

Final Curtain for Prabhakaran?

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Counter Terrorism Expert Prof. Rohan Gunaratna in an exclusive interview discusses the challenges of fighting the LTTE and how effectively they have been surmounted



Prabhakaran will not survive more than a year if he flees Sri Lanka, Head of International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore Prof. Rohan Gunaratna, a world authority on counter terrorism said in an interview with The Bottom Line.

In an exclusive interview he stated that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has links with multiple terrorist groups including the Pakistani Taleban, an associate group of Al Qaeda.

Q: What is your assessment of the Sri Lankan Forces? You have travelled world-wide - the USA, UK, Indonesia, Pakistan and you may have met a lot of military leaders in other countries. What are their views about Sri Lanka?

A: A Special Forces General from a foreign country recently remarked that the Sri Lankan Special Forces are the best. They have so many years of experience. The Sri Lankan Special Forces soldiers have fought all their lives. There is no substitute for experience. He said the best Special Forces soldiers are from Sri Lanka.

Q: You can say the world's number one?

A: Certainly, in terms of fighting a ruthless insurgency and terrorism, I rate them the best in the world.

Q: As an eminent researcher on counter Terrorism, Dr. Rohan Gunaratna, can you share your latest assessment on the LTTE?

A: The LTTE has suffered very significantly very recently. If the military can maintain the current degree of pressure, the LTTE can be militarily destroyed within the next two years.

Q: The LTTE is restricted now to only 22 sq. kms. in the township of Puthukudyiruppu.

A: The LTTE's main fighting force is within that area. But the LTTE is a guerrilla group. The LTTE has been able to infiltrate its members into other parts of the north and east. A counter-terrorist and counter-insurgency operation takes longer than expected.

Also the LTTE has a very significant support base overseas. And it is important in parallel with fighting the LTTE in the north and east, to also dismantle its shipping, procurement, financial, propaganda and other structures that are overseas, from India to Canada and Australia.

Q: Around 200 LTTE cadres were killed in battle by the Sri Lankan Security Forces when LTTE terrorists attempted to infiltrate at north of Puthukkudiyirippu in-between Chalai on March 14th . So whenever there are infiltrations, the Special Forces, Commandos and the Special Infantry Operations Teams (SIOT) hunt them down and kill them.

A: The Sri Lankan military has developed the organization, doctrine and the training to hunt infiltrators. After the LTTE's main force is destroyed, it will be more a job for the Special Forces to actively pursue and hunt down LTTE members attacking villages and towns. For a long period, these LTTE infiltrating teams plan to operate outside those main areas where the LTTE has traditionally dominated. This should be prevented with skill and intelligence. The Special Operations Forces are very capable and they have done a remarkable job in interdiction of these infiltrators.

Q: The LTTE is a centralized organization and it is controlled by Velupillai Prabhakaran. He is the sole decision maker and all others like Pottu Amman, Soosai, and each and every leader act according to Prabhakaran's orders. In case the Forces eliminate Prabhakaran or he commits suicide, what will happen to the LTTE?

A: If Prabhakaran is eliminated, the only leader who can assume leadership is Pottu Amman, the head of LTTE intelligence. And he will be equally ruthless as Prabhakaran. Both these leaders have killed large numbers of people in Sri Lanka and India and even killed Rajiv Gandhi. So, Prabhakaran's natural successor will be Pottu Amman, who is equally or more feared than Prabhakaran within the LTTE including leadership. Even the other leaders fear Pottu Amman who spies on every LTTE leader of significance.

Q: But if Prabhakaran is killed or something happens to him, don't you think there will be an inter struggle for leadership?

A: Yes, there will be a struggle, but Pottu Amman will always take over the organization.

Q: For the past one-and-a-half years they have tried their level best to assassinate VIPs, they tried to sabotage economic nerve centres in Sri Lanka. But according to Sri Lankan intelligence, especially the Directorate of Military Intelligence, they have countered these threats. Your comments on this?

A: The Sri Lankan government is serious. The security divisions have taken adequate measures to protect its leaders, from the President to the Defence Secretary and other important functionaries of government. Today, the Sri Lankan VIP protection specialists, both in the police, STF and military, understand how to protect. They have made it tough for the LTTE to kill VIPs.

With regards to economic infrastructure, the government has once again secured the key targets. Police and military working with their intelligence arms have interdicted many LTTE members and supporters in Colombo and elsewhere in the south and arrested them. Unlike previous government, the current regime has also been proactive in dismantling the LTTE infrastructure. The Secretary of Defence Gotabaya Rajapaksa has got the Army, Navy, Air Force, Police, intelligence services, the CID, TID, all these different agencies to work together. This is unprecedented. That is why the government has been able to dismantle the LTTE infrastructure in Colombo and elsewhere.

There is good screening of people and goods coming in from the north and the east to the rest of the country. There is a transfer of goods from vehicles in the north east to the vehicles in the south. With this simple but effective measure, the number of suicide attacks has dramatically diminished. So there has been very intelligent security management that has led to a lesser number of attacks in the south. Unless the LTTE leadership is decapitated and the fighting force destroyed, there will be attacks, especially against civilians. The government should continue to fight the LTTE creatively, innovatively and intelligently.

Q: You accept that Sri Lanka has a good counter-insurgency intelligence operation?

A: Yes, intelligence is the spearhead of counter insurgency and counter terrorism. Without sound and timely intelligence, the fighting will protract. By working with the public, winning hearts and minds, the flow of intelligence will increase.

Q: When the Al Qaeda attacked the World Trade centre in the USA, President George W. Bush started the war against Afghanistan and Iraq. There is no significant progress towards an end to these wars. Also, the US and Europeans have deployed their best Special Forces and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) forces, but still the terrorist momentum is high. When compared to Sri Lanka, the world's most ruthless terrorist organization is limited to only some 28 sq. kms? But in Sri Lanka, within a period of some two years, the battle has reached a decisive stage. Can you comment on that?

A: The Sri Lankan military has extensive experience. The Sri Lanka intelligence services have experience. The Sri Lanka Police, especially the CID, STF and the TID, have extensive experience. They have been fighting for two decades. This is unprecedented compared to other armies, law enforcement agencies and other intelligence services. With good leadership, they have been able to fight the LTTE and bring about the decline in the LTTE's strength. Good leadership has made the difference between defeat and victory.

Q: What is the leadership you are talking about?

A: The key leaders are Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the Secretary of Defence, who is totally committed, and of course he is very ably supported by Lt. General Fonseka, the Army chief, who miraculously escaped a deadly suicide attack, Vice Admiral Wasantha Karannagoda - a very creative and a very innovative Navy chief - and of course once again a very committed Air Force chief Air Vice Marshall Roshan Gunatileke, whose own brother was killed. So with these leaders and working with the intelligence leaders they have been able to achieve this feat. In the fight against terrorism, the most important thing is leadership. And we have seen in Sri Lanka that quality leadership achieved through dedication and commitment.

Q: But looking at this battle, the Sri Lanka Air Force is doing its role in the air, the Sri Lanka Navy is doing its role on the seas; but the most important factor is the battle on the ground. This ground is now limited to some 28 sq. kms. I am asking about the ground leadership?

A: The ground leadership is very good, but the Navy is equally important. Because, if the Navy had not destroyed the LTTE arms ships bringing in the artillery, mortars, explosives and other equipment, the Army would have faced a much heavier resistance. So it is the close cooperation, the coordination and the collaboration among the three services that has helped to bring about this situation. In this fight, everyone is important, from the military to the Central Bank working on counter terrorist finance, to the foreign office working overseas against the LTTE network from New Zealand to Switzerland.

Q: What is your frank opinion about the Sri Lanka Army Commander?

A: The Army Commander is a very capable commander. He is a fearless, tough and a honest commander. He is constantly learning, improving his knowledge and understanding and engaging the enemy. He is has developed an innovative strategy in warfare of hunting the LTTE rather than dominating land. He dominates land only when it is absolutely necessary. He understands the enemy. He is the like the shadow of the enemy, constantly learning from the enemy and hunting him down. I have known him since he was a young officer. He was injured several times in combat. Every time I saw him after those battle injuries, he was even more determined to fight. I firmly believe that his sole determination is to dismantle the LTTE, economically develop the northeast, and make Sri Lanka a peaceful and secure country. There are very few military leaders like him anywhere in the world.

Q: Do you feel that this particular Sri Lankan conflict and the way Sri Lanka has handled the counter-terrorist and insurgency operations can be a lesson to the West or the USA?

A: The Sri Lankan case study provides a brilliant example for the Western world. If you look at Afghanistan or at Iraq, both these theatres can learn a lot from the mistakes made in Sri Lanka and from the successes in Sri Lanka.

Q: Regarding the LTTE; if Prabhakaran leaves the country, what will happen?

A: Prabhakaran can leave the country. But he will become extremely vulnerable if he leaves Sri Lanka, because he is in the Interpol's Red Notice., and he is wanted by most governments in the world. And Prabhakaran is the proclaimed offender in the Rajiv Gandhi case. So, certainly he will not survive for more than a year. If he leaves Sri Lanka he will be killed.

Q: But he is not an ordinary citizen. He is a multi-billion dollar terrorist. He can survive in any country in South East Asia.

A: Prabhakaran is Asia's master of terror. He has brought untold suffering to the Tamils. Today he is holding more than a 100,000 Tamils as hostage. Prabhakaran has created a humanitarian crisis and a few countries overseas have fallen to this trap. I don't think any country will flirt with Prabhakaran. I think that country's reputation will be tarnished if it gives refuge or if it gives even a day's sanctuary to Prabhakaran. Prabhakaran is a very ruthless leader. No one will risk giving him sanctuary.

Q: But Prabhakaran's procurement chief K.P. is still living in Thailand, married to a Thai woman. Interpol has issued an open warrant on K.P. but the Thai authorities are extremely silent. Why is that?

A: I think there needs to be more effort on the part of the Sri Lankan government to work with the Thais to arrest K.P. and bring him back to Sri Lanka.

Q: Do you think that the LTTE is a global threat?

A: Yes, the LTTE is a threat not only to Sri Lanka. Internationally, the LTTE technique has been used, copied by so many other terrorist groups.

Q: The Sri Lankan Army recently recovered many LTTE equipment, five submersible vessels and other hardware, aircraft and more sophisticate equipment. Even V-Sat, satellite uplink equipment and a lot more. What is your assessment?

A: The LTTE always wanted to build technological capability. Prabhakaran always wanted to go hi-tech. That is why he established an air wing, sea wing, computers and modern communications systems. That is why the LTTE became such a capable terrorist organization.

Q: If the LTTE had lasted longer, do you think it would have been able to manufacture chemical weapons or other types of weapons of mass destruction?

A: If the LTTE had survived it would have gone in the direction of producing chemical weapons. And also weapons systems that could kill large numbers of people. Because Prabhakaran is a very ruthless man, for him to achieve this end goal he is prepared to kill large numbers of people. That is the mentality of Prabhakaran.

Q: Do you think that psychologically he is a weak man?

A: Medically, clinically, Prabhakaran is not ill. But he is an ethnic fanatic. He is an extreme Tamil nationalist and he believes that by killing non-Tamils he can protect the Tamil community. But what Prabhakaran through his actions has done is he has weakened the Tamil community. He has brought so much suffering to the Tamil people.

Q: But I have heard some former LTTE people say that Prabhakaran wants the killing of civilians or military personnel videoed and enjoys watching them. Don't you think that he is suffering from some kind of psychological aberration?

A: Prabhakaran is a killer. He is a man who is willing to kill large numbers of people, like Hitler, Osama bin Laden or Pol Pot. All these people have delusions. They have grandiose ideas, they have illusions. In that sense he is psychologically different. Psychologically very different from the mainstream. He is not a mainstream citizen. He is an extremist.

Q: But you say that he is clinically not weak. Yet reports suggest that he is diabetic or suffers with some kind of kidney ailment or high blood pressure.

A: It is possible that Prabhakaran is suffering from diabetes. It is also possible that he may be having high blood pressure. But in terms of his ability to command a terrorist organization, he has not been affected by those illnesses.

Q: What do you think of the international mechanism, the fund raising capability of the LTTE?

A: It is crucial for the international community to work together with Sri Lanka to dismantle the LTTE financial, propaganda and procurement and its shipping network. For this Sri Lanka should work with the Americans, Europeans, Australians and other countries, so that the LTTE will not be able to revive its dwindling structure in Sri Lanka.

Q: Don't you think that the LTTE's shipping network has already been destroyed? Or does it have more ships now?

A: The LTTE shipping network has been weakened but it is still a very significant organization.

Q: Are there any other terrorist organizations using this shipping network?

A: The LTTE has supplied weapons to other terrorist groups. According to the Indian intelligence services, the LTTE ships were used to supply weapons to South East Asian terrorist groups.

Q: Which groups? Pakistani terrorist groups or Al Qaida?

A: The LTTE has links with the Taleban and with a number of terrorist groups in the Middle East.

Q: Is there any proof that the LTTE has any links with Al Qaida?

A: The LTTE has links with groups close to Al Qaida, like the Taleban and Abu Sayaff. But we have yet to see evidence of links between Al Qaida and the LTTE. The Pakistani Taleban is the closest link that the LTTE has had with the Al Qaida. It is almost as good as the LTTE influencing the Al Qaida. Today, the key group that is working with the Al Qaida is the Pakistani Taleban. The Taliban technology of suicide is a copycat of the LTTE.