



HOW THE WAR WAS WON

A combination of factors led to the defeat of the LTTE in Sri Lanka, 33 years after its formation. Prabhakaran's blunders, the loss of Indian sympathy, and China's strategic interests were vital, experts tell *The Mag*



Sri Lankan soldiers march through a village in Mannar district of northwest Sri Lanka during the invasion of areas under the control of the LTTE —NYT

Military wizard, political novice

Josy Joseph

Never engage the same enemy for too long or he will adapt to your tactics." The line is often credited, wrongly, to the legendary military tactician Carl von Clausewitz. It aptly describes Velupillai Prabhakaran's end. Prabhakaran's is a textbook case of how flawed leadership can end in unimaginable tragedies. He was a brilliant guerrilla who devised several innovative means of modern insurgency operations, a devout leader who commanded unflinching loyalty from his supporters, a shrewd planner who built a terror group into an operational state, but he lacked the vision to see the criticality of consensus-building and winning allies in reaching one's ultimate goal. War, he forgot, is a continuation of politics by other means.

Strategic mistakes

"He didn't have the patience for long-drawn negotiations and political adjustments. That was his undoing," says a former intelligence officer who had interacted with Prabhakaran while in service.

When the Indian Peacekeeping Force withdrew from Sri Lanka in 1990, the mood in Tamil Nadu was strongly pro-LTTE. But within a year, Prabhakaran made his first strategic blunder when he sent suicide bombers after Rajiv Gandhi. Sympathy for the LTTE in Tamil Nadu was replaced by anger against it. It is this anger that many use today to justify the military brutality unleashed by the Rajapaksa government on innocent Tamils in Sri Lanka.

Prabhakaran and the LTTE leadership were to later regret the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi. But he continued to commit such strategic blunders over and over again, and they cost him and the Tamils dearly. The fact that he had no formal training as a leader and was not baptised in the fire of politics proved to be his biggest weakness.

Turning down peace

Many officers who have observed the LTTE for long believe that in both 1994 and 2002, it was on a strong wicket when the peace processes started. When the liberal Ranil Wickramasinghe came to power in 2001, it was the finest opportunity for Prabhakaran to politically cement the military victories of the past. In 2002, he seemed to be moving in that direction by signing the ceasefire agreement, which was monitored by Norway. But after six rounds of peace talks, the LTTE pulled out of the talks for unspecified reasons in 2003. And that was to mark the beginning of the end for the LTTE.

"His biggest mistake was to ignore Ranil's overtures and the possibilities presented before him for securing a dignified future for Tamils. The other mistake he committed was in deciding to fight the army conventionally after Rajapaksa ordered the onslaught in recent months," says a former intelligence officer who has worked in Sri Lanka for long.

From then on, a series of missteps marked Prabhakaran's strategy: from forcing people to boycott presidential elections, to the refusal to meet directly with government representatives in 2006. Norwegian mediator Erik Solheim, presently a minister in Norway, blamed the LTTE for the collapse of the peace efforts in 2006. The skirmishes continued, and in January 2008, the Sri Lankan government pulled out of the peace talks and started its aggressive military campaign, which culminated a few days ago in the end of the LTTE as we know it.

j.josy@dnaindia.net



A photo recovered from Prabhakaran's (R) family album shows wife Mathivathani (L), son Charles Anthony (3rd from L) and daughter Duwaraka (3rd from R) —AFP

'India helped cut off LTTE supply lines'

Indian intelligence was vital in intercepting ships, international terrorism expert Rohan Gunaratna tells *G Sampath*

Rohan Gunaratna is the author of several books on international terrorism and Sri Lankan politics. His noted works include *Indian Intelligence in Sri Lanka: The Role Of Indian Intelligence Agencies (1993)*, *International Dimension Of The Sri Lankan Conflict: Threat And Response (2001)*, and *Countering Terrorism: Can We Meet The Threat Of Global Violence (2008)*. Currently, he is the head of the *International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR)* at *Nanyang Technological University in Singapore*. Excerpts from an interview: **Strategically, how did the Sri Lankan army finally manage to defeat the LTTE?**

Four factors were responsible for the defeat of the LTTE. The first, and the most important, is that the LTTE supply ships that used to ply from East and South-East Asia, and the Middle-East, were intercepted and destroyed. A total of eight ships were sunk. This became possible because a number of governments, including India, helped with intelligence. As a result the LTTE could not replenish its materials — mortar, artillery, guns, ammunition, explosives — and this weakened them considerably. Secondly, the Eastern Province commander, Karuna, broke away with some 5,000 fighters in

2004, and joined hands with the Sri Lankan army. Consequently, the LTTE lost more than 50 per cent of its human resources, and this was a turning point.

What made Karuna break away? Karuna saw a lot of internal killings by Prabhakaran — he had assassinated a lot of moderate Tamil leaders — and that was a key reason.

What about the military approach of the Lankan army? That's my third point. Unlike in the past, the army, instead of moving into the north through the centre of the country, travelled along the coast. As a result, the LTTE found it difficult to get supplies from the sea; this also restricted the movement of LTTE cadres along the coast and sea. Besides, this time the morale of the army was very high, as they had an experienced, battle-hardened commander who was a field man — he had been injured in combat three times. Also, for the first time, the Sri Lankan military worked closely with the police and intelligence services. The secretary of defence, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the president's brother, is a team player. He got all these organisations to work together, and with the international community. India was one of the countries that really helped

Sri Lanka, though Indian assistance was mostly behind the scenes. As you know, Prabhakaran is a proclaimed offender in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case. After Rajiv was killed, India kept a sharp eye on the LTTE, and most of the intelligence came from the Indians.

Rohan Gunaratna

Terrorism & Lanka expert

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remaining support he had. **Despite a large number of civilian casualties, how did Sri Lanka succeed in keeping international public opinion largely in its favour?** The international community supported the campaign in Lanka because LTTE is a blacklisted group in their own countries.

Can the LTTE make a comeback?

No, and the main reason is that they have lost popular Tamil support. They do have some support overseas among people who have a very romantic idea of the Tigers, like the Khalistan supporters in Canada. But the Tamils in Lanka have had enough of suffering and won't support Tamil separatism or terrorism. There may be a small number of people who, because their family members have been killed, may commit some terrorist acts, but they would be very few. In Sri Lanka, Prabhakaran has made Tamils synonymous with terrorism, just as Osama bin Laden has done it for Muslims in many countries. The Tamils won't want to go down that road again.

What is in store for Tamils in Lanka today?

The immediate focus of the Lankan government should be to assist the refugees who have been displaced and help them settle down. Their next task would be to identify LTTE members, help them with rehabilitation, and reintegrate them back into society — remember that most LTTE members are not voluntary members but conscripts. The government should give every LTTE member a job and guarantee security for their families. Most of these members are children, and it is a question of looking after the nation's future. Thirdly, the Lankan government must raise sufficient funds, and come up with a 'Marshall Plan' for the north-east, like they did to develop Europe after World War II, and India has a vital role to play in the development of the region.

sampath@dnaindia.net



Lankan refugees M Aruldas and his nephew Kuberan in a hospital in Tamil Nadu —NYT

G Sampath

Shortly after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the US, counterterrorism expert Frank J Cilluffo was appointed to the White House where he served as Special Assistant to the President for homeland security. Currently, he is director of the *Homeland Security Policy Institute* at *George Washington University, Washington DC*. Excerpts from an interview: **How was the war won?**

Military means ultimately brought an end to the war. But the more important question is

whether the administration will win the peace; otherwise its military success may result in nothing more than a Pyrrhic victory. The government's military strategy worked because the Tigers suffered major setbacks on the battlefield and were confined to less and less land from which to operate or find safe haven. Maneuverability is everything; without it, they were forced to surrender.

Did China play a role? Yes. The Sri Lankan government's decision to enhance relations with China was a key factor. Sri Lanka gave China access to its ports and in exchange, Chi-

na supplied weapons, funds, and political support. Until this month, China staved off criticism of Sri Lanka from the UN Security Council by repeatedly blocking attempts by the US, UK, France and others to raise the issue and pass a resolution. It's not for nothing that, in 2008, China supplied more than \$1 billion worth of aid to Sri Lanka. **Is this the definitive end of the LTTE?**

LTTE doesn't have the resources or leadership necessary to make a significant comeback in the short run. Prabhakaran's death and that of his heir-apparent (son) as well as the Tigers' sen-

Frank J Cilluffo



former White House official & counterterrorism expert

ior leadership, leaves surviving elements with little to rally around. Keep in mind that the LTTE anchored its command and control system in a charismatic leader. Its structure was highly hierarchical, rigid, and discipline was ruthlessly enforced. So while the LTTE may live to see another day, it's now

merely a shadow of its former self. The same is true in other cases with strong and charismatic leaders — think Sendero Luminoso (Peru's Shining Path), or the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party in Turkey) — cutting off the head of the group is debilitating but not necessarily fatal. With residual LTTE supporters overseas, for instance, we could still see smaller scale incidents, if for no other reason than to demonstrate that a capacity still exists. Even if only vestiges remain, the LTTE should not be underestimated. **Is a political solution likely?** Political solutions and reconcili-

ation are the way forward. The Sri Lankan government needs to address the underlying grievances of the Tamil community and work to eliminate racial discrimination.

The LTTE managed to manipulate these grievances for its own purposes, and cow other Tamil organisations into submission. Now the government needs to empower Tamil politicians who were pushed out in the past, as well as give more than lip service to human rights. Winning the peace will be harder, and likely require more strength than winning the war.

sampath@dnaindia.net