The Tigers Die Hard

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By John C Thompson- President of the Mackenzie Institute in Toronto Canada Since their emergence as a local terrorist group from out of a criminal sub-community in Jaffna on Sri Lanka, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have undergone several transformations. The next one might be their most persistent – and pernicious – one yet.The organization and discipline of the LTTE has always made them worth studying. They are very innovative, resourceful and hard-working: These characteristics would make their members a success in any more peaceful or profitable field of endeavour. Alas, for the Tamils of Sri Lanka and the other peoples of the island nation, their talents have been turned to revolt. Now, after decades of warfare, the 25-year old Tiger guerrilla force is facing defeat, and what comes next may reveal even more of the character of the movement behind them.

Claiming a spiritual victory in the face of physical defeat can be comforting (just ask the Serbs)… but with the criminal empire of the LTTE and their grip on the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora communities, there will be consequences.In the models of insurgency that arose in the 1960s and ‘70s; a political cause takes shape out of an ideological movement – Marxism or radicalized nationalism usually. Then, at some point, the more radical elements start creating terrorist cells. As these continue, society polarizes and people are left with two choices: To either rally to the authorities, or the movement. As the movement grows, it creates guerrilla forces as well as its terrorist cells. Eventually, these should be strong enough to tackle the government’s military forces in the field and drive on to victory. Thereafter, the grass is greener, the sky is blue, and there are peaches and cream for all except those evil forces of oppression who get ‘Social Justice’ (usually a bullet in the back of the head). That’s the script, but reality is often different.In the case of the LTTE, which often obscures its own history, its founder, Vellupillai Prabhakaran was a street thug, with a background specializing in extortion and smuggling, who got political ambitions in the early 1970s. Turning his coterie into a small terrorist group, he spent years slowly building up strength and following the classic pattern of using terrorism to create and accelerate the cycle of action and reaction that every insurgent prays for. Generally, the classic terrorist keeps kicking the authorities in the shin, until they punch back and the terrorist issues his cry of "Help! Help! We’re being repressed! You saw him repressing me, didn’t you?" [Apologies to Monty Python].Less experienced then than they are now, Sri Lankan police and military obligingly played along with the script, allowing the Tigers to grow in strength. Then, after an LTTE ambush which killed 15 soldiers in July 1983; the Army went berserk in Jaffna – as did Sinhalese mobs elsewhere in Sri Lanka – murdering hundreds of Tamils and driving tens of thousands (or more) from their homes in fear. Like the Provisional Wing of the IRA and the 1972 "Bloody Sunday Massacre"; the LTTE finally had the incident they craved, and have justified everything since then by referring back to this spree of mob violence. Indeed, virtually all of their history prior to 1983 is often conveniently forgotten.However, guerrillas need time to organize, and almost everyone forgets that the LTTE already had a guerrilla force when this incident occurred. Moreover, barring a couple of ceasefires (usually terminated by the Tigers), Sri Lanka has faced a continuous guerrilla conflict since then.But, after 25 years, the Sri Lankan military has the tools; technology and leadership it needs to finally defeat the LTTE’s guerrilla forces. Sanctuary areas on the Island that have long been held by the Tigers have fallen. The Tigers’ legendary bunker complexes in the jungle have been exposed by new sensor systems and blasted open by smart bombs. The unofficial LTTE capital, the town of Killinochchi- not withstanding claims that it is a "Tamil Stalingrad" could soon fall; and whole areas of Sri Lanka have been free of LTTE attacks for months.However, judging from pro-Tiger websites and chat rooms, " the LTTE is fighting valiantly, and surely the corrupt and rotten Sri Lankan Army must fall apart soon… the heroic Tigers cannot fail… why, Army bodies are stacking up like cordwood although a few sacred defenders of the cause died gloriously… Ad infinitum, ad nauseum. If you haven’t got a victory in hand, one in the imagination can be gratifying.There are ominous signs that the Tiger leadership recognizes that the writing is on the wall for their guerrilla forces in the field and the sanctuary areas they have long held.On November 27th, 2008, the Tiger apparatus abroad is expected to celebrate their movement’s "Heroes Day". Prabhakaran will probably deliver his usual radio address. It might be via an audiotape this time lest an Air Force smart bomb has his name chalked on the casing if he shows up at a radio station. There is going to be another change to the LTTE’s usual observances. The word is already circulating through the leadership of the Diaspora that this year’s Heroes Day theme is to be "Our land might be taken, but our aspiration cannot be defeated."There have been movements whose leadership issued statements like "Well, we’re beaten. We gave it our best shot, but the fight is over and the responsible thing to do is surrender." This is why the American Civil War ended as it did, with the dignified surrender by Robert E. Lee and its dignified acceptance by Ulysses S. Grant. The Tigers seem to be planning nothing like this.Instead, the Tigers appear to be about to retreat into the comforting myth of a spiritual victory as an alternative to a physical defeat. This is where the Serbs went to nurture their pride after their defeat at the hands of the Turks at the battle of Kosovo Polje in 1389. Their brittle sense of nationalism has persisted for 600 years since.Facing imminent defeat in battle in 1918, the German general staff (eager to protect the reputation of the Army), handed the reins of power back to a civilian government. This new government, rather than General Ludendorff, had to negotiate the terms of an armistice. This later gave rise to the comforting myth of the "stab in the back" by politicians in the bitter aftermath of the First World War. The Army could pretend it actually hadn’t been beaten. This myth helped propel the Nazis into power.Scottish and Irish nationalists constructed lots of romantic legends around their numerous defeats. The English might have won all the wars, but the Scots and Irish had all the good songs… Some of these songs turned squalid little episodes into comforting glorious epics.If the Tigers go down this route, there will be consequences. First, the defeat of their guerrilla forces and the loss of their sanctuary areas might not end the violence. There will always be room for a conventional terrorist campaign until the appearance of a new opportunity to create guerrilla units. As usual, their first focus might continue to be the elimination of outspoken Tamils

who feel the best hope for their people lies within the law and the Sri Lankan political system.Will the Tigers be gracious enough to stop using violence? Probably not. Generosity of spirit and respect for the lives of others are not among Prabhakaran’s character traits.The Diaspora of Sri Lankan Tamils that the Tigers facilitated, and which they still control through front organizations, will become their key asset. Would Prabhakaran attempt to flee abroad to see if he can take a more direct personal control of it, or attempt to negotiate a safe exile somewhere? As a secretive man with a carefully crafted persona, a quasi-public life with restrictions on his movement will probably not be to his liking. Staying in Sri Lanka, however, would mean dodging from refuge to refuge with a designated task-force hunting him; and there might only be one ending to that story.The organized criminal empire of the LTTE among the Diaspora communities has been carefully focused on supporting the Tigers on Sri Lanka. Police officers in Western Europe, Canada and Australia who monitor Tamil organized crime have seen little sign of pro-Tiger community leaders living the high life usually associated with organized crime leaders. But narcotics, "War-Taxes", smuggling and other enterprises generate a lot of money and pay for the Tiger’s political apparatus. Those activists are unlikely to want to seek honest work.There is a trap that many other terrorist organizations have fallen into over the past couple of centuries. Resorting to organized crime to pay for the cause usually ends up using the remains of the cause to justify organized crime. Eventually, the transformation from insurgent movement to criminal society is complete… Does anyone remember the original intentions of the Chinese Triads or the Sicilian Mafia? Considering the origins of the LTTE and main source of funding for the last 25 years, much of their international apparatus could very easily morph into a major trans-national criminal empire. For Sri Lankans, there might be some perverse comfort in this – all those nations that let the Tigers operate somewhat freely for many years will now pay a higher price for having done so.For the Diaspora, a romanticized losing cause may have other effects. As subsequent generations of children of Tamils grow up without any experience of life in Sri Lanka, they may well adopt these romantic myths of the losing cause instead in an effort to connect with their heritage and identity. The grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Irish immigrants helped sustain the IRA in the 1970s and ‘80s. Grandchildren of refugees from 1940s Yugoslavia returned to fight in the wars of the 1990s.As a more immediate concern, a Tamil in Sydney, London or Toronto who is reluctant to support the LTTE today, might feel less threatened by its existence tomorrow. Without the risk of having his children conscripted for a guerrilla force, he might feel free to actually approve of the Tigers’ support apparatus as the custodians of his heritage.Ironically, the end of the Tiger insurgency in Sri Lanka might well strengthen their hold on Diaspora communities. It would be in the interests of Sri Lanka to start looking for measures that would undercut the Tiger’s Diaspora leadership now, lest a military victory shouldn’t also translate into a political one. Concessions and honours might have to be delivered to those Tamils who stood up to the Tigers; and it would be prudent for Sri Lankan diplomats to start getting other governments thinking about Tamil organized crime now.As for the Canadian government, if the Tamils who arrived here from Sri Lanka are ever to be Canadians rather than Tiger supporters in exile, then the power of the LTTE’s fronts will have to be broken. Moreover, given the international diversity of our organized criminal societies already, can Canada really afford to let the insurgent-to-gangster transition of the Tigers occur unchallenged here? Could we anticipate a problem instead of reacting to one for once? (John C. Thompson is the President of The Mackenzie Institute in Toronto Canada. The Institute, cited by several major Canadian newspapers as one of Canada’s leading research organizations, prides itself on its objective and independent forays into some of the most contentious issues of the day. Its work often becomes a catalyst for informed debate and major change. Thompson directs its research into issues relating to domestic and international political instability and organized violence (e.g. terrorism, warfare, organized crime, conflict, causes of instability, political extremism, etc.) Former Intelligence Officer of the Canadian Army, Thompson was awarded the Canadian Forces Decoration in 1989. He left the service as a Captain. John is a member of Civitas, the Queen’s York Rangers Regimental Council, the Royal Canadian Military Institute – and its pistol club, Fair Vote Canada, the International Counter-Terrorism Officers Association)(Courtesy: Island)