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# The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam: Essential Points

Wednesday, 08 April 2009

Last Updated Wednesday, 08 April 2009

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A Fascinating Terrorist Group Arising in the mid-1970s, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have become one of the world's leading terrorist groups. Following the classic model of a 'National Liberation' movement of those years, they escalated their activities in the early 1980s to create a guerrilla force, and the resulting civil war has continued ever since. The LTTE remain noteworthy for several reasons. These include: 1. A history of innovative tactics and techniques. The LTTE were (until surpassed by various Palestinian groups during the 2000-04 Second Intifada) the most prolific users of suicide bombing tactics, pioneered the use of the suicide belt-bomb, and introduced many new tactics including the use of hang-gliders and ultra-light aircraft, frogmen, improvised submarines and much else. 2. A unique use of Émigré communities to support their cause. While the use of emigrated nationals to support various homeland conflicts is an old story, the Tigers were unique in facilitating the Diaspora of Sri Lankan Tamils into Western democratic states. As hundreds of thousands of Tamils made the transition from poor refugees and newly landed immigrants to prosperous citizens, they were controlled to a degree never seen before and systemically milked for contributions to support the LTTE's war effort. Diaspora organizations that opposed Tiger perspectives were simply not allowed to exist. 3. An immediate resort to sophisticated organized crime. There is a very long history of various insurgent movements turning to organized crime to meet their expenses and payroll; this is usually a gradual process. As the Tigers helped establish the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora, they also used it as a foundation to help spread an international network of smugglers and narcotics traffickers. The vast majority of Tamil émigrés are law-abiding with little tolerance for the criminals in their own community: Yet the speed with which Tamil organized crime networks became established in the 1980s and early '90s was remarkable. 4. Close harmonization of all aspects of the movement. Few terrorist groups act in isolation. Most have some manner of political front, arrangements for logistics, and mechanisms to raise money through legitimate and criminal means. For the LTTE ever since the early 1980s, a variety of political fronts, fundraising organizations, arms and equipment purchasing, and various criminal enterprises have always worked closely together. On the War in Sri Lanka Few conflicts have simple causes, and the human appetite for easily understood narratives inevitably casts the players in a conflict into roles as 'good guys' and 'bad guys', with helpless victims on the side. The reality is always different. Sri Lanka is a complex society with complex problems. The insurgency that the Tamil Tigers began in the mid-1970s arose for a number of reasons. Some of the validations for the conflict and the Tigers' behaviour are true, as many are false. Some of the conditions that generated the conflict have changed, some never will. As of 2001, the Sinhalese constitute 74% of Sri Lanka's population, Tamils are 18%, Muslims 7% and Burghers comprise most of the rest of the country's people. Sri Lanka underwent major population growth after independence in 1948. The new country invested heavily in education (and many Tamils were predisposed to embrace the opportunities this presented). By the 1960s there were greater expectations among young Sinhalese and Tamils than the island could provide. In such circumstances, many under-employed youth will be attracted to extremist ideologies. This included Maoism and a 1971 revolt by the Maoist young Sinhalese of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) was quashed -- leaving an estimated 15,000 dead. Frequent episodes of Sinhalese nationalism during this time also limited the ability of many Tamils to find education or employment according to their expectations and the international climate of revolutionary politics and national liberation movements had its attractions. The successful independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan (accomplished after severe repression and a major Indo-Pakistani war) was also an inspiration. In the early 1970s, some 30 Tamil independence groups had formed and five armed factions made their appearance: The war itself has gone through a number of phases. These include: 1970-1976: Growing violence within Sri Lankan Tamil community: Internal militancy grew as young militants attacked high caste Tamil elites and federalist Tamil politicians while emerging Tamil 'national liberation' movements attempted to redirect violence towards Sinhalese. 1976-1983: Classic Terrorist Group: The LTTE is created and established connections with Middle Eastern terrorist groups and Indian intelligence agencies. It worked to limit effects of liberalizing government policies and to destabilize local areas, encouraging repression by police and military to polarize Tamil society. Terrorist cells evolved into embryonic guerrilla forces. Base organization of Diaspora political front organizations and overseas organized crime by LTTE-related gangs first appeared in Europe. 1983-1987: Classic Guerrilla Warfare: LTTE attacks provoked violent communal rioting by Sinhalese, hundreds of Tamils were killed and tens of thousands displaced inside Sri Lanka. LTTE guerrillas began to engage in conventional warfare with the Sri Lankan Army. The Tigers encouraged refugee emigration into Western Europe, Australia and Canada while using political fronts to tap them for support in their new countries. The Tigers began to destroy rival Tamil militant organizations and absorb other factions. 1987-1990 Indian Imposed Peace Accords: The imposed settlement of the conflict resulted in extremely hostile opposition among Tamils and Sinhalese alike. The Sinhalese JVP initiated a second revolt against the government, which was suppressed with the loss of over 40,000 lives. The Tigers took on the Indian peacekeeping force and inflicted very heavy casualties. By 1990, India bailed out and the Sri Lankan civil war returned with full force. 1990-2002 Nearly Continuous Civil War: Aside from a brief ceasefire in 1994/5; warfare continued, with first the Army and then the Tigers gaining the upper hand in fighting around key areas in the Island's north. The Tigers assassinated two national leaders -- India's Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lanka's President Ranasinghe Premadasa -- and engaged in "ethnic cleansing" against Sinhalese and Muslims. They conducted frequent terrorist attacks elsewhere in Sri Lanka, and encouraged the growth of the Diaspora movement. During this time, the Tigers first resorted to maritime piracy; established their own shipping line and created a sophisticated administrative apparatus inside their controlled territories. 2002-2008 The Attempted Peace Process: Twelve years of warfare in northern Sri Lanka had resulted in a deadlock, and in early 2002 a cease-fire agreement was signed by the LTTE and the government. However, both sides had fundamentally irreconcilable positions - Sri Lanka wanted to remain intact while LTTE demands inevitably led to a

fractured state. By September 2004 the Tiger Fronts started to condition the Diaspora community for a return to the conflict and a series of incidents suggested the LTTE hoped to provoke a response from the Sri Lankan military. The 2004 Tsunami hit eastern Sri Lanka especially hard, probably delaying the return of the conflict but giving the Tigers new opportunities to raise money, stockpile supplies and recruit children. The Tigers also murdered hundreds of Tamil politicians from non-Tiger parties (particularly during the 2004 elections). 2008-2009 Return to War: The Tigers were not alone in preparing for a return to hostilities and the LTTE's desire for a return to the conflict had estranged many former supporters inside Sri Lanka and the Diaspora. The Sri Lankan government went heavily into debt to finance an expanded military and acquire new capabilities. The 2004 defection of a senior LTTE leader - Colonel Karuna - had also enabled the Army to shift resources when the fighting resumed. The Sri Lankan military was able to concentrate in a series of offensives and inflicted enormous losses on the LTTE through late 2008 and into 2009. After 25 years of more or less continuous guerrilla war, the Sri Lankan government finally tipped the balance. Employing new weapons and expensive new resources, the Army was able to drive the LTTE out of many areas and overrun sanctuaries that the Tigers had controlled for years. In January 2009, after a series of battlefield defeats, the LTTE guerrilla force retreated into a tiny enclave (less than 30 square km) between two lagoons in north-eastern Sri Lanka around the town of Puthukkudiyiruppu. The Tigers pulled between 70,000 (Army estimate) and 200,000 (LTTE estimate) Tamil civilians into their enclave with them, and have been using them as human shields, a forced labour pool, and a last source of compelled conscripts and child soldiers. Two months later, the LTTE's situation had not changed, and the end of the guerrilla war is in sight. Taking your own people hostage, then pleading for their safety and welfare is unusual. Even at bay, the Tigers remained innovative. The Genocide Myth Terrorist groups, aspiring revolutionaries and other kinds of insurgents usually like to present a simplistic and unambiguous narrative that justifies their behaviour. Like all simple stories, there have to be heroes and villains, and evil to be overcome; it's not hard to imagine where those who construct such narratives like to place themselves. The LTTE's first and most enduring objective was the creation of a Tamil homeland on Sri Lanka; the justification for this goal was the idea of Sinhalese genocide against Sri Lankan Tamils. The offered proof for this genocide was the communal rioting of 1983 in which many Tamils were killed, injured or dispossessed. Since then, Tigers have used the events of 1983 as justification for their own deeds; and the Diaspora's reaction to the imminent victory of the Sri Lankan military is a redoubled effort to brand Sri Lanka as a genocidal regime. A basic principle in the revolutionary 'National Liberation' model that the Tigers followed in the 1970s and early 1980s is the use of violence to provoke an over-response by aggrieved authorities. Whenever police and military can be induced to use indiscriminate violence against a community that an insurgent claims to represent, it makes the insurgent's case for him. By way of analogy, imagine being repeatedly kicked in the shins by someone until you punch him in response, so that he can cry to all nearby that you just hit him without provocation. There's always someone prepared to believe him. In the LTTE's formative years, many Sri Lankan police and military obligingly went along with the pre-written script; clumsily using violence in response to provocative outrages; and alienating more and more Tamils. On July 23rd, 1983, 13 Sri Lankan soldiers were killed in a Tiger ambush, and the incident was given full play by the Sri Lankan government (although it kept quiet about the subsequent murder of 14 Tamils by the Army the next day). At the funeral for the soldiers on the evening of the 24th, rioting broke out and subsequently, somewhere between 200 and 2,000 Tamils - estimates vary widely -- were killed and up to 100,000 were displaced by Sinhalese mobs. Despite the numerous examples of Sinhalese sheltering their Tamil neighbours, the damage had been done, and the Tigers then had all the justification they ever needed. They seldom discuss the years preceding 1983, and often would have credulous Westerners believe that they arose solely in response to these riots. However; since 1983, there has been no repeat performance of similar mob behaviour by Sinhalese. No mob violence followed the news that 1,200 Sri Lankan soldiers were killed by LTTE guerrillas (300 after surrendering) when the Mullativu army base was overrun in 1996. Nor was there any vigilantism after some spectacular LTTE truck bombings in Colombo. No mobs appeared in 1998 when the Temple of the Tooth - one of the holiest places in Sri Lankan Buddhism - was attacked by a Tiger suicide bomber. Part of the Tiger's incentive for these outrages may have been a hope that Sri Lankan Sinhalese would repeat their behaviour of 1983, but they never have. There have been frequent instances of human rights abuses, extra-judicial homicide and carelessness about collateral damage by the Sri Lankan military. These are distressing, but do not constitute genocide. Genocide, as we have all too often seen, requires much more extensive and enthusiastic massacres than a week of violent rioting 26 years ago. It requires wholesale ethnic cleansing - which is something the Tigers have repeatedly attempted, but not so the Sri Lankan authorities. It requires labour camps and death camps - something that the Sri Lankans have never built. Notwithstanding the events of 1983, Colombo and other Sri Lankan cities have large populations of Tamils who haven't felt the need to live in fear and apprehension of their neighbours for the past quarter century. The charges of genocide from the LTTE and their supporters have no merit, and should be immediately ignored whenever they are raised. The Tigers Claim to Tamil Leadership In the 33 years of the LTTE's existence, the Tigers have repeatedly claimed to speak for all Sri Lankan Tamils. This has never been true, although thousands of Tamils have been killed by the Tigers to substantiate this claim. In numerous other instances around the world, terrorists and insurgents have expended a great deal of time and effort to ensure that they are the sole 'legitimate' voice for the people they claim to represent. What is seldom remembered is that it took intimidation and murder to ensure this situation could be achieved. One should remember how that much of the violence in Apartheid South Africa of the 1980s, in Ulster in the 1970s, or among the Palestinians in the 1950s, was the result of infighting among various factions. Many of the first victims of the Bolsheviks in Russia were other Leftists; and Hitler's first spree of mass murder was to suppress Rohm's SA within his own Nazi Party. Whatever the claims of the LTTE, Sri Lanka's Tamils were never one united community. Some Tamils have ancestors who arrived in Sri Lanka over 1,500 years ago; other Tamil communities have been present for less than 200 years. There are cleavages within the Tamil community based on class, region, religious caste, and occupation. Some Tamils are so intermarried with their Sinhalese, Muslim or Burgher neighbours that they are barely conscious of their

identity. Many Tamils have no love for the LTTE - with profound reason. The Tigers were ruthless in murdering the leaders of rival insurgent groups such as PLOTE, the EPRLF, and TELO; and in purging potential rivals within their own ranks to their leader, Vellupillai Prabhakaran. The toll among Tamil figures who were opposed to a militant path has been very heavy and continuous - some 200 in 2004 alone. It must be remembered that the first murder by the embryonic LTTE was a Tamil federalist politician, killed by Prabhakaran personally. The LTTE's indiscriminate attacks with time bombs and booby traps on buses, and with truck bombs on office buildings, could not distinguish between Tamils, Sinhalese, Muslims and Burghers. Ethnic cleansing activities often involved massacres and midnight attacks on rural communities, which also made it difficult for machete-wielding Tigers to distinguish Tamils from intended victims. Tamils in Sri Lanka who have tried to shield their children from conscription by the Tigers (who are notorious for using child soldiers) and educators who tried to keep the Tigers out of their school rooms have been killed by the LTTE. Tamils who objected to paying war-taxes, or who opposed the Tigers in other ways have also disappeared, or have been wiped out along with their families. In the past two months, many of the Tamils compelled to act as human shields have been killed by the Tigers as they tried to escape. Others, hastily armed and forced into the ranks of the Tigers, have fired on the guerrillas in an attempt to save themselves and their families. Whenever the Tigers or their supporters insist they are speaking for all Sri Lankan Tamils, it is an insult to some very brave people to accept this claim. Some Questionable Chums

The Tigers began by adopting the traditional model of a national liberation movement in the 1970s, and they were soon tied into the networks of indirectly Soviet sponsored international terrorism that existed in those days. At various times, Asian Defence Journals, investigative reporters, and Jane's Defence Review have linked the LTTE to: The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP); LTTE members were at their training camps in South Lebanon during the late 1970s and apparently again after 1983. The Palestinian Liberation Organization; again, this was in the 1970s when the PLO was a terrorist group in Lebanon. The PLO was also said to be providing some training for the LTTE in southern India. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF); The LTTE was reported to be helping train members of this al Qaeda-related group from Mindanao in the Philippines during the 1990s. The Abu Sayyaf Group; a successor to the MILF and more conventionally tied to al Qaeda. The LTTE was also said to be training their members in the late 1990s. Jemaah Islamiya: The Indonesian 'franchise' of al Qaeda. The LTTE is said to have helped train JI members in maritime terrorist tactics in the 1990s. Al Qaeda: Besides providing training (presumably on a commercial basis) to a number of member organizations within al Qaeda; the LTTE has assisted members of al Qaeda with false passports and in joint arms purchases before the 9/11 attacks. Over the decades, the LTTE has frequently pioneered terrorist techniques that have been copied by other groups. These include the suicide belt bomb famously used in the 1991 assassination of Rajiv Gandhi and later to such effect during the Second Intifada by the Palestinians, the use of chlorine tanks in vehicle bombings to generate a gas cloud, later much copied by al Qaeda in Iraq, and suicide speed boat attacks such as were later seen in the attack on the USS Cole. This has led to widespread speculation that the LTTE provides training and instruction for other terrorist groups. The LTTE has been involved in heroin trafficking since the late 1970s. They have been linked to heroin distribution in Canada, France, Italy, Poland and Switzerland; and major shipments of heroin and opium to and from India, Myanmar, Pakistan, Thailand and Sri Lanka itself. The LTTE has been accused of piracy on numerous occasions and is linked to the capture of eight freighters in the Indian Ocean since 1995. The entire crews of two ships are missing, and it is assumed they were murdered by their captors. Criminal enterprises associated with former LTTE members in many countries include human trafficking, extortion, credit card fraud, counterfeiting, commercial fraud and much else. Organized criminal activity in any Western country requires a degree of cooperation with various other criminal societies and Tiger criminal enterprises have cooperated with Bikers, Chinese Triads, Russian and Italian Mafias, and a variety of other groups over the years. Protesting for the Tigers

Notwithstanding their interest in carving out a single ethnic state in Sri Lanka, LTTE political fronts in Diaspora communities have always stressed multicultural politics in their new societies. The Tiger Fronts in Canada made early connections with 'anti-racism' groups as a way of securing allies in their fight to keep liberalized refugee policies that facilitated easier immigration. They were also quick to cultivate political contacts, particularly with incumbent politicians. In Canada, this meant (in the mid-1990s) wooing the NDP at the municipal level, the Liberals federally, and the Conservatives in Ontario. Similar behaviour has been seen in Europe and Australia. Among the Diaspora, the only organizations that were permitted to exist were at best strictly neutral and non-partisan. However, most were pro-Tiger. Tamils who had left Sri Lanka found that every Tamil cultural body, temple, newspaper, or language and immigration service that they might resort to was pro-Tiger. Being known to hold Anti-Tiger views was to risk ostracism (a severe threat to a new immigrant) or a beating. Trying to avoid paying 'War Taxes' meant running the same risks; and could result in penalties to family members still living in Tiger-controlled areas back in Sri Lanka. Frequently, if the Tiger controlled front organizations needed to make a point, mass attendance at a protest march might be compelled. In recent years, Tamil store owners have been ordered to shut their shops to maximize attendance; and the men used to collect War Taxes might also go door to door in Tamil neighbourhoods ordering people to appear at events. However, as the Diaspora community matured and disappointment with the failure of the 2002 ceasefire grew, a growing number of Tamils started avoiding Tiger events. Legal prohibitions and orders against the LTTE and its front organizations in a number of countries have also encouraged many Tamils to defy these groups. However, the LTTE has controlled Tamil language media and education in Diaspora communities for years and many Sri Lankan Tamils still see the Tigers as champions of their people. There are many who remember the events of 1983 or human rights abuses and have decided to side with the Tigers. Much of the support for the Tigers is genuine and will remain so in future. As the war in Sri Lanka grinds to a conclusion; the flare-up in protest activities is a natural outcome. It could be seen as a displacement activity and a rejection of an unpalatable reality for many Tamils. Imagine a Tamil immigrant in their 50s who gave a child to the movement and contributed thousands of dollars over 30 years; now imagine how desperate they might be to avoid seeing the cause come to an end and all their sacrifices come to naught. For many of the children of Tamil immigrants, their idea of their Sri Lankan Tamil identity was entirely defined

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by the Tigers. The heroes they were encouraged to emulate were LTTE veterans at the Diaspora's "Martyr's Day" celebrations who paraded under the Tiger flag in their old uniforms. They cannot accept that the Tigers were ruthless killers under the control of a pitiless sociopathic leader. The problem for Tamils in the Diaspora is that they cannot really fit into their new societies as long as the Tigers exist and influence their lives. The problem for Sri Lanka is that it can never realize its true potential, as many other Asian countries have, so long as the Tigers remain. The LTTE arose as a radical response to a situation that existed decades ago, and it has long outlived its time. The Mackenzie InstituteThe Institute was formed in 1986 to provide research and comment on such diverse subjects as terrorism, organized crime, political extremism, propaganda, conflict and other such matters. It does not shy away from controversy. The Institute holds to the proposition that our democratic institutions need to be defended and enhanced, and works to do what it can to protect the stability of Canadian society. Those who support its purposes are invited to become Friends of the Institute, and those who contribute \$60 (or more) to it, receive its publications for the next twelve months. The Mackenzie Institute PO Box 338, Adelaide Station Toronto, Ontario M5C-2J4  
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