
Time ticking down for Sri Lanka's rebel leader

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By Scott McDonald COLOMBO, Sri Lanka: He has been the No. 1 target of Sri Lanka's military for 25 years. Now, Velupillai Prabhakaran's fate capture, death, flight is key to how the endgame in the island's civil war unfolds. The ruthless leader of the Tamil Tiger separatists and his remaining fighters are widely believed to be trapped in a dwindling patch of jungle and beach as government forces close in to end the conflict that has killed 70,000. Prabhakaran, 54, transformed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam from a group of barefoot soldiers into a guerrilla force that not only held off the Sri Lankan army for years but also drove off the Indian army. He did it with a brutal streak that saw his Tamil rivals assassinated, the widespread recruitment of child soldiers and an ironclad grip over his army, known as the LTTE. Its demand: a Tamil state in the north and east of Sri Lanka, an island nation of 20 million people off India's south-eastern coast. "Prabhakaran is the center of gravity of the LTTE," said Rohan Gunaratna, the head of the International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research in Singapore. Considered a devil to most Sri Lankans but a legend to his followers, Prabhakaran has had a bigger impact on modern-day Sri Lanka than any other person. Now, all are wondering if he will be killed, captured or do what he has ordered his followers to do for years: bite down on a cyanide capsule to avoid being taken alive. "It is very likely that Prabhakaran will not leave Sri Lanka," said Gunaratna, who along with the military thinks the rebel leader is still in the war zone. "If he leaves Sri Lanka the morale of the LTTE will decline even more." The military, which is confident of ending the civil war soon, says it is now in such a strong position that Prabhakaran no longer matters. "He is irrelevant," Defense Ministry spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella told a news conference Wednesday. At his peak, Prabhakaran controlled as much as one-third of Sri Lanka's 25,000 square miles (65,600 square kilometers). But after a series of defeats in the last three years, the rebels - along with tens of thousands of terrified civilians - have been pinned into just 8.4 square miles (21 square kilometers) on the northeast coast. Gunaratna, who has researched and written extensively on the Tamil Tigers, said Prabhakaran's death would have a huge negative impact on the organization's ability to continue as a guerrilla outfit. He said it would unleash infighting among other leaders to replace "an iconic figure" and also cause overseas Tamil supporters to lose faith. A high-ranking Sri Lankan army officer also predicted that once Prabhakaran is gone, the Tamil Tigers would break up. "There will be lots of infighting because he is the one who held the LTTE together," said the officer, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media. Tamil separatist movements started in the 1970s, and Prabhakaran first became known when he killed the mayor of Jaffna city in 1975. Jaffna peninsula in northern Sri Lanka is Prabhakaran's birthplace and the Tamil minority's cultural heartland. The war officially started in 1983, when 13 soldiers from Sri Lanka's Sinhalese majority were murdered in Jaffna. The incident sparked anti-Tamil riots nationwide in which thousands were killed. Since then, Prabhakaran, a stocky man with a bushy mustache and military fatigues, has killed off loyal lieutenants who failed him and gone after political leaders who crossed him. That includes Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa, who was killed by the Tamil Tigers in 1993. Prabhakaran is also accused of masterminding the assassination of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by a suicide bomber in 1991, apparently in revenge for his dispatching troops to help Sri Lanka try to crush the rebels. A ban on marriage for Tamil Tigers was lifted when Prabhakaran married a university student in 1984, but smoking and liquor are still outlawed for his followers. The couple has three children. His wife and two of the children are reported to be out of Sri Lanka. Military spokesman Brig. Udaya Nanayakkara said that the eldest son, Charles Anthony, 24, was wounded in a recent battle. "He was wounded last week, we don't have any details," Nanayakkara said Wednesday. When Prabhakaran controlled much of the north, he practically ran his own country, with a police force -which patrolled the main highway with radar guns- courts, schools and a navy and tiny air force to go with his battle-hardened ground forces. With that homemade state, came a personality cult that saw Prabhakaran transformed into a demigod. Life-size posters of him were sold in Kilinochchi, the Tamil Tiger's de facto capital. Even recently, supporters carried pictures of him at demonstrations in Europe and Toronto, Canada. Many of the pictures show him in uniform with a black necklace tucked into his shirt pocket. On the end is a cyanide capsule. Every Tamil Tiger fighter wears one and must swear an oath to swallow the capsule to avoid capture. Courtesy: yahoo.com