
Witness to one extended roller-coaster ride

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Nirupama Subramanian It is difficult to believe now that Prabakaran had thought nothing could dislodge him from his position. It was February 2002. Supervised by the Norwegians, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe had signed a ceasefire agreement with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Implicit in the truce was the sentiment widespread at that time that the LTTE could not be militarily defeated. The agreement virtually made over the North-East to the Tigers. The government seemed to have abdicated its responsibility towards its Tamil and Muslim citizens living in that one-third part of the island.

But for the people of southern Sri Lanka, crushed by years of a war that their military seemed incapable of winning decisively, it was as if a great burden had been lifted off their shoulders. Colombo, where I was then based, was in a party mood. In fact, the capital had begun celebrating two months earlier, in December 2001, when the United National Party, which promised to end the war and start a peace process with the Tigers, was elected to form the government. The Tigers offered a Christmas-time truce. The government reciprocated. All at once, the atmosphere changed. The military dismantled barricades and checkpoints on several roads in the capital. No longer fearful of Tiger suicide bombers, people packed the shopping malls. They took joyrides down Bullers Road and Galle Road past Temple Trees, the Prime Minister's official home, and other roads that had been closed to the public for seven years for security reasons. Galle Face, once a deserted oceanfront promenade that only the very young or the very daring frequented after dark, turned into the city's most crowded spot. Soldiers still manned the watchtowers of the military headquarters that looked out to a spectacular ocean sunset but now they smiled and waved at the laughing crowds below. Where the waves crashed against the concrete breakers, someone put up a sign with a single word — PEACE. At night, it twinkled with lights. I had never seen a Christmas season quite like that earlier in Colombo. Firecrackers are going off in Colombo today because the LTTE is finally vanquished and its leader Velupillai Prabakaran is dead. Back then, people were over the moon just for the truce, so weary had they become of the never-ending war, so hopeless had the military campaign against the Tigers seemed. Since April 1995, Sri Lanka had not known a single day's peace. I first arrived in Colombo just after the truce between the Chandrika Kumaratunga government and the LTTE collapsed. The Tigers ended that ceasefire by bombing navy ships in the Trincomalee harbour. The country backed Ms. Kumaratunga as she declared war on the one hand, and announced a strong political package for devolution of power to Tamils on the other. It was the best political settlement that a Sinhala leader would offer to the Tamil minority. Military morale was high; Buddhist monks led the way in a recruitment drive by the army. But it was not long before Sri Lanka was overwhelmed by powerlessness in the face of a Tiger onslaught, on and off the battlefield. Early on, the Tigers very nearly grounded Sri Lanka's tiny air force, bringing down aircraft after aircraft with their shoulder-fired missiles. They targeted Colombo with suicide bombers so frequently that the picturesque capital soon resembled a city under siege. Bank bombing The truck-bombing of the central bank in January 2006 that killed a hundred people was a particularly shattering blow. With black humour, a Sri Lankan journalist friend said he was going to start a bomb-site tour of Colombo for visiting international journalists. No foreigners visited Sri Lanka then, bar journalists. It was around then that the city sealed itself behind barricades. The Sri Lankan artist Chandragupta Thenuwara captured the spirit of the time with a series of works called 'Barrelism'. It was so named for the oil-drums painted in camouflage colours that soldiers used to block roads. Barrels became the theme of all his paintings. One of his exhibits was a 'barrel map' of Colombo, showing all the roads blocked with drums. In his garden, he worked on installations with real barrels. Loss of Jaffna Sri Lanka's victory in the cricket World Cup that year was a huge high for a demoralised country. There was an important military victory too — for the first time since the Indian Peace Keeping Force left, the LTTE lost control of the Jaffna peninsula to the Sri Lankan security forces. The loss of Jaffna was a big psychological blow to the Tigers, and it crippled them strategically too until the very end. Unfortunately, the government was unable to build on this victory politically. The Tigers managed to infiltrate the heavy security cordons around the peninsula to make it a target of terrorist attacks, killing any unarmed Tamil politician who dared to venture back to rebuild his or her base and ensuring that the Tamils who lived there always feared for their lives. I remember meeting Sarojini Yogeswaran of the Tamil United Liberation Front during her campaign for the mayoral elections in Jaffna, the first time the elections were being held in 14 years. Just a few weeks after her election, the Tigers gunned her down outside her home. They had killed her husband V. Yogeswaran back in 1989. The Sri Lanka Army's response to terrorist attacks was brutal. Over 600 Tamil youth disappeared from the peninsula, sealing the fate of Ms. Kumaratunga's attempts to win Tamil hearts and minds. The suffering of Tamil civilians under a crushing security regime drove a tragic wedge between a charismatic Sinhala politician who was sincere in her desire to settle Tamil aspirations, and the Tamil minority who gave her full backing in the 1994 parliamentary elections. All this while the Sri Lanka army reeled under one military reverse after another inflicted on it by the LTTE. The joke those days was that the LTTE never had to shop for arms. Its cadres simply wheeled off heavy artillery and other weapons at the military camps they attacked. Casualties The attacks were spectacular affairs in which hundreds of soldiers perished at a time. Bad news from the front first reached the rest of the country through the ambulances screaming their sirens down Galle Road from the Ratmalana air base where wounded soldiers were flown from the battlefield. The sirens were the first indication of an 'incident' up in the north-east. The number of ambulances gave an idea of how big it was. Life on Galle Road would come to a standstill as vehicles pulled to one side to give way to the ambulances and people watched sombrely. Sometimes, after an attack, the Army would have a mass funeral for bodies of soldiers decomposed beyond identification. Those families fortunate enough to receive a coffin were advised not to open it. 'Victory Impossible'; Operation Jaya Sekuru or Sure Victory, a campaign to link up Vavuniya with Jaffna by road through Tiger-controlled territory, turned into Operation Victory Impossible for the military. So many combatants were killed along that highway that it came to be known as the

Highway of Death. Not surprisingly, the army faced desertions. Recruitment dried up. The operation had to be finally called off. In 2000, the Army came close to losing even Jaffna back to the Tigers. It held on only with the help of deadly multi-barrel rocket-launchers hurriedly procured from Pakistan and the Czech Republic. Meanwhile, Ms. Kumaratunga's efforts to push her devolution package through Parliament proved unsuccessful. Buddhist monks declared their opposition to a plan they thought would break up Sri Lanka, and that was enough to stay the politicians's hands. By the time of the 2001 election, support for Ms. Kumaratunga had eroded badly. Then the Tigers dealt a death blow to the economy with a ground attack — their “air force” did not yet exist— on the Katunayake air base-cum-international airport. Despondency was written all over Sri Lanka. After that, defeat for Ms. Kumaratunga's People's Alliance was a foregone conclusion. When Mr. Wickremesinghe took over as Prime Minister at the end of 2001, his controversial truce pact with the Tigers two months later was also no surprise. As I watched the Sri Lankan military notch up success after success against the LTTE in the last two years, and particularly in the last few months and weeks, the main question for me was how and when the turnaround had come for an army that was something of a joke only a few years ago? Karuna factor Military analysts are surely already studying this. A political turning point was perhaps the rebellion by Karuna, the one-time LTTE boss in the east, in March 2004. Mr. Wickremesinghe can take credit for this internal revolt against Prabhakaran as it was a byproduct of the ceasefire. It exposed the cracks in an organisation that was until then considered a monolithic force, and paved the way for a determined military operation under a leadership that was clear about its objectives, first in the east and later on in the Vanni. It is difficult to believe now that seven years ago, in April 2002, Prabhakaran had started believing that nothing could dislodge him from his position as the unquestioned ruler of a Tamil state. At least that was the impression he sought to give at a press conference in Kilinochchi, his first in a decade, soon after the ceasefire. A reporter for an international wire service even asked him to outline the LTTE's economic policy as Indian journalists tried to pin him down with questions about Rajiv's assassination. My thoughts today are about Sri Lanka's Tamil community led to ruination over three decades on Prabhakaran's pipe-dream of Eelam, and the Tamils he killed — outstanding intellectuals such as Neelan Tiruchelvam and Loganathan Ketheeswaran and Lakshman Kadirgamar and quiet workers on the ground such as the EPRLF's Robert Thambirajah Subathiran. He did that only because they dared disagree with him. Courtesy: Hindu.com