
'I realised we would never win'

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By Andrew Hosken For more than 20 years, Colonel Karuna Amman was one of the most feared men in Sri Lanka. As the military commander of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) or the Tamil Tigers, Karuna - perhaps more than any other man - established the Tigers as one of the most formidable fighting machines in Asia.

At one time, in the late 1980s, he fought both the armies of India and Sri Lanka. It was Karuna's defection from the LTTE in 2004 which largely destroyed the Tigers as a serious fighting force and brought them to the brink of destruction today. When we met Karuna at his offices in Colombo, it was hard to imagine that this smiling and quietly reserved 42-year-old man was number two in the LTTE and the military commander who had organised his 30,000 cadres into platoons, companies and regiments. "I won 60% of my battles," he says, matter of fact. His story and his growing disaffection with the LTTE, both its strategy and tactics, explains largely how the Tigers went from one of the most powerful and wealthiest proscribed terror groups in the world with around 30% of Sri Lanka under its control - and the capability to murder prime ministers and presidents both home and abroad - to a rump of desperadoes now staging a last stand on a tiny strip of land in northern Sri Lanka. In 1983, Karuna was studying bio-science in his home town of Batticaloa on Sri Lanka's east coast with dreams of becoming a doctor when the island's Tamil minority suffered from an upsurge of violence by nationalist members of the Sinhalese majority. Many refugees fled the violence to predominantly Tamil areas in the east such as Batticaloa. Along with many other young Tamils, Karuna was so shocked by the refugees' stories that he joined the LTTE. The LTTE was created in May 1976 by its current leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, who committed the first of the group's many murders with the shooting of the mayor of the northern town of Jaffna, Alfred Duraiappah. Karuna, born Vinayagya Muralitharan, was given his current Tigers nom de guerre - which translates into kindness - and swiftly came to Prabhakaran's attention. He told us: "After my training, I was first appointed as a personal bodyguard for Prabhakaran. I was very close to him; we were both very friendly with each other. In those days, he was a good leader. Discipline was very high. When we were in the LTTE, we can't smoke, we can't drink, no girls. And he was like that also. But little by little he changed." Suicide bomber According to Karuna, Prabhakaran's first serious strategic mistake came in May 1991 with the assassination of the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. By then the Tigers' eastern military commander, Karuna claims he had no fore knowledge of the operation but immediately suspected Prabhakaran and his intelligence chief Pottu Amman because the assassination had been carried out by a suicide bomber, an LTTE hallmark. "I told Prabhakaran that he had made a big mistake," says Karuna. "He denied it but I knew. "That was a big mistake because following that, 20 countries banned us as a terrorist organisation. Before that, many governments had been supportive of us behind the scenes." Prabhakaran killed Gandhi to punish India for its military intervention in Sri Lanka in the late 1980s, but in the long term, the killing would severely damage the LTTE's cause. Many thousands of murders followed, including many moderate Tamil leaders and intellectuals. Politicians, including at least 30 ministers were also killed. Perhaps the most spectacular domestic assassination was the successful suicide attack on the President, Ranasinghe Premadasa, during the 1993 May Day rally. "Prabhakaran killed a lot of Tamil intellectuals," adds Karuna. "That's why he couldn't come to the political mainstream. Then after that, the war turned into a war for Prabhakaran's survival and stopped becoming a liberation war. I realised that." Black Tigers Suicide attacks became a common feature of the LTTE and the group even had their own elite squad of suicide bombers, the Black Tigers. Karuna says: "Many people applied to join and cadres were picked carefully depending on the nature of the operation." Suicide attackers have been used effectively against both military and political targets. Even in the last stages of this brutal conflict, there have been as many as six such attacks a day against the army. Among the items captured by the Sri Lankan army from the Tigers and displayed this week were the heavy brown bomb jackets worn by the attackers. Karuna had no formal army training and says he learned military tactics from reading books on famous World War II generals including Rommel, Montgomery and Patton. "I particularly liked General Zhukov," says Karuna. "I learned very much from his defence of Stalingrad and used it for my own defence tactics." In 1997, Karuna led his 30,000 strong army against the Sri Lankan army of 80,000, ejecting it from the predominantly Tamil area of the Wanni in the north. He lost 4,000 cadres but killed 16,000 soldiers. His army had engineers capable of making mines, mortars and even armoured vehicles; they tried and ultimately failed to make a submarine for under water suicide attacks. What they couldn't make, they took. This included two tanks taken during a raid from the army. 'We would never win' By 2000, Karuna was convinced the group's strategy was wrong. "A separate state was an unattainable goal," says Karuna. "Other countries would never accept a separate country, especially India. I realised we would never win this war." He also grew contemptuous of Prabhakaran. He says, "In my 22 years with Prabhakaran, he never once came to the battlefield; he always stayed behind the lines. Everyone knows Prabhakaran as this iron man; Prabhakaran - the very big man and the born leader. But he was never like that." Eventually, the LTTE became known not just for terrorism but for money laundering, drug smuggling and forcing children into uniform. Although Karuna strenuously denied to us involvement in any of these activities, Amnesty International has said repeatedly that he has questions to answer for his past military actions, including the alleged killing of unarmed policemen. "Prabhakaran will never surrender to the army because he knows his crimes. Or he will be killed by the army, and for the future peace of Sri Lanka, that would definitely be a good thing." Colonel Karuna In 2004, after several failed attempts to persuade Prabhakaran to pursue a political solution, Karuna quit the Tigers and sent home his 6,000 soldiers. He urged Prabhakaran not to kill his supporters but the furious LTTE leader massacred approximately 500 of them in revenge and placed his former military chief at the top of his assassination hit list. According to Karuna, his departure robbed the Tigers of more than 60% of their strength, cost them their eastern provinces and left them vulnerable when the Sri Lankan army launched its final assault in February 2007. Now in the final stages of this war, the fortunes of the two former senior Tigers could not appear more stark. Karuna is now an MP, a close associate of the President, Mahinda Rajapaska, and the Minister for Constitutional Affairs and National Integration.

Prabhakaran and his few remaining followers are holed up on a small stretch of coast in north Sri Lanka, awaiting almost certain capture, or death - either by their own hands or those of the five infantry divisions which surround them. Karuna says: "Prabhakaran will never surrender to the army because he knows his crimes. Or he will be killed by the army, and for the future peace of Sri Lanka, that would definitely be a good thing." Story from BBC NEWS: Courtesy: bbc.co.uk