

ISAS Brief

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Fate of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam: From Civil War to Guerilla Warfare?

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The military debacle suffered by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) should not come as a huge surprise to any keen observers of the Sri Lankan developments. This is not the first time that the LTTE has been thrown out of its stronghold in Kilinochchi and is being pushed into the jungles of Mullaithivu. It happened 12 years ago under Chandrika Kumartunga's presidency and it also happened when the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) had to take on the LTTE during 1987-89. The myth of the LTTE's military invincibility was consciously built up and nursed both by Tamil and Sinhalese vested interests as well as the media.

On all previous occasions, the LTTE re-emerged, even more powerful and more determined, after being bottled up in Mullaithivu jungles. This may not happen this time. The IPKF and Chandrika left the LTTE in the jungles in the hope that a viable political resolution of the ethnic issue would emerge. The IPKF also had the constraint of the Tamil political factor to leave Velupillai Prabhakaran and his LTTE un-eliminated. President Mahinda Rajapaksa's regime, particularly its defense establishment, seems determined to 'eliminate' the LTTE. On previous occasions, the LTTE also retained its international credibility. While it has pockets of support in the western world even now, in the aftermath of 9/11, the LTTE terrorism has been discredited. The European Union has branded the LTTE as a terrorist organisation, and even the United States and India have decided to tacitly support Colombo's military operations. The LTTE's sources of diasporas funding and support have also depleted from what they were five years ago.

Organisationally, the LTTE's cohesion and resilience has been eroded considerably. It has lost some of its experienced leaders. Colonel Karuna Amman, who was the LTTE's strongest pillar in the East, defected in 2004 and joined the Sri Lankan side. Its principal strategist after Prabhakaran, Anton Balasingham died. Last year, Prabhakaran's confidant and the LTTE's political strategist, S. P. Tamilselvan, was also killed in Sri Lankan military operations. There are now reports of serious differences between Prabhakaran and his intelligence chief, Pottu Amman. These reports suggest that Pottu Amman is unhappy over Prabhakaran's attempts to usher in his son, Charles Antony Seelan, to succeed him. However, these reports cannot be

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taken on their face value as they could have been exaggerated or even wholly concocted by the Sri Lankan army to demoralise the LTTE.

Any assessment of the LTTE's remaining resistance to the advancing Sri Lankan forces must be based on the objective understanding of the reality on the ground. The LTTE has been drastically weakened but no exact estimate of its remaining strength is available. The Sri Lankan government's claims that no more than 3,000 of the hardcore LTTE cadres are left cannot be taken as reliable. There is confusion even on the area that remains under the LTTE control. The Sri Lankan army sources put this as about 30 square kilometers, but Sri Lanka's army chief himself admit that the Tigers have nearly 40 kilometres of coastline under their control. However, according to the Sri Lankan President, it is about 60 square kilometres. Although under tremendous pressure from the Sri Lankan army, the LTTE retreated from Kilinochchi on its own, in a planned manner (spread over a period of a month or so). The Tiger evacuated all the civilians under their control, leaving a 'ghost town' behind with full of land mines to increase Sri Lankan military casualties. The civilian population moved out of Kilinochchi to Mullaithivu may be used by the LTTE as human shield and a bargaining factor in the continuing conflict. While the LTTE claims the number of such people to be more than 300,000, the Sri Lankan President accepts that only 100,000 Tamils are now under the LTTE control. However, even 100,000 people are a large number to deter the Sri Lankan forces from running over the territory remaining with the LTTE. Ruthless killing of these people will amount to be an 'act of genocide' against which the LTTE has already launched an international campaign in order to build pressure for a ceasefire. The Sri Lankan government is trying to lure people out of the LTTE control but, so far, only about 1,800 people have reportedly gone to the government side since the fall of Kilinochchi. In their drive to 'eliminate' the LTTE, how the Sri Lankan forces will find a safe passage for these innocent people and clear the dense jungle of Mullaithivu from the thousands of hardened LTTE cadres remains to be seen. The Sri Lankan army itself admit that it would need at least a couple of months more in this operation, as the area cannot be bombed.

No one in the Sri Lankan security establishment is hoping to get Prabhakaran alive. The Sri Lankan army chief suspects that he may have already escaped but such speculation could also be to mislead and demoralise the LTTE cadres. Many times earlier, claims had been made about Prabhakaran's death and/or serious injuries sustained by him. The Sri Lankan navy claims to have sealed the Mullaithivu coastline but the LTTE has shown the capacity to dodge such naval surveillance in the past. The LTTE has 800 horsepower fast boats ready to whisk him away, as and when required, either to a South Indian or a Southeast Asian coast. In the case that Prabhakaran is cornered and is forced to take a cyanide pill, either his son, Antony Seelan, or Pottu Amman will lead the LTTE operations. However, the strong possibility is that, notwithstanding the already floated Sri Lankan speculations about Prabhakaran, he will command the coming guerrilla warfare against the Sri Lankan state with terrorist attacks. Colombo and its vicinity were being targeted even when the LTTE was retreating from Kilinochchi. Many of his hardened cadres will escape the Sri Lankan attack in disguise as 'innocent Tamils' under the human shield of civilian Tamil population, possibly to carry out guerrilla and terrorist operations in the unfolding dimensions of war. An Iraq-like situation with regular attacks on Sri Lankan forces in the territories gained from the LTTE seems like a strong possibility.

What the Rajapaksa regime refuses to accept is that the cause for the LTTE to live and bounce back, in one form or another, and under the leadership of Prabhakaran or anyone else, will remain so long as a credible political solution to the ethnic issue is not found. The international community, including India, has failed to persuade the Rajapaksa regime to be

responsive in this respect. With a decisive military victory over the LTTE, the regime may feel even less compelled to offer any such solution, leaving the potential for persisting insurgency.

Indian Foreign Secretary Shiv Shanker Menon's visit to Colombo last week underlined the urgency for a political solution, besides relief and rehabilitation of the Tamils trapped in the war zone. Colombo has assured India that a political package on the lines of the 1987 India-Sri Lanka Agreement will be worked out. However, there has always been a huge gap between Rajapaksa regime's promises and performance in this regard so far.

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