
Truth and the Tigers

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John Thompson, National Post No prolonged violent civil war ends quietly; and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are squalling like, well, a cat on the losing end of a desperate fight. Throughout the countries that shelter the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, the Tigers' activists are desperately trying to win some reprieve for the last LTTE guerrilla force trapped in Sri Lanka. The problem is that the Tamil Tigers began as a terrorist group; and the two main traits of terrorists are deception and atrocity.

Terrorists try to convince both themselves and a wider audience that their cause is righteous. It seldom is. Reformers like Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi and Lech Walesa proved that non-violent protest works. Terrorists are people who prefer violence; their first targets are often the aspiring King-and Walesa-types who would lead the terrorists' preferred audience along a gentler path. Prabhakaran, the Tiger Supremo, began his career by murdering a federalist Tamil politician who preferred to work within the political system. The violence of a terrorist is a fast-track to leadership -- faster than working within a political system. The leaders of terrorist groups are often "self-actualizing," choosing a path that lets them convince themselves that violence is excusable. Few conflicts have simple causes, and descriptions of the complexities behind the Sri Lankan war with the LTTE have filled entire books. But most people prefer simple narratives; terrorists and their supporters are no exception. A highly involved struggle in Sri Lanka was slowly turned into a Sinhalese vs. Tamil epic by the Tigers, and that's the story they still push --even now. Atrocity is the stock-in-trade of the terrorist who feels he has to use outrageous violence to give truth to his lies to justify his actions. One basic tactic of terrorism is to goad authorities into an overreaction which then polarizes the terrorists' target community and alienates them from the wider society. The Sri Lankan civil war is widely held to have started when Sinhalese mobs killed hundreds of Tamils and forced tens of thousands to flee in 1983. The Tigers have used this event to justify all their actions ever since. What they do not discuss are the years of terrorist activity leading up to this explosion of rage. Moreover, guerrilla forces do not manifest overnight; the LTTE already had a guerrilla force in advance of the outbreak of rioting. The guerrilla war has been waged off and on for 26 years now. Yet we are supposed to forget that the Tigers have probably killed more Tamils than the Sri Lankan government has; not least through their suppression of rival Tamil perspectives. There have been three major ceasefires in the LTTE war -- each one broken by the Tigers as soon as they had rebuilt their ranks and restocked their war chest. The Tigers also assassinated two heads of state, pioneered the suicide belt-bomb and generally established a reputation as one of the most audacious terrorist groups the world has ever seen. As the Tigers' last main guerrilla force retreated to its current position in January, they held tens of thousands of Tamil civilians at gunpoint, using them as human shields. This hasn't slowed down Sri Lanka's Army much; so now the Tigers are using their own hostages as "proof" of alleged genocidal instincts in the Sri Lankan government. However, past LTTE terror tactics, like truck bombs in office buildings and time bombs on buses, didn't discriminate between Sinhalese, Tamils and Sri Lanka's minority Muslims and Burghers. If the Tigers were that concerned about the hostages they use as human shields, they could surrender or let them go. They show no signs of doing either. They are eager for aid to be delivered inside their lines for the relief of the hostages; but their own larder is also running low. For all their squalling, the Tigers don't deserve our sympathy, and it's shameless of them to demand it. John Thompson is president of the Mackenzie Institute, a Toronto-based research group focused on organized violence and political instability. Courtesy: Nationalpost.com