

Tamil Tiger leader's dream
of an autonomous Tamil
homeland in the north of
Sri Lanka never fulfilled

Obituary: V

TAMIL Tiger leader Velupillai Prabhakaran is dead, the Sri Lankan military says. State television made the announcement shortly after the military said it had surrounded him

in the north-east. To his followers, Vellupillai Prabhakaran was a freedom fighter struggling for Tamil emancipation. To his adversaries he was a secretive megalomaniac with a complete disregard for human life.

Under his leadership, the Tamil Tigers became one of the world's most highly-disciplined and highly-motivated guerrilla forces.

But in recent months they fought a desperate rearguard action as the Sri Lankan military inflicted defeat after defeat on them, ending their dream of a separate homeland in the north and east. The youngest of four children, Vellupillai Prabhakaran was born on November 26, 1954, in the northern coastal town of Velvetitthurai on the Jaffna peninsula. Described as a shy and bookish student, he became involved in the Tamil protest movement after being

angered by what he saw as discrimination against Tamils by Sri Lanka's majority Sinhalese population. He claimed he was influenced by the lives of two Indian leaders, Subhash Chandra Bose and Bhagat Singh, both of whom were involved in the armed struggle for independence from Britain.

In one of his rare interviews he also said that he was fascinated by the lives of Alexander the Great and Napoleon and had studied many books on the two commanders. It is believed that Prabhakaran founded the Tamil New Tigers in 1973 or 1974, although the exact date is unknown. It was just another in a series of pressure groups and organisations protesting against what they saw as the marginalisation of the Tamil people in the post-colonial Sri Lanka. In 1975 he was accused of the murder of the mayor of Jaffna, who was shot at point blank range while he was about to enter a Hindu temple. The killing was said to be in response to an incident in Jaffna the previous year when a police attack on a crowd led to the deaths of about seven people. A year later Prabhakaran's group was renamed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), commonly known as the Tamil Tigers.

The Tigers became a formidable force numbering upwards of 10,000 soldiers, including women and children. They were also well-equipped

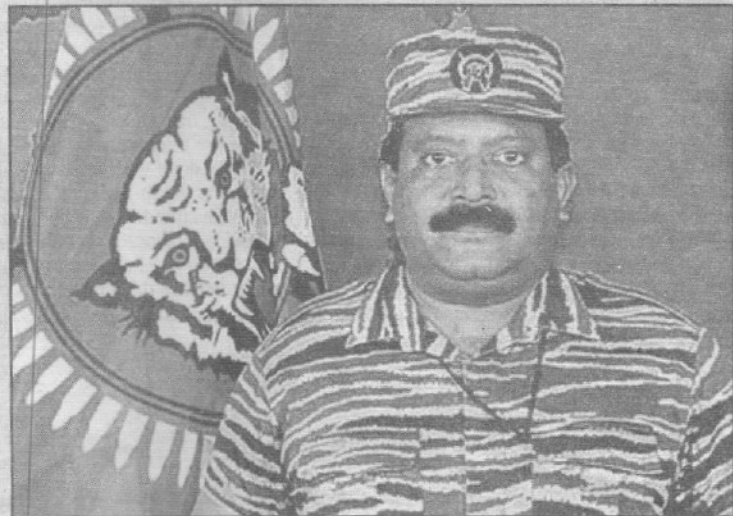
Always outnumbered by the Sri Lankan army, Prabhakaran led his forces in a series of guerrilla actions against a range of targets. He encouraged a cult of martyrdom among his followers which led to the first use of suicide bombings as a common form of attack, often against civilian targets

with weaponry funded by Tamil expatriates and, according to some reports, by sympathisers in India. Always outnumbered by the Sri Lankan army, Prabhakaran led his forces in a series

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...tice soon emulated by many of his soldiers. In 1991 he was accused of involvement in the assassination of former Indian prime minister Rajiv



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He was also reputed to carry a cyanide capsule around his neck to be swallowed in case of capture, a prac-

Gandhi, who was killed in a suicide bomb attack near Madras (Chennai). It was alleged Prabhakaran had personally ordered the attack in revenge for Gandhi's posting of Indian peace-

keeping troops to Sri Lanka in the mid-1980s. An Indian court signed a death warrant in his name and Interpol issued a wanted notice on the grounds of terrorism, murder and organised crime. Under his leadership the LTTE was branded a terrorist organisation by many countries and he was wanted by Interpol, the global police network for murder, terrorism, organised crime and conspiracy. He was a shadowy figure, constantly under threat of arrest or assassination.

At one of Prabhakaran's very rare press conferences, in 2002, he refused to answer any questions about Ghandi's murder, referring to it as a "tragic accident". Instead he repeated his demand for self-determination for Tamils and said he was prepared to die in the fight to achieve it. In 1996, more than 90 people were killed and a further 1,400 were injured when a suicide bomber crashed a lorry through the gates of the Central Bank of Colombo and detonated its cargo of explosives. Most of the casualties were civilians in what was then the Tigers' deadliest attack, with a number of foreign nationals among those killed and injured. In 2002 a Sri Lankan court issued a warrant for

Prabhakaran's arrest in connection with the attack and, in his absence, sentenced him to 200 years in prison. When the latest attempt at peace talks broke down in 2006, the Sri Lankan army launched a huge offensive against Tiger strongholds, eventually capturing large areas of what had been Tiger-held territory. In early 2009 Prabhakaran suffered a major reverse when the Sri Lankan government captured the Tigers' administrative capital of Killinochchi and there were rumours he had fled the country.

Velupillai Prabhakaran remained a secretive figure throughout his life, his movements between his various jungle hideouts carefully planned to avoid capture or assassination. At the height of its powers at the end of the 1990s and the early years of this decade, the LTTE controlled nearly one-third of Sri Lanka. But Prabhakaran was unable to translate this authority into his dream: an autonomous Tamil homeland in the north of the country. His single-minded determination in pursuit of his goal never wavered: he once claimed he had ordered his own men to shoot him if he ever gave up his demands for a Tamil state. COURTESY BBC NEWS