
Sri Lanka Closes in on Leader of the Tamil Tigers

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By Amantha Perera / Colombo For more than 30 years, Velupillai Prabhakaran has been Sri Lanka's most wanted. And the authorities now believe that they have cornered the elusive commander of one of the world's deadliest and most resilient insurgencies. Sri Lankan military officials said Sunday that more than 500 cadres of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam had been killed in fighting over the weekend, and that the Tamil separatist fighters are now confined to a narrow coastal stretch a little over seven miles long in northern Sri Lanka — a far cry from the vast swathes of eastern and northern Sri Lanka controlled by the insurgents just two years ago. And eight military divisions with as many as 50,000 personnel backed by air support are going in for the kill, with escape and supply routes by sea blocked off by a naval blockade. (Watch TIME's video of civilians caught in Sri Lankan civil war.)

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa has staked his political future on achieving a military victory over the Tigers, following the collapse of a 2002 cease fire. The Tigers have been fighting since 1983 to establish a separate homeland in the island's ethnic Tamil-majority areas, a conflict that has claimed more than 70,000 lives. To capture Prabhakaran — dead or alive — would symbolize the successful conclusion of a military offensive that began late in 2006, but has since dragged, despite the capture of nearly every town under Tiger control. Rajapaksa had one message for the Tiger leadership — above all Prabhakaran — in a speech at Temple Trees, his heavily guarded official residence in Colombo: "The option for the Tiger leadership is to lay down arms and surrender and save the lives of the remaining cadres." (See pictures of life in the territories previously controlled by the Tamil Tigers) Prabhakaran, known among his acolytes simply as "the Leader", has been sought by the Sri Lankan authorities ever since the 1976 murder of Alfred Duraiappah, the then mayor of the northern city of Jaffna. But until now, he has eluded capture in his jungle hideaways and, reportedly, on occasional clandestine trips to other parts of the region. "He is surrounded by the army," says Vinayagamorthi Muralitharan, previously known as Colonel Karuna when he had served as the LTTE's eastern military commander. "It is now almost impossible to escape undetected. All the top Tiger leaders are still very much in the Vanni [the region where the fighting is taking place]." Muralitharan defected from the Tigers in 2004 and formed a breakaway faction that supports the government. Since January, Sri Lankan forces have gained control of at least three heavily fortified bunker complexes previously used by Prabhakaran. Photographs released by the military show heavy fortifications, underground bunkers equipped with air-conditioning — all signs of the Tiger leader using the hideouts, according to military sources. The Army has also recovered insulin containers suspected to have been used by Prabhakaran, who is a diabetic. Independent verification of the discoveries has been impossible due to restrictions on media access to the combat zone, although the military's claims have not been contradicted by the LTTE. If Prabhakaran finds himself cornered, his end may be dramatic, suggests Rohan Gunaratna, head of the International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. "Prabhakaran will stay back and fight until death," says Gunaratna, who has written extensively about the Tigers. At an April 2002 press conference during the cease-fire, the Tiger leader said that he had advised his aides to kill him if there were ever a threat of capture. Recently there have been intelligence reports that he had advised his cadres to burn his body and not allow it to be discovered by government forces, but Prabhakaran's intentions — let alone his whereabouts — are difficult to gauge. "He rarely allows anyone other than his trusted lieutenants to get physically near him," says retired Indian Army intelligence officer Ramani Hariharan, who was stationed in Sri Lanka between 1987 and 1990. "Now probably very few people even among the top LTTE leaders — so few are alive today — will have direct access to him." A secretive nature, bordering on paranoia, has helped Prabhakaran, who was born in 1956, to stay ahead of his opponents. He burned all the existing photographs of himself when he went into hiding, and has not allowed himself to be seen in public since the 2002 press conference. The only recent photographs of Prabhakaran are those released by the Tigers. Some have speculated that Prabhakaran could use a light aircraft — of the type the Tigers have recently used in attempts to bomb the capital, Colombo — to make a last minute escape. But the LTTE's air capability is very limited, says Shanaka Jayasekara, Lecturer, Centre for Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. "The only possibility in my view is if the Zlin-143 (the Czech built light aircrafts used by the Tigers) has been modified with landing floaters and the objective is to land in international waters close to a LTTE merchant vessel for a transfer," Jayasekara says. But even if he could get out, few countries would be willing to accept the LTTE leader. "It is very unlikely that any country will offer asylum to Prabhakaran as he has an indictment and arrest warrant against him in India and Sri Lanka," Jayasekara says. The Indian government has accused Prabhakaran of ordering the assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991. "It is more likely that Prabhakaran will get his children out of Sri Lanka to provide inspirational support in the future. The entire family of [Prabhakaran's wife] Madhivadini is in Denmark, and the children will have strong contact with them." The Tigers would be unlikely to recover from the loss of Prabhakaran, who led by personality cult and has no second-in-command or designated successor. "LTTE's centre of gravity is Prabhakaran," says Gunaratna. "The LTTE will factionalize, fight each other and die after Prabhakaran." See pictures of Sri Lanka on the brink of civil war in 2006 Courtesy: time.com