
The Man Who Tamed the Tamil Tigers

Monday, 13 July 2009

Last Updated Monday, 13 July 2009

By Jyoti Thottam / Colombo Sri Lanka's 26-year civil war between the government and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) came to a dramatic end in May with a decisive military victory and the killing of Velupillai Prabhakaran, the Tigers' fearsome leader. President Mahinda Rajapaksa is the man who tamed the Tigers. Now his task is to heal a nation still divided by tensions between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils. In a rare, wide-ranging interview, Rajapaksa, 63, talked with TIME's Jyoti Thottam at the President's official compound in Colombo on July 10.

TIME: Prabhakaran had become practically a mythical figure in Sri Lanka. What went through your mind when you heard he had been killed? Rajapaksa: Thank the Lord. Thank the [Buddhist] Triple Gem. That was a gift. (Read "Prabhakaran: The Life and Death of a Tiger.") How did he die? We know that he was shot — that's all. I was not interested in finding out how he was shot, but whoever that was, deserved some credit. The most important thing is that he's no more. I would have preferred to bring him here and have a chat with him. I have never seen this man. What would you have asked him? Why he did all these mad things. [Laughs.] What else I can ask him? You came under fairly intense pressure from the U.S. and European governments to call a ceasefire during the final offensives against the Tigers. You resisted that pressure and, yet, these are some of your biggest trading partners. Are you worried about jeopardizing that relationship? I don't think they're so petty-minded. They're the people who encouraged us to defeat terrorism. We followed what [George W.] Bush said. We accomplished what he wanted: eliminate terrorism. They must give credit to us. We fought their war. We showed that you can defeat terrorism. Some foreign policy analysts saw the last stage of the war as a test case for the idea that the international community has the responsibility to protect civilians caught in the crossfire. It's my citizens. I am responsible for them. I have to protect them and get them out. If I allow some foreign country to come and do that, they would have killed most of the people. It is my soldiers who will protect my citizens. They are my people, they are my voters ... The international community must help the government if a government is elected properly by the people. (Read "Viewpoint: Obama Failing Sri Lanka Test.") What if an elected government is acting against its own people? Are you going to punish [all the] citizens for that, or the man who is responsible? Take me. Say that I violated all these human rights, killed people, right? Do you punish me, Mahinda Rajapaksa, or the innocent people of this country by sanctions, embargoes, travel advisories? There are ways of punishing me if you want. There, now by saying that, I will get punished. [Laughs.] Many people feel that the way you ended the war sets a dangerous precedent — that the cost in terms of human rights, in terms of civilian casualties, was too high. I reject that totally. There was no violation of human rights. There were no civilian casualties. If I did that, it wouldn't have taken two-and-a-half years to finish this. I would have done this in a few hours. These are all propaganda. (Read "How to Defeat Insurgencies: Sri Lanka's Bad Example.") The U.N. stands by its number: 7,000 civilian casualties. 7,000? No way. In the eastern province, zero casualties. I won't say there are zero casualties in the north. The LTTE shot some of them when they tried to escape. There is so much that is not known. Would you be willing to have a Truth and Reconciliation Commission? We must find out what has happened. The thing is, if you start something, I don't want to dig into the past. Many people feel that's exactly what Sri Lanka needs, to talk about what happened in the past. There must be a way, that it must not be felt that they will be punished again. Then you will have the north and the south fighting each other again, you can't have that again. I don't want to dig into the past and open up this wound. Sometimes a wound needs airing to heal. That is where the West is different from the East. What is your priority now? Over 300,000 people are in the IDP [internally-displaced persons] camps. The whole area is mined. We must demine the whole area, give basic facilities, water, electricity, roads, resettle them. (Read "The Tigers' Last Days.") What is your time frame? We have a 180-day program. That is our plan. In 180 days we want to settle most of these people. What would you like to accomplish before the next presidential election [which could be held as early as November]? At least 50% must be released. I would say 60%. Is that a promise? It's not a promise, it's a target. There is a sense of relief in the country now that the war is over, but there is also some anxiety among Tamils over what happens next. If you ask the IDPs, they'll say, we want to go back to our villages. If you ask politicians, they'll say, we want this and that. But yes, we need to give a political solution. Do you believe in some kind of self-governance for the Tamils? Don't say Tamils. In this country, you can't give separate areas on an ethnic basis, you can't have this. With the provinces, certainly there must be powers, where local matters can be handled by them. What if the people in the north want a model of governance that's somewhat different from the rest of the country? That I will not allow. The whole country must have a system. You can't have one system for the north and one for the east. There are already signs of development — new roads, new bridges — but I've also heard some concern that the roads, for example, instead of connecting Tamil-majority areas to one another, are connecting the Tamil-majority east to the [Sinhala-majority] south, making it easier for people from the south to do business there, to move there. Is there some kind of effort to change the demography of the Tamil-majority areas? No, but it's happening in Colombo. The eastern-province Muslims have come here. The Tamils have come here. You ask them, why are you coming here? Can I stop them? No. If anybody wants to come and live in any part of this island, it is the right of a man. The port project at Hambantota — that's a massive new Chinese project. It's a Sri Lankan project. China helped us. It's a commercial loan. Hambantota is my area, and it had been neglected for so many years. It's my duty, my obligation to develop that area. We must develop not only Colombo, but other districts too. What do you think China's strategic interest is in this port? I asked for it. China didn't propose it. It was not a Chinese proposal. The proposal was from us; they gave money. If India said, yes, we'll give you a port, I will gladly accept. If America says, we will give a fully equipped airport, yes, why not? Unfortunately, they are not offering to us. Is China becoming more important than India as Sri Lanka's ally? I don't see that. We are not thinking like that. India is our neighbor, our relation, our friend — we have a special relationship. For a small country like us, for development,

you need money, you need assistance. In this world, who can afford to give us money? We can go to China. We can go to Russia, or Brazil. Very few countries can afford to give. Japan is helping us a lot. Our biggest development partner is Japan. India is helping us. The last time I came to Sri Lanka was in January of this year for the funeral of assassinated journalist Lasantha Wickramasinghe. The posthumous editorial that his newspaper published was a very emotional piece. It addressed you. He was a good friend of mine. He had informed somebody to inform me [that he was in danger]. But unfortunately, I didn't get that message. I would have told him to go to the nearest police station. No one knows what happened. (Read "Dying for Journalism: Lasantha Wickrematunge of Sri Lanka.")He was very sure that it was the government. He wouldn't have called me if it was a government thing ... I hope we will know the truth. Otherwise, I am getting blackguarded and I am getting the blame. Courtesy: time.com