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Sri Sabaratnam

Some members of the TELO had claimed that TELO was the first Tamil militant organization. One of TELO's songs contains the line: The first militant movement was the Tamil Eela Liberation Organization. This is not factually correct. The claim was based on the basis that TELO was the successor of the Eelam Liberation Organization (ELO) formed by the leftist group headed by Muttukumarasamy when it defected from the Tamil Ilaingar Peravai in 1973. ELO withered away after the Puloloy Multipurpose Society robbery in 1976.

Attempted Murder of Canagaratnam

The year 1978 saw heightened militant activity. The LTTE (still known as the Pirapaharan group) and the TELO were active in that year. The LTTE, which shook the country with the attempted murder of Canagaratnam and the murder of Inspector Bastiampillai, came into the open in April. Later, it blasted Air Ceylon's AVERO 748 aircraft and robbed the Tinnaveli branch of People's Bank. TELO killed police informant Thadi Thangarajah and Police Inspector Pathmanathan. The government responded with urgent legislation, "Proscription of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and other similar organizations."

On 26 January 1978, Pirapaharan travelled to Colombo by the crowded night mail train. Uma Maheswaran received him at Colombo Fort station. The chairman and military commander of the LTTE walked to the Tamil hotel, Ananda Bhavan, opposite the Fort Railway Station, where Pirapaharan took a wash. They ate their breakfast at Ananda Bhavan, and took the bus to Kolupitiya, where Potuvil Second Member of Parliament M. Canagaratnam lived.

Canagaratnam contested the double member constituency of Potuvil in the Ampara district as a TULF candidate in the 1977 parliamentary polls. The election was held on 12 September due to the death of an independent candidate. Canagaratnam was elected the second member next to Dr. M.A.M. Jalaldeen, the UNP candidate. Canagaratnam polled 23,990 votes against Jalaldeen's 30,315. Canagaratnam campaigned for a separate state and Tamil voters voted for him.

Canagaratnam was a landed proprietor and a long time UNP supporter. Jayewardene, keen to undermine the TULF claim that the eastern province Tamils was supporting the establishment of a separate state, decided to get Canagaratnam to cross over to the UNP. I got wind of the move on 18 December morning and met Canagaratnam in the old parliament. He confirmed the story and said he was due to cross over to the government the next day and he would make a statement explaining his decision,

I asked him: What do you intend to say in your explanation.

Canagaratnam: I have told that to Shanmugalingam, Premadasa's assistant. You ask him. He will tell you.

I knew Shanmugalingam. He was an officer in the Office of the Leader of the House. Premadasa was the Leader of the House. I went to his office and he showed me the draft of the statement. *Daily News*, in which I worked, broke the news on 19 December.

Canagaratnam, in his statement, gave two reasons to support his decision to cross over. The first was that he had trust in Jayewardene and he was certain that he would do justice to the Tamils. The second, the Tamils of the eastern province, though they voted for the TULF, did not support the establishment of a separate state.

Amirthalingam and other TULF parliamentarians shouted: Traitor.

The LTTE central committee that met on 22 December also decided that Canagaratnam was a traitor and such traitors should be 'taught a lesson.' Until then the LTTE central committee had passed capital sentence on police informants, policemen and politicians. Alfred Duraipappah was the only politician to receive that sentence. Though he was a former member of parliament, he was a mayor when he was assassinated. Attempts at the life of Thiyagarajah was made by the Thamil Manavar Peravai and an attempt to assassinate Arulampalam was made by Thangathurai's group. All of these politicians were from the northern province. Canagaratnam was the first member of parliament the LTTE central committee decided to execute. He was also the first from the eastern province.

Uma Maheswaran had observed the movements of Canagaratnam for about two weeks. He left home by car daily around 9 a.m. Uma and Pirapaharan went to Canagaratnam's house and waited outside the thorny hedge that surrounded it. One of them fired as Canagaratnam walked towards his car. He collapsed and was rushed to hospital. He survived. Doctors said he was wounded in the chest, neck and ribs. Canagaratnam told investigators that he saw two boys running away after firing at him. "A tall boy and a short boy" was what he said. Investigators later found that the tall boy was Uma and the short boy was Pirapaharan. Uma stayed back in Colombo while Pirapaharan went to the Fort station and took the train to Jaffna.

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Pirapaharan was able to go about openly, though the police had launched an extensive hunt for him, because they could not get any photograph of him. He had torn up all the photographs of himself before he left the house. His elder sister's wedding album was also torn. He had cut out his picture even from group photographs.

Canagaratnam, a diabetic, miraculously survived, but died three months later due to the impact of the shooting. The shooting led to two interesting controversies and two hilarious police mess-ups. The first and the persisting controversy was: Who fired at Canagaratnam. It is well established that Pirapaharan was an expert shooter. He never misses the target. Canagaratnam's shooting was shabbily done. So, Uma must have fired, according to one theory. The second possibility was that Pirapaharan fired the shots and Uma did not cooperate fully. Whoever fired the shots, the impact of the shooting was tremendous. The Tigers had come to Colombo, shot at a member of parliament and had escaped. The police was unable to explain that to an angry Jayewardene.

When annoyed or embarrassed, Jayewardene became spiteful. He used the media under his control to launch a public campaign against those whom he wanted to discredit. He either ordered the media bosses to initiate the campaign or got one of his members of parliament to raise the matter in parliament and then got the media to do the follow up. In this case, he got one of his men in parliament, Weerawanni Samaraweera, to raise the Canagaratnam shooting incident in parliament. Weerawanni did that on 2 May. He tried to impute that Amirthalingam was behind the shooting. He said the shooting occurred nearly a month after Amirthalingam called Canagaratnam a traitor.

Amirthalingam raised a point of order and Speaker Anandatissa de Alwis ordered Weerawanni to withdraw the statement.

Weerawani obeyed the Speaker, but challenged Amirthalingam to condemn the murder.

Amirthalingam said Weerawanni had created parliamentary history by asking an opposition leader to explain his conduct. But the government MPs shouted at him. "Any amount of shouting is not going to intimidate me or my party," Amirthalingam shouted back but meekly satisfied Weerawanni's demand, declaring that he and his party were concerned about the shooting and condemned it.

The police ordered a vicious crackdown and a special team headed by Inspector Bastiampillai of the CID was set on that task. When Bastiampillai learnt that one of the attackers was a tall boy he ordered the police to arrest Mavai Senathirajah of the Tamil Youth Forum Peravai because he was tall.

Bastiampillai also issued a poster containing the photographs of four wanted men: Uma Maheswaran, Nagarajah, Vamathevan and Kannadi. He was not aware that Kannadi had been killed in 1973. He got 100,000 posters printed and pasted in all areas where Tamils lived announcing a 100,000 rupee reward for their capture.

While the police was hunting the Tigers, Thangathurai's group , struck again. It killed Thadi [bearded] Thangarajah, a



A. Thangathurai

police informer on 1 April. He was a strong supporter of former Nallur member of parliament C. Arulambalam. Thangathurai wanted to kill Arulampalam who had voted for the 1972 constitution, but he lived in Colombo. Arulambalam, who entered parliament as a member of the All Ceylon Tamil Congress defeating Federal Party strongman Dr. E. M. V. Naganathan by 13,116 votes to 12,508 votes in the 1970 election, lost miserably in 1977 polling a paltry 1042 votes, securing the third place. He contested as a SLFP candidate. TULF candidate M. Sivasithamparam polled a massive 29858 votes, obtaining a majority of 28,137.

Thangathurai and Jegan (Ganeshanathan Jaganathan) went to Thangarajah's house at Kokuvil, called him out and shot him. Thangarajah fired back and injured the assassins in their legs. In a fit of rage, Thangathurai and Jegan killed Thangarajah's dogs and escaped.

The Murder of Bastiampillai

The shooting of Canagaratnam upset Jayewardene and embarrassed the police. The special unit of the CID headed by Inspector Bastiampillai, quartered at Jaffna police station, was specifically instructed to destroy the Thangathurai group and the Pirapaharan group. Inspector Pathmanathan and Sub-Inspactor Perambalam were appointed to assist Bastiampillai. Sinhala policemen who served in Jaffna during that time say Bastiampillai and Pathmanathan were efficient investigators who indulged in ruthless torture. They were bitter rivals.

Bastiampillai, through his informant network, got information that Pirapaharan's group was operating a secret training camp in the thick jungles close to the Madhu Church in the north-west Mannar district. He kept the information to himself and instructed Perambalam, police constable Balasingham and police driver Sriwardene to be ready to go on an important raid around 6 April midnight. He did not tell them their destination. They set off along the Kandy road towards Vavuniya in Bastiampillai's official vehicle, a Peugeot 404. They carried a Sub-Machine Gun (SMG), two shotguns, revolvers and pistols.

They reached the vicinity of the militant hideout as day broke on 7 April.

The police party halted the car alongside the Murungan-Madhu road when they spotted a footpath leading into the forest. They started looking for visible evidence. They had stumbled onto the correct spot. The main hideout was a few hundred meters inside the thick wood. Most of the LTTE central committee members were there. Uma Maheswaran, Nagarajah, Sellakili, Sivakumar, Ravi, Ganesh Iyer and some others were there. Only Pirapaharan was missing. Uma and Nagarajah were in the observation post on the top of a tall tree. The others were in the hut a few meters away from the tree.

I asked Uma Maheswaran in September 1987, after an exclusive interview for the *Daily News*, about the then on-going negotiations about the interim administration for the northeast, about the Bastiampillai shooting.

"Nagarajah and I were in the observation post. We saw the headlights of a car at around 6 a.m. It was traveling very slowly. It was unusual in that deserted stretch of the road. We felt suspicious. The car stopped near the footpath that led to our camp. We informed those on the ground. Chellakili took charge of the situation," Uma said.

Their suspicion was confirmed. They saw Bastiampillai and Perampalam getting down. "We almost froze. 'These rascals have come even here,' I whispered to Nagarajah. We passed the information to Chellakili." Uma told me.

Chellakili sent two of his assistants, not known to the police, to go along the footpath. They were in shorts and sarong. They tried to go past the policemen who stopped them. Bastiampillai wanted to know their identity.

"We're farm labourers," they said. "You are not involved in illicit tree falling?" Bastiampillai asked. "No," they replied.

"Then why have you put up the hut inside the forest?"

"Because there is a well with good drinking water."

Bastiampillai told them that they were from the Murungan police and they were investigation a complaint about illicit tree felling. He told them that he wanted to check their hut. The two took them along to the hut where Chellakili received them. Bastiampillai recognized Chellakili, but did not show it. Bastiampillai who carried the SMG with him checked the camp while Perampalam with his revolver went round the hut and inspected the surroundings. Balasingham, who carried the shotgun, kept vigil over Bastiampillai. Driver Sriwardene was standing blocking the footpath.

"Alright! Alright! We have to do our duty. You just come to the station and give us a statement. That's a formality. We will bring you back after it is done," Bastiampillai said.

Chellakili agreed. "They are boiling tea. We will drink that and go," he said. One of his assistants served Bastiampillai a cup of tea. Bastiampillai kept the SMG on a side and stretched his hand to accept the tea. Sellakili, a former Pirapaharan bodyguard, pounced on the SMG, hit Bastiampillai on his head with it and opened fire. Bastiampillai slumped dead. He turned the SMG around and cut down Balasingham. Perampalam was overpowered by the others and they caught the fleeing driver and killed him too.

Uma said, "Everything was over in a flash." He added with a smile: "Tamils had upgraded their armed struggle. They had used an SMG." He failed to add another dimension: An SMG snatched from the police.

Uma and Nagarajah came down the tree, pushed Perambalam's body into the well, threw the bodies of the others into the forest, and fled the camp, after burning it, in the Peugeot 404. The burnt shell of the car was later found in the Kilinochchi jungles. The bodies of Bastiampillai, Balasingham and Sriwardene were found highly decomposed after a wood cutter informed the police about some decaying bodies. Perambalam's body was hauled out of the well and his identity card recovered from his trouser pocket.

Police combed the LTTE camp. They found over 300 spent cartridges, a cut out of a head of a man used for target practice, stocks of canned food and cooking utensils.

They also stumbled on an EROS hide out where some boys were undergoing military training. They had no guns. They were training with sticks. Police gave them a sound thrashing and asked them where they had hidden the guns.

Bastiampillai's murder sent shock waves through the government. Bastiampillai, who joined the police as a sub-inspector in 1963, was in charge of the TULF desk in the CID and was an authority on Tamil rebel groups. Three weeks later, on 25 April, the LTTE came into the open. In a letter typed in its official letterhead, the LTTE claimed responsibility for the murders of Alfred Duraipah, police informant N. Nadarajah and nine policemen, including Bastiampillai.

The government could not ignore the LTTE any more.

The murder of the police party led by Inspector Bastiampillai and the claim of responsibility issued on 25 April 1978 brought the LTTE into the open and heralded the Tamil challenge to the Sinhala-dominated Sri Lankan state. Tamils were now ready to fight for their rights and not just agitate.

Next:

Chapter 15: The Ban, Gift of J. R.

To be posted on : October 20

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Chapter 14. The LTTE Comes into the Open"

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