

Prabakaran in First Person

With Political Adviser A.S. Balasingham trying to dominate the press conference in a jungle clearing, LTTE supremo Velupillai Prabakaran fields questions awkwardly, gives no indication of relenting on his extremist goal of Eelam and fails to deny the LTTE's and his involvement in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination.

T.S. SUBRAMANIAN

in Kilinochchi

VELUPILLAI PRABAKARAN, leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, made it plain at a press conference on April 10 in northern Sri Lanka that he has not given up his demand for Tamil Eelam and that any solution acceptable to the LTTE and the Tamil people should be crafted on the basis of three core principles. They are: (1) recognition of the Tamils of Sri Lanka as a distinct nationality, (2) recognition of the Northern and Eastern provinces of the island as the traditional homeland of the Tamils, and of the territorial integrity of this homeland, and (3) recognition of the Tamils' right to self-determination.

Prabakaran made these observations in response to pointed questions at a press conference held in a makeshift structure at Kilinochchi in northern Sri Lanka.

SRIYANTHA WALPOLA

Velupillai Prabakaran and Anton Balasingham at the press conference in Kilinochchi.

He revealed that the focus of the forthcoming talks in Thailand between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government would be the formation of an interim administration in the north-east of the island. He insisted that Colombo's ban on the LTTE should be lifted before the talks could begin.



He expressed confidence that the talks would have "a different approach this time because the Norwegian government is taking part as a third-party facilitator. We, therefore, believe that the negotiations this time will be smooth to some extent."

In response to a question whether he was denying the LTTE's and his involvement in the assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, Prabakaran said: "This is a tragic incident that took place ten years ago. We don't want to comment further on it." Informed observers found it significant that the LTTE supremo, who is the first accused in the assassination case, did not deny his organisation's or his involvement in the assassination.

Asked about his reported instruction to his cadres to "kill" him in the event of his abandoning the demand for Eelam, the LTTE supremo said: "It still holds good."

SRIYANTHA WALPOLA

Mediapersons at the press conference venue.

The press conference, taking place in a surreal setting, lasted about two hours and 15 minutes. Prabakaran,



looking more portly than usual, was dressed for the occasion in a safari suit. It covered a wide range of subjects such as the prospects of the LTTE giving up the armed struggle; Prabhakaran's underground life; the LTTE's sincerity in the peace process; the ban on the organisation in several countries; its conscripting child soldiers; and its attitude towards the Muslims of Sri Lanka and the plantation Tamils.

The first question raised in the press conference was by *Frontline*. The question was whether Prabhakaran was prepared to consider an alternative to Tamil Eelam if it embodied an integrated northern and eastern province with substantial devolution of powers. The LTTE supremo's response was: "I don't think the necessity and situation have arisen now for that [a consideration of an alternative to Eelam]." He elaborated on this response: "It is our people who put forward this demand for Tamil Eelam. The people gave a mandate to the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) for this as early as 1977. We, therefore, with people's support, are fighting for Tamil Eelam till now."

On whether the time was ripe to give up his demand for Eelam and under what conditions he would give up his armed struggle, Prabhakaran responded: "When a solution is put forward incorporating the recognition of the Tamil homeland, recognition of the Tamils' nationality and their right to self-determination, and in the event of our people accepting it, we will reconsider our demand."

When a reporter asked him whether he thought that the Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe would come up with such a proposal, Prabhakaran said: "That is why we have put forward the interim solution. Our aim is that it is through the interim solution that the economic embargoes imposed on our people should be removed and arrangements made for our people to lead a peaceful life."

The LTTE leader met journalists in a village at Kilinochchi. The venue was a partially open hall with a low wall running on three sides. The hall had been built in a clearing. The press conference attracted international media attention in the background of a ceasefire that has been observed by the Sri Lankan armed forces and the LTTE from February 24. For two decades now, the LTTE has been waging a bloody secessionist armed struggle with the objective of winning Eelam. The ceasefire has raised hopes of a settlement to the ethnic conflict that has claimed tens of thousands of lives - of civilians belonging to various ethnic communities, thousands of Sri Lankan soldiers, over 17,600 LTTE fighters, hundreds of militants belonging to other Tamil organisations, and several political leaders.

As V. Prabhakaran approaches the venue of the press conference, LTTE security men belonging to the 'zero group' take position. These marksmen are equipped with upgraded AK-47 assault rifles, besides headphones to receive wireless instructions.

This was the first time in 12 years that Prabhakaran addressed a press conference. He last spoke to journalists, a handful of reporters, in Jaffna on April



1, 1990 - a week after the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) had pulled out of the Tamil areas of Sri Lanka.

A.S. Balasingham, the LTTE's political adviser who seemed to want to dominate the press conference, asserted that the aim of the press conference was to drive home the message that the organisation was committed to peace and a negotiated political settlement. This was in response to a pointed question. Balasingham observed that there was a lot of misunderstanding about the LTTE's position on the peace process and a negotiated settlement. "We, therefore, wanted the international media to be present here," he said, "so that we can explain very clearly and coherently what we stand for and that we are sincerely committed to peace. You must carry this message that the LTTE is for peace and a negotiated political settlement."

About 300 journalists from Sri Lanka, India and various other countries converged on Kilinochchi town on April 9. The LTTE put them up at various places there and at Mallowi in Mullaitheevu district for the night. On April 10, the journalists were woken up around 5 a.m. to be taken to a place called Vadakkachi where the LTTE cadres did a security check on them. This was thorough: pens were taken apart; pages of shorthand notebooks riffled through; audio cassette recorders and video equipment tested for hidden explosives; cameras and videography equipment weighed on electronic scales; skulls of journalists tapped; and heels of shoes poked. Nothing was left to chance, including earrings of women journalists.

The security procedures did not come as a surprise because the LTTE under the direction of Prabhakaran has conducted a number of assassinations and violent and terrorist acts over the past two decades. Among other things, the LTTE supremo is the first accused in the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, which took place on May 21, 1991, at Sriperumbudur near Chennai. Prabhakaran has been declared a proclaimed offender in this case and Interpol has served a red-corner notice for his arrest. India has been seeking his extradition from Sri Lanka to bring him to trial in the case but has not pressed the matter seriously in recent years. The LTTE was banned in India in May 1992 under the Prevention of Unlawful Activities Act and the ban has been extended every two years since then.

Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe after handing over to Norwegian Ambassador Jon Westborg the signed ceasefire document in Vavuniya on February 22.



Prabhakaran drove to the venue in a van around 5-15 p.m. and walked nervously to the dais. He swivelled his head, looking here and there, and up and down. He looked nervous for a few minutes after he took his seat. There was none from the LTTE's old guard to sit with Prabhakaran on the dais - except Balasingham and his wife, Adele. Senior cadres such as Natesan, the LTTE's former Jaffna Police Commissioner; Baby Subramanian; Lawrence Thilagar; and Yogi who would flank Prabhakaran when he used to meet reporters in Chennai between 1985 and 1987 were nowhere to be found. Sornalingam, his chief of security in Chennai, was not to be seen either. Yogi is reported to have been sidelined.

An entirely new LTTE leadership team sat around Prabakaran. The team included S.P. Thamilchelvan, who heads the LTTE's political wing; Karuna, its Batticaloa commander; and Paduman, its Trincomalee commander.

During the press conference, Prabakaran often gave halting replies. There were awkward pauses before he answered some questions. Prabakaran answered only in Tamil. When a question was asked and translated, Prabakaran more often than not consulted Balasingham on the answer and responded briefly in Tamil. The microphones picked up the consultations as well. Balasingham translated the responses in English. At times, the translation was a misrepresentation or an inaccurate rendering of what Prabakaran said in Tamil. Balasingham actively embellished his leader's responses, adding content, detail and elaboration in a way that suggested the translator wanted to control the press conference and the message put out to the external world.

If the LTTE leader's replies were any indication, political negotiations for a final settlement were very far from his thoughts. The formation of an LTTE or LTTE-dominated interim administration in the north-east and, as a pre-condition for that, the lifting of Sri Lanka's ban on the LTTE seemed to engage his mind now.

When a reporter pointed out that Wickremasinghe had said he would discuss anything but Eelam with the LTTE and whether the LTTE would go to Thailand with that kind of policy on behalf of the Prime Minister, Prabakaran replied: "No final solution has been reached as yet. We are going to Thailand only to discuss an interim solution."

Balasingham put a gloss on this by translating the reply thus: "So far as the demand for Tamil Eelam is concerned, the LTTE has not made any decision so far, whether to give up the demand or to accept an alternative because the negotiations have not yet started. We are going to Thailand to discuss the interim administration as proposed by the government."

At another point, Prabakaran said that it was in the talks in Thailand that the LTTE would take a decision on the interim administration's powers.

Asked whether he was prepared for any kind of compromise considering the enormous destruction of the Tamils' properties, Prabakaran tersely replied: "That is why we have proposed an interim solution."

Norwegian Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen (centre), who is on a mission to finalise the arrangements for talks with the LTTE in Bangkok, and Norwegian Special Envoy Erik Solheim with Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga on April 19.



Balasingham's translation of this was expansive: "You have seen the cities damaged and destroyed in 20 years of war. Kilinochchi and other towns have been greatly affected. We have undertaken this peace process to provide a dawn to our people and to give them an economic uplift. At the same time, if we are going for an interim solution as a compromise, it is because we have the high objective that these people should have a dawn in

their lives and that they should have an economic uplift. It is therefore for our people that [we are embarking on] this interim administration and these peace efforts."

Balasingham's rendering into English of what Prabakaran said about the Rajiv Gandhi assassination amounted to transcreation, not mere translation. When a reporter asked Prabakaran whether he was denying the LTTE's and his involvement in the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, Prabakaran's response was: "This is a tragic incident that took place ten years ago. We don't want to comment further on it." Balasingham's first rendering of this was: "I know it is a sensitive issue not [only] for you but for us also... because we want to have friendly relations with India. You are raising the issue that happened ten years ago. That is what Mr. Prabakaran says. What he is saying is that...'it is a tragic incident that happened ten years ago and we are, therefore, not in a position to make any comments at this stage'."

When pressed further whether the LTTE's involvement in the assassination would not come in the way of its request to New Delhi to lift the ban on it, Prabakaran, after a long discussion with Balasingham, replied: "As long as this case is alive, we are unable to comment on it."

Balasingham, however, put this gloss on Prabakaran's reply: "This case is going on. There are four persons who are condemned to death and they are seeking amnesty from the Government of India. At this critical juncture, therefore, we do not want to make any comments that might affect their status." (The Supreme Court of India had convicted and sentenced Nalini, her husband Murugan, Chinna Santhan and Perarivalan to death for their involvement in the assassination. On a clemency petition from Nalini, her death sentence has been reduced to life imprisonment.)

Balasingham showed annoyance when Indian journalists followed up with questions on the LTTE's involvement in the assassination. He accused some Indian journalists of having "come all the way" from India "to dominate the whole press conference". He said in Tamil: "Sir, a congenial, peaceful atmosphere prevails now. Our people need a bright future. You are digging into the dead events of the past. Please stop such questions for the present. It is a tragic incident. Don't try to dig into the past."

Balasingham hailed India as a regional superpower, the fatherland of Sri Lankan Tamils and so forth. He expressed the opinion that it would be difficult to find a solution to the ethnic conflict without India's support and sympathy. "As a race of people, we are Tamils and we have our roots in India. India is our fatherland. We have respect and love for India, and its people. So whatever happened in the past, we are not going to entertain unpleasant memories. We look forward to establishing new, friendly, constructive relationship with India.... So please don't ask me any such questions."

Balasingham said he had requested India to offer him a "venue" for two reasons. The first was logistical and medical: he had a serious kidney ailment and had undergone a kidney transplant. He would be "pleased" if India provided him with a transit passage to land in any of its cities for medical treatment. Balasingham added: "At least, they [the Government of India] will have to consider this for the sake of our people and the resolution of the conflict." The second reason was that he would have to fly to Sri Lanka to consult Prabakaran once the peace process got under way in Thailand.

Balasingham pleaded for India's "active participation" in the peace process. According to him, such participation was "crucial for the Tamil people because India is a regional superpower and we don't want to alienate or isolate India in the process."

The Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, Balasingham explained, requested the Norwegian government to play a facilitatory role because India was not taking an interest in the peace process. "At the same time, our intention is not to undermine or alienate or isolate India. We want India to play an active role," he explained.

Asked why he was so keen on having friendly relations with India, Balasingham said it would be difficult to find a solution to the ethnic conflict without India's support or sympathy. He said: "We do not want to have any unfriendly relationship with India because we have suffered a lot as a consequence of contradictions between India and the LTTE. So we want to renew our friendship and engage in a positive relationship with India." These contradictions had led to an armed conflict between the IPKF and the LTTE. He wanted India and the LTTE to "mutually forget" these bitter memories.

SRIYANTHA WALPOLA

At the press conference venue, the LTTE's photographic team.

PRABAKARAN'S mention of a mandate for Eelam given by the Tamil people to the TULF in 1977 was a reference to the 1977 parliamentary elections, which the TULF contested on the 'Eelam' plank. This was a sequel to the TULF adopting a separatist resolution at its May 1976 conference in Vaddukoddai in the Jaffna peninsula. The resolution proclaimed that the Tamils of Sri Lanka constituted a nation and had a right to self-determination. The resolution incongruously committed the moderate Tamil party to the "restoration and reconstitution of the Free, Sovereign, Secular, Socialist State of Tamil Eelam based on the right of self-determination inherent to every nation."



The three 1976 demands - recognition of the Tamils of Sri Lanka as a distinct nationality, recognition of the north-east as the Tamil homeland, and recognition of the right to self-determination of the Tamils - plus the grant of citizenship and other rights to the plantation Tamils in Sri Lanka formed the four "cardinal principles" that the Tamil parties to the two rounds of the 1985 Thimphu conference brought to the fore, triggering a brusque official Sri Lankan negative response.

When a reporter asked Balasingham to define his concept of self-determination, the LTTE's self-proclaimed theoretician answered that it meant "the right of our people to decide their own political destiny." He explained that the concept could also apply to autonomy and self-government. "If autonomy and self-government are given to our people, then we can say that internal self-determination is met to some extent," Balasingham observed. He, however, warned that if Colombo rejected the Tamils' demand for autonomy and self-government, they would opt for secession as a last resort. "That also came under self-determination," he asserted.

Balasingham went on to say that autonomy and self-government entailed two aspects in "an extreme course". One was that it meant "secession as a last resort." So if Colombo offered the Tamils "a form" of autonomy and self-government that recognised their right to their traditional homeland, the Tamils as a distinct nationality, and their right to self-determination, the LTTE would consider that offer. "If the government refuses to give us proper autonomy and proper self-government, we have no alternative but to fight for political independence and statehood," Balasingham declared. He added that the LTTE had faith in the Wickremasinghe government and pledged to work with it till a solution was forged.

Significantly, Prabhakaran said nothing suggesting that the right to self-determination could be abridged or limited to "autonomy" or "self-government" or "internal self-determination".

However, at another point in the press conference, Balasingham offered the opinion that the Wickremasinghe government was not capable of addressing the core issues and offering the LTTE a permanent solution. Balasingham said this after Prabhakaran answered a question whether Wickremasinghe would come up with a proposal comprising the three principles. Prabhakaran's reply in Tamil was: "That is why we have put forward the interim solution. Our aim is that with the help of this interim solution, the economic embargoes imposed on our people should be lifted and arrangements made for our people to lead a peaceful life."

Balasingham's transcreation of this in English was: "Mr. Prabhakaran says that we do not think that Ranil Wickremasinghe is capable of addressing the core issues and offer(ing) us a permanent solution at this stage... because you know that the executive's powers were vested in the President (Chandrika Kumaratunga, who heads the Sri Lanka Freedom Party) and his (Wickremasinghe's) powers are limited only to the Parliament. (Wickremasinghe is the leader of the United National Party.) It is because of that we are suggesting the formulation of an interim administrative set-up so that we can run the administration in the north-east and the LTTE can participate in the interim administration there."

Balasingham continued, "In the meantime, Ranil Wickremasinghe will have enough space to build up southern Sri Lanka economically. Thus, it will be advantageous for both the Tamils and the Sinhalese to work out an interim administration for the time being. Once the interim administration is established, we are prepared to discuss the core issues and negotiate for a permanent settlement to the ethnic question. But we think that Ranil's government is not politically stable or authoritative or powerful enough to take up the core demands of the Tamils and offer us a permanent solution. "

Prabhakaran gave an unusually long reply in Tamil when asked whether the Tigers were changing their stripes, considering that for close to 25 years they had waged an armed struggle but now seemed to be embarking on a new political path. The LTTE supremo's answer to the question was: "Our struggle began with peaceful methods. Our previous leaders waged a struggle using peaceful means to win their rights. Since their peaceful methods were crushed and chauvinism was let loose on our people, we were pushed into a situation where we had to take up arms. We were, therefore, compelled to take up arms. Yet, whenever opportunities presented themselves, we never lagged behind in adopting peaceful means to find a peaceful solution."

Asked whether the talks in Thailand would take place only after Colombo lifted the ban on the LTTE, Balasingham answered emphatically: "Yes. That is our position. We have told the Government and we have informed the Norwegians that de-proscription is a necessary

condition for the commencement of the talks.... We want to be de-proscribed properly. The provisions of the Prevention of Terrorism Act should be amended properly so that we can be de-proscribed and accepted as the authentic representative of the Tamil people and so that we will participate in the peace process as representatives of our people with equal status [to that of the Sri Lankan government representatives]. That has been our official position."

It may be recalled that Colombo banned the LTTE in 1998 after the organisation carried out a terrorist attack at the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha in Kandy.

As for India's ban on the LTTE, Prabakaran expressed this hope: "As far as India is concerned, we would very much like the ban on us to be removed. Whenever we get an opportunity, we will press India for this."

About the impact of the ban on the LTTE in several countries, Prabakaran said: "We believe that the Sri Lankan government's false propaganda is the reason behind the worldwide ban on us. We have, therefore, put forward the demand that the Sri Lankan government should remove the ban on us in the coming talks. In the event of this ban being removed, an atmosphere will be created where the countries in the world will remove the ban on us."

Balasingham "assured" other political parties that they would be allowed to function in the north-east and participate in the democratic electoral process, "whatever their policies may be."

At another point, while answering a question on the LTTE ruthlessly eliminating moderate and militant Tamil leaders, Balasingham gave an extended reply. He said he did not want to go into the past because there were contradictions between the LTTE and other Tamil parties then. However, all the parties in the north-east were now supporting the LTTE. There were some Tamil armed groups which the LTTE regarded as not political entities but mercenary groups. They carried arms and supported the Sri Lankan armed forces in their war against the LTTE. Under the agreement on a ceasefire between the Government of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, all these groups had to be disarmed. The situation now was that almost all the Tamil parties that contested the Parliamentary elections in the north-east were backing the LTTE. "So... in future there will not be any problem. We will allow the Tamil parties, genuine democratic parties, to operate in the North-East as democratic entities," Balasingham said.

On the allegation that the LTTE used ceasefires to re-arm itself, Prabakaran offered this witty observation: "Only in times of war do we get a lot of weapons. We get much less now." He added that it was during military campaigns such as the attack on the Sri Lankan Army's camp at the Elephant Pass in April 2000 that the LTTE was able to seize "thousands" of weapons.

When it was pointed out that he had told his cadres that they could "kill" him if he ever gave up his demand for Tamil Eelam, Prabakaran said, "It still holds good."

The LTTE chief denied speculation that the LTTE started talking on account of the U.S. action against terrorism in the wake of Al Qaeda's terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001. Prabakaran explained: "This [assessment] is wrong because we had already unilaterally declared a ceasefire for four months [from December 24, 2000] and we undertook goodwill measures aimed at peace. We had discussions with the

Norwegian envoy Erik Solheim, then we unilaterally declared a ceasefire and implemented it too. We, therefore, took part in the peace efforts even before these [September 11] incidents took place."

Prabakaran refuted a suggestion that he had agreed to observe the ceasefire because he was tired of leading an underground life and wanted to lead a normal life. "Don't you see our underground life?" he asked. "If our underground life entails hardship, we are prepared to face it. We are fighting for our fundamental rights.... We are fighting for the welfare of our people, not to enjoy personal comforts."

At Vavuniya on March 24, a member of a paramilitary group (not LTTE) laying down arms in the presence of religious leaders 29 days after D-day, February 24, when the ceasefire agreement between the LTTE and the Sri Lanka government took effect.

AFP



He reasoned it was not time for the LTTE cadres to remove the cyanide capsules they wear round their necks. "When our struggle reaches a solution, such activities will automatically stop," the LTTE supremo explained.

Prabakaran denied allegations that the LTTE was engaged in recruiting child soldiers. "We deny the allegation because we have stopped recruiting children for some time now. We integrate those who are above 18 years in our political work. We have plans to provide education to those children who are already with us.'

Reporters raised several questions about the LTTE's expulsion of Muslims from the north in 1990. Balasingham offered the assurance that once normalcy returned to the north-east and an interim administration started functioning, Prabakaran would invite the Muslims to return to the north. The Tamil homeland belonged to the Muslim people and the LTTE leaders never denied the right of the Muslims to own land in the Eastern province, Balasingham asserted. (The LTTE expelled more than 75,000 Muslims from the Northern province in October 1990 and they have been living as displaced persons in Puttalam, Kurunegala and Anuradhapura districts. There have also been killings of Muslims by the LTTE.)

On the plantation Tamils, Balasingham said the organisation was prepared to foster strong ties with them. The LTTE, therefore, had invited two Ministers, Arumugam Thondaman and P. Chandrasekaran, who were elected by the plantation Tamils, for talks with Prabakaran.

Prabakaran expressed hope about the current peace process and twice praised Wickremasinghe for his efforts to get the process going. "I am satisfied with the peace talks. As far as the Sri Lankan Prime Minister is concerned, he takes very bold and firm decisions. I believe that these will bring success to some extent to the peace efforts."

He had more praise for Wickremasinghe when asked how the present ceasefire was different from the ceasefires worked out with Sri Lankan governments in 1985, 1990 and 1995. The LTTE supremo's answer was: "A favourable feature [of the current peace process] is the

mediation of a third party. Besides, Ranil Wickremasinghe has taken some bold decisions." And turning to Balasingham, Prabakaran asked: "Has he not?"

On that note, the press conference in the jungle clearing came to a close.

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