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Sri Lanka Declares Victory Over Tamil Tiger Rebels

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Rebel Leader Prabhakaran Reported Dead

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa in an address to parliament May 19 formally declared victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebel group, ending a civil war that had been fought on and off since 1983. Rajapaksa's announcement came a day after the army reported that LTTE leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran had been killed during the army's final offensive against the rebels, which had taken place on a thin strip of land in Sri Lanka's northeast. [See 2009 [Sri Lanka: Key Events in Sri Lanka's Civil War](#); 2009 [Sri Lanka: Civilians Trapped as Army Squeezes Rebels](#); [Other Developments](#)]



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Dale Williams

The conflict was thought to be the longest-running insurgency in modern Asian history, and had claimed between 70,000 and 80,000 lives. It stemmed from tensions between Sri Lanka's ethnic Sinhalese majority, most of whom were Buddhist, and the ethnic Tamil minority, who were predominantly Hindu. Tamils claimed that since Sri Lanka's independence from the British in 1948, Sinhalese-dominated governments had enacted discriminatory policies, including making Sinhalese the country's national language, and denying Tamils equal access to university spots and government jobs. Tamils made up about 15% of Sri Lanka's population.

The LTTE had been formed in the 1970s to agitate for a separate Tamil homeland in the northern and eastern parts of the country, an area it called Eelam. At the height of its power, the LTTE held a fourth of the country's territory, and ran a shadow government with a separate police force, court system and political structure. It had been one of the only rebel groups in the world to boast a small air force and navy.

But the government deemed the LTTE a terrorist organization, a designation also officially imposed

by many other countries, including the U.S. The LTTE was thought to have pioneered the use of suicide bombers as an insurgent tactic, and had allegedly assassinated Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa in 1993. The group was also thought responsible for the 1991 assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, who as India's prime minister in the 1980s had sent Indian troops to Sri Lanka to intervene in the conflict. [See 1993 [Sri Lanka: President Killed by Suicide Bomber](#); 1991 [Indian Ex-Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi Assassinated at Election Rally; National Vote Postponed](#)]

A 2002 cease-fire between the Sri Lankan government and the rebels was officially annulled in early 2008, and Rajapaksa vowed to defeat the LTTE militarily. The army seized control of rebel-held territories in the east and north, and overran the LTTE's de facto capital, Kilinochchi, in January. By April, the rebels were trapped in a thin, peninsular strip of land on the Bay of Bengal that was separated from the mainland by a bog. The area had previously been designated a "safe zone" for civilians that was to be free from fighting.

In the last few weeks of fighting, as many as 50,000 civilians were trapped in a conflict zone no larger than two-and-a-half square miles (6.5 square km). (Population and casualty numbers for civilians were difficult to verify independently, since aid agencies and media outlets were barred from the conflict zone.) The United Nations called the violence being done to civilians by both sides a "bloodbath." But with an outright victory in sight, Rajapaksa repeatedly rejected international calls for a cease-fire. [See below]

Rajapaksa May 19 declared that his government had "liberated" the country from terrorism, and called for unity between the country's Sinhalese and Tamils. He said, "The war against the LTTE is not a war against Tamil people. Our aim was to liberate our Tamil people from the clutches of the LTTE. We must now live as equals in this free country." Analysts said chances for a sustained peace would depend on the Rajapaksa government's success in reaching out to disaffected Tamils and including them in the country's development.

The government May 18 had announced the rebels' defeat on state television, and sent cellular telephone text messages trumpeting Prabhakaran's death to people across the country. Spontaneous celebrations erupted in Colombo, the Sri Lankan capital, and other Sinhalese-majority areas of the country.

Prabhakaran's Death Challenged

Selvarasa Pathmanathan, the LTTE's chief diplomat, May 19 rebutted the army's claims that Prabhakaran was dead, in a posting on TamilNet.com, a pro-LTTE Web site that was often used by the group to issue statements. He said Prabhakaran was "alive and safe. He will continue to lead the quest for dignity and freedom for the Tamil people." However, the Sri Lankan army that day said it had identified Prabhakaran's body, and released video footage of his purported corpse, lying on a stretcher and surrounded by army troops.

Government officials said Prabhakaran had been killed May 18, as he and other top officials tried to escape the conflict zone in an armored van. In one account, the army had fired a rocket at the van, killing Prabhakaran and others. In all, the army said 18 top LTTE officials by May 19 had been found dead, including Balasingham Nadesan, a leader of the LTTE's political wing; intelligence chief Pottu Amman; Soosai, who went by one name and headed the LTTE's navy; and Charles Anthony, Prabhakaran's eldest son and the suspected leader of the group's air force.

The LTTE May 17 had appeared to concede defeat when Pathmanathan wrote on TamilNet, "This battle has reached its bitter end. It is our people now who are dying from bombs, shells, illness and hunger. We cannot permit any more harm to befall them...We have decided to silence our guns." The government at that point was already declaring victory. Rajapaksa May 14 had declared that the conflict would end in 48 hours, and the military two days later said it had seized full control of the coast of the rebels' tiny haven, completely surrounding them. Rajapaksa during a trip to Jordan May 16 said, "I will be going back to a country that has been totally freed from the barbaric acts of the LTTE."

While many Tamils viewed Prabhakaran, 54, as their defender against alleged discrimination and human rights abuses by the Sinhalese majority, he was also widely seen as a ruthless leader who had amassed power by killing and torturing potential challengers within the LTTE. He rose to prominence in 1975, when he personally assassinated the governor of Sri Lanka's Jaffna province. He was rarely seen in public, although he did reportedly emerge once a year to honor LTTE fighters who had participated in suicide missions or died fighting. He required that fighters carry vials of cyanide on their person, so that they could kill themselves when they were captured.

Some observers said Prabhakaran's unwillingness to cooperate with the government undermined various peace talks that had come and gone since 1983. Additionally, some said Prabhakaran was reluctant to join the political process over fears that he would be prosecuted for past crimes, including the assassination of Gandhi and others.

U.N. Says 265,000 Civilians Displaced

The United Nations May 18 said 65,000 Tamil civilians had fled the conflict zone in the preceding days, bringing the total number of those displaced by the fighting in the northeast to 265,000. The Associated Press May 16 had reported that 7,000 civilians had died between January 20 and May 7 in conflict-related violence, citing an internal U.N. document. Casualty numbers were expected to increase once authorities were able to determine the number killed in more recent fighting.

Most of the refugees were held in 42 government camps near the conflict zone that aid officials said were overcrowded and lacking in basic necessities. Many refugees were injured and badly malnourished. The army was reportedly frisking refugees on suspicions that some were escaped Tamil fighters, and refugees were not allowed to leave the camps, which were enclosed with barbed wire. Officials said refugees could not return to their homes until the area was cleared of land mines, but critics said the squalid conditions at the camps could further alienate Tamils from the government.

Both the LTTE and the government had been criticized internationally for their apparent disregard for civilian life, with the U.N. May 11 proclaiming that the situation in the conflict zone was a "bloodbath." The LTTE was accused of using civilians as human shields against the army's offensive, and shooting at civilians who attempted to flee. Meanwhile, the government was accused of indiscriminately shelling the conflict zone. The government April 27 had pledged to stop using heavy artillery and air strikes, but that promise was reportedly never fulfilled.

British Foreign Minister David Miliband May 12 said the conflict zone was "as close to hell as you can get." U.S. President Barack Obama May 13 condemned the attacks on civilians as "deplorable." The U.N. Security Council May 13 released a statement objecting to the civilian casualties.

As many as 100 civilians were reported killed when the conflict zone's only hospital was shelled May 12-13. Doctors were reportedly forced to abandon the hospital May 14.

Officials from other countries and the U.N. made attempts to broker a cease-fire, but Rajapaksa deflected those entreaties. John Holmes, the U.N. undersecretary general for humanitarian affairs, April 26-27 attempted to convince the government to allow a "humanitarian pause" in the fighting, to no avail. Miliband and French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner April 29 also visited the country. In a sign of Rajapaksa's increasing frustration with what he saw as international interference, Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt April 28 was barred from joining Miliband and Kouchner.

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