been running LTTE’s state of the art propaganda, fund raising, procurement and shipping infrastructure overseas for many years, carries over a dozen passports and is on the Interpol wanted list for gun-running and criminal activities.

“KP has been the principal facilitator and enabler that transformed the LTTE into one of the most dangerous terrorist groups in the world” argues Dr Rohan Gunaratna, Head of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research in Singapore. “Although KP is not a public figure, he is well known to the international security and intelligence services both in the West and in the East. Wanted for crimes in several countries including India, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka”.

In September 2007 the Sri Lankan government said that the Thai police have informed them that KP was arrested in Bangkok, and the government immediately started a process to get him extradited to Colombo, only to find him vanish and the Thai government denying such an arrest.

Thailand has been a safe haven for the LTTE after Pathmanathan, moved out of neighboring Malaysia when the Malaysian Special Branch detected and seized an LTTE ship in 1990. In addition to setting up a number of lucrative businesses, the LTTE established a state-of-the-art boat yard that manufactured a dozen different boats, including a mini-submarine for debussing divers. The Thai authorities detected the LTTE operation on the island of Phuket, but since it was not an offence to build a submarine in Thailand, the Thai authorities released the head of the boat yard, a Sri Lankan Tamil refugee, who then returned to Norway. For a long time, both the Indian and Sri Lankan intelligence communities have been aware of LTTE activities in Thailand, especially its procurement and shipping activities. Three years ago, Sri Lankan air force acting on intelligence provided by India bombed and destroyed in the high seas, a number of LTTE ships carrying arms believed to have been loaded in Thailand or Cambodia.

Sri Lankans display a national flag after President Mahinda Rajapaksa declared victory in the country’s quarter-century civil war with the separatist rebels in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

In recent years KP’s whereabouts have
been a mystery and many in Sri Lanka believes that he is married to a Thai woman and lives mainly in Thailand, though he is known to travel to countries in Southeast Asia and Europe on various aliases to oversee LTTE's fundraising, money laundering and arms purchasing operations.

Pathmanadan, who left Sri Lanka immediately after 1983 communal clashes, set up a shipping company in Malaysia in late 1987 under instructions of LTTE supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran. By 1995, he has acquired six ships for the LTTE. Defence magazine, Jane’s Defence Intelligence Review, revealed in 2007 that the LTTE has two international wings -- KP Department and Aiyanna Group -- engaged in global terrorist activities.

According to the magazine, the terrorist outfit earns US$200-300 million per year through their fund raising activities and numerous illegal businesses. KP department is the oldest international wing of the LTTE, which has been led by Padmanadan and he is a noted smuggler of arms and narcotics. Operating with bank accounts opened in London, Frankfurt, Denmark, Athens and Australia, KP has engaged in many illegal activities using Yangon, Singapore, Bangkok and Johannesburg as his bases, according to reports.

A series of arrests in 2006 and 2007 in the US, UK, France, Guam, Thailand and Singapore of Sri Lankan Tamils involved in credit card scams and arms purchasing deals dealt a heavy blow to LTTE operations, which ultimately led to its military defeat in Sri Lanka. Yet, the KP department is believed to hold millions of dollars in reserves, which is today funding its huge propaganda campaign in the West on genocide and war crimes allegations against the Sri Lanka government.

It was KP, as the Head of its International Operations, who told the world on behalf of the LTTE that its leader Prabhakaran was dead. In March, US Ambassador to Sri Lanka Robert Blake admitted in a comment to the Daily Mirror in Colombo, that UN’s Humanitarian Chief John Holmes has been talking to KP to get the civilians held by LTTE as human shields released.

During the last days of the war, KP has been in touch with a number of UN and senior western government officials in an effort to broker a deal to get the LTTE leadership out of the war zone. But, some of his critics within the LTTE have raised suspicions, according to media reports, that he may have misled Prabhakaran and led him to his death. Thus, there is resistance within LTTE circles for KP’s attempt to take over the leadership of the LTTE.

Since Prabhakaran’s death, KP has moved swiftly to reincarnate the LTTE as an organization that has denounced violence, when he announced to the world in the dying moments of the war, that LTTE has silenced its guns. He has also said recently that LTTE would be willing to enter the democratic process. As India’s Hindu newspaper’s P.K. Balachandran observed: “This approach is expected to attract the support of the western governments keen on keeping the Tamil resistance alive in Sri Lanka in the post-Prabhakaran period if only to check the rising power of the ultra-nationalistic Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa”.

“If KP survives, the threat from the LTTE will persist” argues Dr Gunaratna. “In the current international environment, KP will survive unless the Sri Lankan government works closely with India, the U.S. and other law enforcement and national security agencies to bring him to justice”.

A separatist Tamil tiger cadre fights against Sri Lankan government forces during a battle in Tamil Tigers stronghold Wanni, north east of Colombo, Sri Lanka.