
Tamil Tiger leader no-surrender vow nears last test

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By C. Bryson HullCOLOMBO, March 31 (Reuters) -- Tamil Tiger founder Vellupillai Prabhakaran has done one thing better than anything else for 37 years: avoid capture.

Now the 54-year-old guerrilla leader and architect of Asia's longest-running civil war faces near certain defeat at the hands of the Sri Lankan military, and his longstanding vow of no surrender appears near a final test. For once since he first got the authorities' attention after accidentally setting off explosives in 1972, there is little doubt about the elusive Tiger chief's whereabouts. In a rare moment of agreement between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and Sri Lanka's military, both say he is in the 25-square km (10-sq mile) war zone -- all that remains of Prabhakaran's goal of a separate nation for Sri Lanka's Tamils. "We still believe that he is there," military spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara said. Refugees reported Prabhakaran and his son, Charles Anthony, had sporadically emerged from bunkers to speak with civilians, the spokesman said. On March 22, LTTE political head B. Nadesan told India's CNN-IBN network in an email interview: "I can confirm that our leader is here with our people as always." Much of how the war plays out, and how tens of thousands of civilians trapped by the LTTE inside a military-declared no-fire zone fare, depends on the fate of a man wanted by Interpol and blamed for scores of assassinations and suicide bombings. A United Nations assessment given to diplomats at a March 9 briefing spelled out five possible end-game scenarios, and listed Prabhakaran and other leaders surviving inside the no-fire zone as "the most critical for humanitarian conditions". "It is unlikely that they will give up ... (They) will either try to escape or fight a last stand with potentially devastating consequences for civilians should the government not restrain its forces," a copy of the U.N. assessment obtained by Reuters says. Already, the world body has accused the LTTE of keeping civilians as human shields and forced conscripts, and of shooting those trying to flee. It also accuses Sri Lanka's military of killing civilians in shelling. Both sides deny the accusations. "THE CULT WOULD DIE" That Prabhakaran is facing a final showdown is a marked turnaround for a man who had just a few years ago owned a reputation as a ruthless tactician who killed his enemies before they became threats and commanded a fanatically loyal army.

In his annual speech in November, he said Sri Lanka's military was "in a dreamland" if it thought it would win a war which erupted in earnest in 1983. But in quick succession, Sri Lanka's military has penned in and destroyed most of the LTTE. "Assuming the story is going from bad to worse and worse as seems is happening for Prabhakaran now, the only choice I see is the man dying in some form," said M.R. Narayan Swamy, author of the Prabhakaran biography "Inside an Elusive Mind". Escape or surrender is out of the question for a man whose followers are willing to commit suicide for the cause and wear cyanide capsules to be taken in case of capture, Swamy said. "His dying for the cause will help the cult, the personality, to live on for a long time. If he were to run away or withdraw, the cult would die," Swamy said. Prabhakaran is most often pictured in his trademark Tiger stripe camouflage along with men and women he has sent to their deaths. Regular use of suicide bombs -- a tactic the LTTE arguably pioneered -- put it on U.S., EU and Indian terrorist lists. Prabhakaran has been sentenced in absentia to 200 years in prison for the 1996 bombing of Sri Lanka's central bank, and is wanted by India for ordering the 1991 suicide bombing that killed former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa has said Prabhakaran would be sent to prison if caught, but few expect to see him behind bars.

Prabhakaran since the war started has been clear about his plans in case of defeat.

"I would prefer to die in honour rather than being caught alive by the enemy," he said in his first interview, published in India's Sunday magazine in 1984. (Editing by Jerry Norton) Courtesy: reuters.com