
Deploying diaspora

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D.B.S. JEYARAJ After having brought Tamils to the verge of disaster, the LTTE is putting the diaspora on a confrontational course with Western governments. IN 1989, this writer attended a conference organised by the pro-Tiger publication Tamil Voice International in London. Among the participants were politicians, journalists and bureaucrats from India such as P. Upendra, S. Unnikrishnan, Aladi Aruna, N.V.N. Somu, K. Veeramani, A.P. Venkateswaran and Samantha Datta Ray.

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) leader Velupillai Prabhakaran sent a felicitatory message to the conference. The delegates, consisting mainly of members of the worldwide Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, were shocked by a reference in that message. Prabhakaran described the diaspora as tholaintha santhathi or "lost generation". The diaspora representatives were seething with anger but were unable or unwilling to challenge the Tiger supremo's poor opinion of them. Despite members of the diaspora playing an important role in the affairs of the LTTE, that organisation regarded those who had "left the homeland" (pulam peyarntor) generally with contempt. The LTTE described them as people who had deserted "Tamil Eelam" at a critical juncture. A former LTTE spokesperson told a German journalist that the expatriates were economic refugees. The LTTE poet laureate Puthuvai. Rathinadurai in a poem called them dogs. That opinion began to change as more and more Tamils left Sri Lanka as refugees to swell the numbers of a global diaspora. Even as contributions to the LTTE decreased at home, the funds from abroad increased. In recent times, the shrinkage of the LTTE sphere of control in the island has resulted in the reduction of the Tigers' revenue base also. Thus, the Tigers who had at one time ridiculed the diaspora were compelled to rely more and more on funds raised from it. The bizarre twist was yet to come. With the LTTE getting gradually boxed into a tiny strip of coastal territory in the Assistant Government Agent division of Karaituraipattu in Mullaithivu district, the endgame for the Tigers began. The fate of Prabhakaran himself was a big question mark. Desperate, the LTTE turned to the diaspora. The wheel had turned full circle. The LTTE claiming to liberate the Tamil people now started looking to the pulam peyarntor to extricate itself from the morass it had sunk into. Need for oxygen It was felt that only high-level pressure exerted by the international community could compel Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa to call off the offensive and enter into negotiations with the LTTE. The Tigers gasping for breath needed oxygen. For this task, the LTTE hierarchy thought that the Tamil diaspora would be the trump card. Sections of the diaspora in Western countries would mount pressure on their respective governments and make them pressure Colombo. The Tiger lobby in Tamil Nadu was expected to do the same in India. An international campaign focussing on the plight of Tamil civilians in Tiger-controlled territory was to be orchestrated. Charges of genocide were raised. The objective was to use the civilians' plight to pressure the international community into fulfilling its responsibility to protect civilians. The Tigers, who are known for grave political miscalculations, were way off the mark in this too. While being sympathetic to the tragedy, the international community had a different take on its causes and possible remedy. The unwritten consensus was that the LTTE was primarily responsible for the Tamils' plight. The bulk of the Tamil people were being held against their will by the Tigers. As such the crisis amounted to a "hostage" situation. The best option, therefore, was for the LTTE to release the civilian hostages and discuss terms of surrender. But then the LTTE, which is known for its disconnect with political reality, opted to go along the doomed course. The Tigers, underestimating the collective intellect of the international community, resorted to stratagems that were patently obvious. In Tamil folklore and everyday usage, there are many sayings and references about the tiger. Pasuthol porthiya puli is one such descriptive phrase, which means the tiger covered in a cow's skin or hide. Metaphorically, this alludes to something fiercely dangerous portraying itself as harmlessly docile-an equivalent of the English idiom "wolf in sheep's clothing". An interesting phenomenon within the global Tamil diaspora was the carnivorous tiger attempting to portray itself as a herbivorous cow. New pattern of protests A new, different pattern was discernible. For the first time in many years, demonstrations and protests were being staged in Western capitals and important cities without two familiar items. One was the portrait of tiger supremo Prabhakaran and the other the flag with the image of a roaring tiger symbolising the LTTE. They were conspicuous by their absence. A harsh reality in recent times was that no significant public demonstration or meeting of a political nature could be convened or conducted by anti-Tiger or non-Tiger sections within the diaspora. Though low-key events with adequate security arrangements were held occasionally by persons independent of the LTTE, it was virtually impossible to organise something "political" on a large scale. Such was the LTTE's grip on the Tamil diaspora. With the Tigers enjoying a monopoly of large-scale "public politics", most demonstrations and meetings organised by the Tiger and pro-Tiger elements usually saw an abundance of placards with Prabhakaran's picture and flags with the tiger emblem. Against this backdrop, it was indeed a noteworthy deviation from the norm when large-scale political demonstrations and events began proliferating amidst the Tamil diaspora without these familiar objects. The reasons were not hard to seek. Fundamentally it was a change of tactics dictated by the politico-military circumstances in northern Sri Lanka. The situation "back home" for the LTTE was bleak. Realising fully well that the writing on the wall was clear for the LTTE if this trend continued, its supporters and sympathisers began orchestrating a campaign to "save the Tiger". In what seemed a tactical yet puerile manoeuvre to hoodwink the world at large, the lead role in these efforts was delegated to students and youths who were not openly identified as LTTE supporters. Well-known LTTE elements adopted low profiles. In a further bid to show that the demonstrations were not LTTE-oriented and that the concern displayed was altruistic in purpose, the tell-tale signs of Prabhakaran placards and Tiger flags were dispensed with. A facade The demonstrations were shown as being expressions of concern about the civilian plight. That this humanitarian concern was only a facade was exposed by four factors. First, no such concern was shown when civilians in the Eastern province were in distress

owing to the military campaign or even when civilians in the north-western regions of Wanni were affected. It was only when the LTTE-dominated north-eastern enclave was under threat that this cacophony for civilian concern increased in volume. Secondly, these voices were stridently loud about the damage and destruction caused by artillery shelling and aerial bombardment by the armed forces but were conspicuously silent on the atrocities committed by the LTTE against its own people. There was no condemnation of the Tigers endangering civilian life, limb and property by locating their artillery and mortars in thickly populated places and engaging the enemy, thus bringing about inevitable retaliatory attacks. Thirdly, there was no criticism of the LTTE for preventing sections of the people fleeing its territory for safety reasons. The LTTE has killed and injured several civilians for daring to escape its clutches and seek Army protection. Only the armed forces were blamed by these sections of the diaspora. Fourthly, these sections wanted a permanent ceasefire. The United Nations has called for a temporary ceasefire to help facilitate the humanitarian exercise of evacuating entrapped civilians. But the pro-Tiger elements agitating for civilian protection are not responsive. They want a permanent ceasefire to safeguard the LTTE. Their intention was to let the LTTE survive further by bringing about an end to the military campaign. They also wanted the entrapped civilians to remain as human shields in Tiger areas rather than obtain safety and relief in government-controlled areas. While these frantic attempts were on, Colombo seemed to be firm that the military juggernaut should keep on rolling forward until the Tigers were firmly dislodged from their positions and the LTTE's remnants were chased away. The only way the government's resolve could have been weakened was through Indian or international intervention. Despite the endeavours of pro-Tiger elements and the well-meaning concern shown by organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, there seemed very little hope that the military campaign would be called off. At best, there could be a "humanitarian pause" to facilitate evacuation of civilians but a permanent ceasefire seemed unlikely. This was the real situation. However much the Tiger elements protested and demonstrated about the civilian crisis, neither Colombo nor the international community was prepared to budge. Whenever the demonstrators evinced concern for civilians, they were informed directly and indirectly that the best option was for the LTTE to send civilians out and that arrangements could be made for that. Tensions within the Tiger ranks. Meanwhile, tensions emerged within the Tiger ranks. The "old hands" were getting jittery that the "leadership" role was slipping away from their hands to new sections. They were becoming increasingly irrelevant in a "Tiger-free" environment. Resentment at their enforced "eclipse" grew. The hard-core Tiger elements were also becoming unhappy. These emotion-driven sections are usually devoid of logic and reason. Their usual role is to generate heat and not to shed light. These people started protesting against the new decision to "blackout" the leader and the flag. They remonstrated that it was a betrayal of the struggle. Aggravating this situation was the cold war between Veerakathy Manivannan alias "Castro", the accredited head of the LTTE's overseas branch administration and the newly appointed global Tiger chief Selvarasa Pathmanathan alias "KP". While KP advocated the "soft" approach of focussing on the civilian predicament, Castro, unwilling to relinquish his power, fomented revolt against the diktat through his hard-line loyalists. In this situation, the LTTE hawks within the diaspora began to gain the upper hand. The earlier, comparatively sensible, approach was jettisoned. Instead, a defiant but unwise decision to pursue a confrontational course was adopted. With this change, the focus shifted. The crocodile tears shed for helpless civilians dried up. The demonstrators and protestors began singing a different tune. Instead of lamenting about innocent civilians, they began demanding that the Western nations lift the ban on the LTTE and formally recognise it as the sole representatives of the Tamil people. The placards showing scenes of suffering civilians and slogans urging international intervention were replaced by ones supportive of the LTTE. Placards with Prabakaran's portrait were displayed at demonstrations with the slogan "Our leader Prabakaran". Tiger flags fluttered proudly as crowds chanted "LTTE sole representative". There was a cosmetic change in the flag. The two rifles at the bottom went missing in some. The glib explanation was that the flag with a roaring tiger sans the firearms was the "Tamil national flag". The official flag of the LTTE until then had the image of rifles on it. In one swift move, the LTTE exposed its true colours. The diaspora demonstrations now openly identified themselves with the Tiger cause. The poor civilians were abandoned. The tiger had shed its cowskin and was on the prowl with its growl. When demonstrations focusing on the civilian plight were held earlier there were signs of a been a slow but gradual growth of sympathy for the tragic Tamil civilian plight among the governments, people and the media in the West. An important reason for this was the absence of Tiger symbols and emblems in the public demonstrations. The problem was being viewed in humanitarian terms and a possible change of heart may have evolved. The logical and humanitarian course to be adopted by the Tamil diaspora was to persist with its earlier role of focussing on the civilian predicament alone. Shifts in public opinion take time. Though not definite a possible change may have been on the cards. Instead, the LTTE hierarchy blundered in a typical fashion by readopting its earlier hard-line stance. Complicating matters further were consistent media revelations that the LTTE was holding the bulk of civilians against their will and had even brutally punished those trying to escape. Since the pro-tiger demonstrators glossed over or denied the infamous conduct of the LTTE international public opinion could not be swayed. The "civilian plight card" by LTTE had outlived its usefulness. The confrontational course of affirming solidarity with an organisation banned in many Western countries and expressing loyalty to a man like Prabakaran as "national leader" was not going down well with the mainstream opinion in the West. This trend in public opinion became more and more visible. Media coverage began dropping in quality and quantity. Mainstream Western politicians, except for a few, started avoiding demonstrations and meetings where Prabakaran placards and Tiger flags were displayed. In spite of massive demonstrations, paralyzing traffic at times, most mainstream Western politicians particularly those holding political office avoided any public identification with demonstrators. At one point demonstrators started playing childish games like folding up tiger flags for periods of time to enable politicians to show up at demonstrations and raising them again when expected leaders did not turn up. Things took a turn for the worse as the LTTE declined further back home. A new "militancy" was displayed abroad.

Committing self-immolation, going on fasts unto death, stopping traffic on public roads, storming public departments and Ministry buildings, protesting outside embassies, high commissions and consulates, throwing rotten eggs and tomatoes, vandalising Sri Lankan and Indian diplomatic missions and other acts in similar vein started spreading. A disturbing trend was the tendency on the part of young activists to confront the law-enforcement authorities. There were also incidents of friction with members of the Sinhala diaspora who had commenced counter-demonstrations. A tactical blunder by the diaspora is its ethno-centric approach to what is essentially a humanitarian catastrophe. If it dispenses with its tiger-oriented agitation and alters the focus to that of a human rights perspective there are vast possibilities of attracting many human rights organizations also into joining the demonstrations. But the LTTE flavour prevents such a wider mobilisation. Likewise another mistake is depicting all Sinhala people as the enemy. There are many liberal and/or left - leaning Sinhalese who would join in demonstrations to protest the killing of innocent civilians by both sides. But the tiger dimension naturally repels such people. Sadly, the younger generation of the Tamil diaspora is being politicised and radicalised for an unworthy and unwinnable cause. Moreover, the demonstrators' open identification with the LTTE had rendered the campaign ineffective with no scope for success. It is indeed pathetic to see the passionate idealism of youth being diverted and sidetracked into a dead end. This short-sighted conduct of the LTTE within the diaspora is just one more instance of the irreparable damage inflicted upon the Tamil people by the Tigers. After having brought Tamils to the precipice of disaster in Sri Lanka, the LTTE is now compelling the diaspora to embark upon a confrontational course with Western governments and law-enforcement authorities. Unless saner elements among the Tamil diaspora are willing and able to protest against the monstrous activities of the LTTE in their midst, this trend is likely to continue. Apart from being totally counterproductive to their own interests, this conduct of the LTTE will in the long run stigmatise the Tamil diaspora as being supporters of terrorism. This certainly is not in the best interests of the global Tamil diaspora in the long run. I can be reached on
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