

By Fred Burton and Scott Stewart

Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake told parliament May 5 that he believes Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam leader Velupillai Prabhakaran is among the large group of Tiger militants trapped in a 4-square kilometer coastline area near Mullaitivu. The area around Mullaitivu has been the final focal point of a recent larger government military offensive aimed at restoring government control of northeast Sri Lanka and crushing the South Asian country's separatist rebels, who have controlled large parts of the region for the past several years.

The Tigers' battlefield losses have been compounded by the severe disruption to their formerly extensive financial network (primarily concentrated among the Tamil diaspora in Western Europe and Canada) after the European Union placed the group on its terror list in 2006. This led to tightened sanctions by Europe, the United States and Canada against the Tigers, as well as greater international cooperation in arresting Tiger smuggling rings. Some of the Tigers' main financiers have since been arrested, and many of their assets have been frozen. It takes a lot of money and equipment to wage a conventional war, and those resources have become far harder for the Tigers to come by of late.

As STRATFOR has previously noted, if Sri Lankan troops manage to crush the remnants of the Tigers' hard-pressed conventional military forces, the Tigers will have little choice but to give up on conventional warfare (at least for the time being). But the Tigers' separatist struggle is more than 30 years old and has been marked by great brutality on both sides. Because of this, there is very little chance the Tigers will simply accept defeat and fade into history. Instead, now that the government has the military advantage, the Tigers can be expected to continue their war against the government by melting back into the populace and resorting to guerrilla tactics and terrorism.

In many ways, this will resemble events in Iraq and Afghanistan, where a militarily weaker force melted away in the face of a more powerful conventional military force. The Tigers, however, have a far more experienced and effective terrorist apparatus than either their Taliban or Iraqi counterparts. This struggle will therefore remain bloody in Sri Lanka (and perhaps even abroad).

Background

The Tigers are battling for the creation of an independent Tamil homeland for the country's 10-15 percent Tamil minority, the dominant ethnicity in northern and eastern Sri Lanka. The Tigers are struggling against the majority Sinhalese Buddhist-controlled government, which has fought the Tigers in a bloody civil war that has lasted nearly three and a half decades. Over the decades, the Tigers have developed an extremely sophisticated paramilitary organization. This force consists of not only ground forces (complete with artillery and even some armor), but also

a sea wing that engages in arms smuggling and naval attacks against the Sri Lankan Navy - to include suicide boat attacks - a small air wing, and an elite force of militants trained to conduct assassinations and terrorist attacks known as the Black Tigers.

The Black Tigers became famous for suicide bombings (one of which killed former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991), and we are hard-pressed to think of another militant group that has assassinated as many VIPs, including several Cabinet ministers and numerous members of parliament, as have the Black Tigers. Last year alone, they killed a Sri Lankan member of parliament on Jan. 1, the minister for nation building on Jan. 8, and the highway minister on April 7. They also killed the Sri Lankan foreign minister in August 2005.

The Tigers' fortunes have fluctuated over the years. Several times they have brought large swathes of northern and eastern Sri Lanka under their exclusive control, only to lose them to government offensives, such as an offensive launched in January 2001. As mentioned, international pressures on their finances and logistics in recent years, plus the loss of the strategically significant Elephant Pass in January - formerly a key logistics hub for their resupply efforts and an important base for their naval efforts - mean the Tigers are now in an uphill battle for survival. Compounding the Tigers' woes, the government now is far better prepared, equipped and trained than it has been during previous military offensives. But despite being so hard-pressed and having taken such significant losses, there are no signs that the Tigers have lost the will to fight. They continue to hold out rather than surrender, and we have not seen news of desertions.

The Tigers' material losses will be more difficult to overcome than their loss of personnel. They should be able to find new volunteers (or conscripts) among Sri Lanka's Tamil population. Their ability to recruit should be aided by the Sri Lankan military's policy of forcing Tamils into internment camps, something the Tigers also have leapt on as an international propaganda opportunity. Tiger militants are well-trained and are also subject to rigorous political indoctrination. With rare exception, the Tigers prefer to fight - or take their standard-issue cyanide capsules - and die rather than surrender.

This willingness for self-sacrifice is best seen in the Black Tigers, which were early adopters of suicide bombing attacks and have been among the most frequent users of the tactic. The Black Tigers also have employed more female suicide bombers than any other group. (They used a female suicide operative in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination.) The Black Tigers reportedly have a waiting list of militants seeking to enter the unit -- suicide bombers reportedly are held in almost mythical esteem by their ordinary Tiger colleagues -- and Prabhakaran reportedly handpicks each member.

Insurgency and terror

As seen from Iraq, Afghanistan and any number of historical examples, it is very difficult to eradicate an insurgency that can blend in with a sympathetic local population. Doing so is even harder when the insurgents can exploit international borders to create a place of refuge. Although Sri Lanka is an island, it is located very close to the coast of India. It lies just a few miles from the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, an Indian state that, as its name implies, has a

substantial ethnic Tamil population. Some Indian Tamils are sympathetic to the Tigers, and the Tigers have established a sizable presence in Tamil Nadu.

Sympathy in Tamil Nadu for the Tigers came into view May 5, 2009, when a large group of pro-Tiger Indian Tamil activists blocked a convoy of Indian army trucks in the city of Coimbatore because they believed the trucks were carrying supplies destined for the Sri Lankan military. The activists reportedly damaged and ransacked some of the trucks.

Support in Tamil Nadu means that the Tigers can - and do - exploit the international border to their advantage. The Tigers use India in much the same way that the Taliban and al Qaeda use Pakistan. The Tigers' logistical and training infrastructure in India is especially important during times (like the present) when the Sri Lankan government is hammering them. The Tigers also have a long history of working with an array of other militant groups in India and the general region. This cooperation is not based on ideology, but rather on mutual benefit, such as bolstering the groups' ability to smuggle weapons and other goods.

Another truism about insurgency is that it takes far fewer resources to sustain an insurgency than it does to fight a conventional war. The amount of ordnance expended in a single conventional battle can sustain months or even years of insurgent activity, especially if the insurgents can acquire ordnance from their enemy during their operations. Conducting terrorist attacks requires even fewer resources than insurgent attacks; terrorism is a cheap and time-tested means of hitting a militarily superior foe. When properly conducted, terrorist attacks are the ultimate exercise of asymmetrical warfare.

For a militant group to effectively wield terrorism as an asymmetrical weapon, however, it must gain mastery of a range of tactical skills that we refer to as terrorist tradecraft. These skills include, among other things, the ability to operate without being detected, the ability to collect intelligence on potential targets, the ability to procure munitions, the ability to recruit operatives, the ability to plan effective strikes and the ability to construct reliable improvised explosives devices (IEDs).

Through decades of trial and error, the Tigers have developed all of these skills, as evidenced by their large number of successful assassinations. In fact, they have a record of tactical success that would make any jihadist group green with envy. The Tigers excel at collecting intelligence, and their female operatives form a significant part of their intelligence apparatus, since they generally can travel more widely than males can and do not tend to arouse suspicions to the extent male operatives do. Female Tigers who are already willing to serve as suicide bombers not surprisingly have been willing to use seduction to obtain information critical to their cause.

The group has also long demonstrated the ability to operate in the Sri Lankan capital, Colombo, as well as in other non-Tamil majority areas. And it has conducted scores of attacks against military, financial and political targets and civilian soft targets in non-Tamil areas. The group conducted five suicide bombings in Colombo alone in 2008, and several attacks against soft targets like passenger buses and commuter trains. The group also has a cadre of very polished and experienced bombmakers who make reliable and effective IEDs.

Perhaps most spectacularly, the Tiger air wing launched a 9/11-inspired airborne suicide attack Feb. 20, in which their two remaining aircraft were loaded with explosives and sent out after dark on a suicide mission to attack Colombo. One of the planes was shot down, but the other plane reached the capital and struck the 12th floor of the 15-floor Inland Revenue Department, where it exploded - a scene captured by a Sri Lankan navy infrared camera and posted to YouTube.

It is thought that the Inland Revenue Department was not the intended target, but that the plane was hit by anti-aircraft fire and accidentally struck that building. According to Sri Lankan sources, the intended target may have been either the headquarters of the Sri Lankan air force, which is next to the building that was hit, or the president's house or army headquarters, which also are close by. The decision to use the remaining Tiger aircraft in this type of suicide operation against the government in Colombo rather than risk losing them to advancing government troops is a prime example of the Tigers' mind-set.

Mayhem in the forecast

With the Tigers' air wing now apparently gone, further 9/11-style suicide planes are unlikely. The Tigers, however, will almost certainly plan more terrorist strikes. Such attacks will be seen as retaliation against the Sri Lankan government. They also will be used to hurt the economy (and thus the government's ability to finance its military efforts). And they will be used to force the government to divert troops from the northeast to provide security to other parts of the country, thus taking pressure off the Tamil heartland. The Tigers also have shown a limited cyberwarfare capability, which they can be expected to use to score propaganda points and wreak economic havoc when possible. In addition to assassinating VIPs and attacking passenger trains and buses, the Tigers have a long history of attacking villages and massacring Sinhalese Buddhist and Muslim civilians to foster a sense of terror.

We anticipate that small Tamil units will resume operations to massacre civilians, in particular Sinhalese Buddhist and Muslim civilians. The Tigers also probably will attack crowds of civilians and commercial centers. We also anticipate assassination attempts to be launched against military and political VIPs in Colombo, and against local/regional leaders and military and police commanders in the northeast. Attacks against passenger trains and buses also can be expected. STRATFOR sources in Sri Lanka advise that the Tigers are likely to strike at the Yal Devi Express, a train that runs from Colombo to Vavuniya and is of great symbolic value to Tamil-Sinhalese coexistence.

We believe there will be numerous attacks and ambushes targeting traffic on the A-9 road that leads from Colombo to Jaffna aimed at both military and commercial targets, blending terrorism and insurgency. Such attacks could involve ambushes and roadside IEDs, a tactic the Tigers have used with success in the past, such as with the roadside IED used in the January 2008 assassination of the minister of nation building.

Due to the long history of conflict in Sri Lanka (which has sometimes been fueled by external meddling), we do not share the assessment by some in the Sri Lankan government that the Tigers are all but dead. They may be severely damaged as a conventional military force - for a

time at least - but the group's cadre of dedicated, zealous militants will certainly spill a lot more blood in their quest for independence and vengeance against the Sri Lankan government.

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