

“We knew they would never lay down arms and start negotiating”

Wednesday, 08 July 2009

Last Updated Wednesday, 08 July 2009

One thing I never did was to underestimate the LTTE: Mahinda Rajapaksa. PHOTO: K. GAJENDRAN PRESIDENT RAJAPAKSA: If I was the leader of the LTTE, I would have gone underground and I would have been in the jungles — fighting a guerrilla fight. In this second part of an extended interview to The Hindu at Temple Trees in Colombo on June 30, President Mahinda Rajapaksa answers N. Ram’s questions on his outlook on the LTTE, his approach to it in peacetime and in armed conflict, and his assessment of its fighting capabilities and of Velupillai Prabhakaran’s strategy during the endgame. The first part was published on July 6.

N. Ram (NR): Mr. President, when you were elected in 2005 what was your expectation of this conflict? This is what you said in your 2005 presidential election manifesto, Mahinda Chintana: “The freedom of our country is supreme. I will not permit any separatism. I will also not permit anyone to destroy democracy in our country…I will respect all ethnic and religious identities, refrain from using force against anyone, and build a new society that protects individuals and social freedoms.” In that policy statement, you also projected the “fundamental platform” of your initiatives as “an undivided country, a national consensus, and an honourable peace.” So what was your real expectation when you assumed the office of President? You had no plan, it appears, to go on an offensive.

President: I was very clear about terrorism. I didn’t want to suppress the Tamils’ feelings. But I was very clear about the terrorism from the start. That’s why as soon as I knew that I was going to win, I invited Gota [his brother Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who took charge as Secretary in the Ministry of Defence, Public Security, Law & Order on November 25, 2005; a battle-hardened professional with 20 years of service in the Sri Lankan Army, he played a key role in the successful Vadamarachchi Operation against the LTTE in 1987 and subsequently, in 1990, in Operation Thirvidabalaya to rescue Jaffna peninsula and the Jaffna Fort from LTTE control.] I said to him: “You can’t go. You wait here.” That’s why I selected as commanders of the Armed Forces people who would get ready to do that. Then I sent the message to the LTTE: “Come, we will have talks, discuss.” I was trying to negotiate. I was very practical. I said: “You can get anything you want. But why don’t you all contest for this, have elections? Now you are people who have weapons in your hands. Ask the people to select. Have elections for the Provincial Council. Then we will negotiate. I can negotiate with an elected group. But with a man with weapons, I can’t negotiate.” The biggest mistake he [Prabhakaran] made was this. He said I was a practical man, a pragmatic man. Lalith Weeratunga (Secretary to the President; LW): H.E. [His Excellency] was appointed on the 19th of November [2005] when he made his inaugural speech, where he invited this man. Then on the 27th of November came Prabhakaran’s Maaveerar speech, in which he said the President was a pragmatic, practical man [the LTTE supremo announced that his organisation would “wait and observe” the new President’s approach to the peace process “for some time” because “President Rajapaksa is considered a realist, committed to pragmatic politics”]. When he said that, H.E. said in a speech: “I am willing to walk that last mile.” Then on the 5th of December, they attacked 13 innocent soldiers who were taking meals to their comrades and they were without weapons. That is how it started. President: Even then I didn’t do anything. But then I knew what was going on. Then only I started my defence, I would say. Then Gota said we would have to increase the strength of the Army. All that was planned by them [the professionals]. I said: “What do you want? Get ready.” But I went behind them [the LTTE] pleading. But I knew people were getting worked up in the South. Then I warned the LTTE: “Don’t do this. Don’t push me to the wall.” LW: Then you sent me to talk to one of their leaders. President: I sent him. I sent Jeyaraj [Jeyaraj Fernandopulle, a veteran politician hailing from the Tamil minority group of Colombo Chetties and Cabinet Minister of Highways & Road Development; he was assassinated by an LTTE suicide bomber on April 6, 2008]. LW: In 2006, I went through many checkpoints without being checked. H.E. said: “Just go. Don’t identify yourself.” Later he told them: “I sent someone. You people couldn’t even find out who it was.” President: I pulled up the Defence people, saying: “If I can send a man there, what is your security?” I told them after several months: “He [Lalith Weeratunga] is the man who went there. Do you know that?” LW: To that extent he went. NR: To see the weaknesses? LW: No, to negotiate. President: To negotiate and see the weaknesses also! Then I sent Jeyaraj. He told them some home truths in Sinhala, which they understood. “You will be killed [if they continued along this path].” NR: Then came the Mavil Aru incident. President: That was the time they gave me the green light! NR: But you were well prepared by then, August 2006? President: Yes. But before that, they tried to kill the Army Commander. LW: In April 2006, when they tried to assassinate the Army Commander, the President said — this was in the next room — “as a deterrent, just one round of bombing, then stop it.” President: Yes, I said: “Just go once.” We were very careful. We did our best to find a way out through talks. LW: There was a whole series of negotiations, in Geneva and elsewhere. They [the Tigers] didn’t even want to talk. President: So these military operations did not come without negotiation or without any reason. But from the start, I was getting ready for that [the military operations]. I knew — because I had the experience, you see. We knew that they would never lay down arms and start negotiating. LW: In this connection let me tell you about the President’s interesting conversation with Mr. Solheim [Eric Solheim, the Norwegian politician and Minister who helped negotiate the 2002 ceasefire and was a controversial participant in the Norwegian mediatory efforts]. I was there, it was about March 2006. Mr. Solheim came to see H.E. after he became President, and said, in the midst of other things: “Prabhakaran is a military genius. I have seen him in action,” and this and that. The President said: “He is from the jungles of the North. I am from the jungles of the South. Let’s see who will win!” It was very prophetic. Later the President met Minister Solheim in New York and reminded him of their conversation on the “military genius,” the jungles of the North and South, and who would win. The East had by that time, in 2007, been cleared and the President said: “Now see

what's going to happen in the North. The same. NR: When did you first get an idea that the Tigers were vulnerable, that they were hollow in some sense, that you could hit deep? No underestimation President: From the beginning I had the feeling that if you gave the forces [the Sri Lankan armed forces] proper instructions and whatever they wanted, our people could defeat them. Because I always had the feeling that what they [the LTTE] were showing was not the reality. But in a way, we were wrong. They had numbers, they had weapons. They would have attacked not just Sri Lanka, they would have attacked South India. The weapons they had accumulated could not have been just for Sri Lanka! The amount of weapons our armed forces are discovering is unbelievable. And I knew when our intelligence was saying: "They have only 15,000 fighters," I knew it was not that number. I was not depending on one source. I knew that the LTTE had more than that. One thing I never did was to underestimate the LTTE. NR: So you say they were the most ruthless and most powerful terrorist organisation in the world. President: Yes, the most ruthless and richest terrorist organisation in the world. And well equipped, well trained. LTTE's final strategy? NR: What do you think was their final strategy? Prabakaran holed out with all the LTTE leaders and their families in that small space, that sliver of coastal land. It shocked the world. But what were they expecting? D.B.S. Jeyaraj, who writes for us, has a theory that they wanted to do a daring counter-attack. President: I think what they wanted was to escape. In the final phase, they were waiting for somebody to come and take them away. Otherwise, they wouldn't have gone there. Because they had the Sea Tiger base: that was the only place where they could bring a ship very close — even a submarine. They selected the best place for them: on one side the sea, then the lagoon, and there was a small strip. But then it was not they who actually selected the place: they "selected" it but the armed forces made them go there. The No-Fire Zones were all announced by the armed forces. After Kilinochchi, they were saying: "No-Fire Zones, so go there." So all of them [the LTTE leaders and fighters] went there. These were not areas demarcated by the U.N. or somebody else; they were demarcated by our armed forces. The whole thing was planned by our forces to corner them. The Army was advancing from North to South, South to North, on all sides. So I would say they got cornered by our strategies. LW: Kilinochchi was captured on the 1st of January 2009. And the whole operation was over on the 19th of May. So there was ample time [for them to get away]. Conduct of armed forces President: Yes, I can't understand why they had to fight a conventional war. Prabakaran could have gone underground. If I was the leader of the LTTE, I would have gone underground and I would have been in the jungles — fighting a guerrilla fight. They couldn't do that now because we, our Army, mastered the jungles. They were much better than the LTTE in this [mode of warfare]. Thanks to the Special Forces, the Long-Range Forces, and the small groups, the group of eight. That worked very well. And I salute our forces for their discipline. LW: For example, there was not a single instance where the Army was found to be wanting in its conduct towards women. President: That girl, when she surrendered — they were deciding, there were six or seven [LTTE women fighters] — she says in her statement: finally, two or three ate cyanide and killed themselves; and then two or three girls said, "all right, we will see whether we will be raped, whether we will kill ourselves or be killed by rape, we will take this risk." The schoolteacher, this educated girl, surrendered. Nothing happened. She can't believe this. She was paid by the government for fighting us! By the way, we are now going to get all the government servants [from the Northern areas that used to be controlled by the LTTE] and I am going to tell them: "Forget your past. You work there in these organisations, you can't just wait there. We are paying you." Now teachers must go and teach and others must go to their posts and work. And the money that they [the Tamil civilians fleeing the LTTE] deposited: on the first day it was 450 million [Sri Lankan rupees] together in the two banks, People's Bank and the Bank of Ceylon. And considerable quantities of gold. The Army has become a very disciplined force. Part III will follow Courtesy: hindu.com