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- [Previous Version Archive](#)
- [Original Version Home Page](#)

### Pirapaharan 2, Chapter 11 Indira Gandhi's Covert Track

By **T. Sabaratnam**

(Volume 2)

#### Training Militants

Indira Gandhi always called President Jayewardene 'the old fox.' Her assessment of him was that he could not be trusted. Her opinion of Jayewardene was based on the information given to her by her friend Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the lady who suffered most at Jayewardene's hands, and the facts provided by the newly formed super intelligence outfit, Cabinet Secretariat (Security), popularly known as the Third Agency.

Indira Gandhi knew that Jayewardene could never be trusted. She decided to deal with him through two different tracks, overt and covert. The overt track, as pointed out in the last chapter, was to offer India's good offices and to pressurize Jayewardene to work out a political accommodation with the Tamils. Indira Gandhi was told by Foreign Affairs Minister Narasimha Rao, who visited Sri Lanka and talked to Jayewardene and Foreign Minister Hameed, that Sri Lankan rulers were more keen in subduing the Tamils militarily than in reaching an accommodation through negotiations. Third Agency's Colombo operatives and its head, Rameshwar Nath Kao, confirmed Rao's assessment. Jayewardene's request for arms from the US, UK, Pakistan and China made these assessments definitive.

Kao, who was also the Prime Minister's Chief Security Advisor, told Indira Gandhi that any attempt by Jayewardene for a military solution would create security problems for India and political problems for her. The security problem would arise from Tamil Nadu, where emotion in support of Sri Lankan Tamils was intense. The call for Indian military intervention was strong and attempts by Indian Tamils to intervene by themselves could be made. Interference by the central government to prevent such intervention would erode her political base in Tamil Nadu, Kao warned.

More serious than these factors, Third Agency's analysts pointed out, would be the influx of forces inimical to India into Sri Lanka. They said,



Rameshwar Nath Kao

besides the US intelligence agency CIA (Central Investigations Agency) and British intelligence agencies, Pakistani and Israeli agents and military interests would intrude into the region. Analysts concluded that India's only option was to persuade Jayewardene to talk to the TULF and work out an accommodation with the Tamils and, if Jayewardene failed to fall in line, to pressurize him to do so by destabilizing the Sri Lankan government using Tamil militant groups.

Indira Gandhi accepted the Third Agency's double track scheme. She told the Third Agency to implement the covert program immediately after her third telephone call to Jayewardene on 17 August. India played up its overt action and kept the covert scheme a top secret. Only Indira Gandhi and a few of her confidantes knew about the secret plan.

The covert plan to train and arm Tamil militant groups had a definitive object. The role India wanted Tamil militant groups to play was to push Jayewardene to the negotiation table and no more. One of the top planners of the covert project told *Frontline*, the Chennai fortnightly:

Indira Gandhi essentially wanted to train Tamil militants because she thought that the armed struggle would be a weapon to make the Sri Lankan government to come to the negotiating table. The training was given to the boys not to behead the Sri Lankan government but to give a signal to Colombo that the Tamils had the powerful backing of India.'

Most of the Tamil militant leaders were aware of India's policy. Pirapaharan was very clear about it. The LTTE's theoretician Anton Balasingham told *Frontline*:

The aim of the Indian policy-makers was that we should carry on the armed struggle up to a certain stage to make Colombo come down from its perch and then we should go for talks with it."

Indira Gandhi instructed the Cabinet Secretariat (Security), the Third Agency, to draw up the plan to train and arm Tamil militant groups and implement the plan. The Cabinet Secretariat (Security) was called the Third Agency because two other

intelligence agencies were then functioning. The Intelligence Bureau (IB) was India's oldest intelligence agency. It had been in operation since the British rule in India. It operated in Sri Lanka from 1953. IB men were posted to Colombo as part of the Indian High Commission's diplomatic staff.

Indira Gandhi found IB inadequate to deal with the new situation that emerged in 1968 when Pakistan started training and arming Sikh militants. Pakistan, which had fought with India over Kashmir, was keen to destabilize India by helping the Sikhs to establish a separate state. Indira Gandhi told her security advisor, Rameshwar Nath Kao, to organize a new intelligence organization on the lines of the CIA and the British intelligence agency Force 136 to help meet the Pakistani threat. The second intelligence agency was thus created in 1968 as India's foreign intelligence agency. It was named Research and Analysis Wing (RAW). Its original task was to deal with Pakistan. Later, with the coming to power of Jayewardene and his policy tilt towards the US, RAW's attention turned towards Sri Lanka. RAW functioned directly under the Prime Minister. Kao was in charge of it. Its structure and operations were kept secret from Parliament. It was provided unlimited resources. RAW played an important role during the Bangladesh crisis in 1971. It trained many Bangladeshi guerrilla groups, including the powerful Mukti Bahini. Currently, RAW has grown into a formidable intelligence network with over 8000 men and women in over 40 countries. Most recently, RAW gained attention by providing the US with intelligence on Al-Qaeda and Taliban targets for the war on terrorism in Afghanistan. Maps and photographs of terrorist training camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan, along with other evidence implicating Osama bin Laden in terrorist attacks, were given by RAW to US intelligence officials.

RAW took over the coverage of Sri Lanka soon after its formation. RAW strengthened its operations in Colombo after India's war with Pakistan in 1971 over Bangladesh. Indira Gandhi realized that India's southern flank was open after Pakistan military planes used Katunayake to refuel during their flight to Dhaka and the US sent its fleet to the Indian Ocean. Since then India had kept a close watch on Colombo. And that watch was intensified after Jayewardene was elected to power in 1977, especially following his foreign policy tilt towards the US. That was the situation when the July 1983 riots broke out.

When the riots erupted RAW's chief agent in Colombo was Mathew Abraham, a deputy director of the agency. He was attacked by a Sinhala crowd who mistook him for a Tamil, on Monday 25 July, at Galle Road as he drove to the Indian High Commission which was then in Colombo Fort. His car was overturned and burned. He was severely assaulted. Mathew shouted that he was not a Tamil but an Indian. That made the mob to intensify the attack. Mathew was severely injured. He reported the incident to RAW headquarters in Delhi. RAW chief Girish Chandra Saxena submitted Mathew's report along with the report about the reactions to the Sri Lankan riots in Tamil Nadu at the top Security Meeting presided over by Indira Gandhi. IB's reports too were considered. Parthasarathy was also co-opted in that discussion.

The thrust of the discussion, a senior official at the Prime Minister's Secretariat told me, was the ways and means of defusing tension in Tamil Nadu. "It was primarily a damage control exercise. The Prime Minister wanted to safeguard her new ally, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MGR (M. G. Ramachandran), and her personal influence there," the official said.

Indira Gandhi telephoned MGR soon after the decision to train and arm Tamil militant groups was taken. She told him about her double track policy. She told him that, while talking to Jayewardene, they were going to train the Tamil militants. MGR was not happy. He told her the training and arming of Tamil militants would not satisfy the Tamil Nadu people. They are asking India to invade Sri Lanka, MGR told Indira Gandhi.

*Girish Chandra Saxena*

"Yes. We can invade. But what will happen to the Tamil people who are living in the midst of Sinhala people?" she asked.

Then she referred to Gamini Dissanayake's speech and said, "The Sri Lankan army will kill the Tamil people, especially women and children, if we invade. Tell the people this," she said.

Gamini Dissanayake told a meeting of the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU) in early August: It will take at least 24 hours for India to invade Sri Lanka. All Tamils will be killed within that 24 hours."

MGR thanked Indira Gandhi for her thoughtfulness and called his trusted lieutenant, Electricity Minister Panrutti S. Ramachandran, and asked him to launch a campaign on the line Indira Gandhi suggested. Panrutti has made reference to this incident in an article he wrote for *News Today*, a Chennai publication, in May 2000.

Indira Gandhi told the Third Agency to draw up a plan to put her covert track into operation. The Third Agency was not created to handle the Sri Lankan situation. It was created a few months before the July riots. It was formed in the beginning of 1983. Indira Gandhi created this new super intelligence agency to deal with the difficult situations that emerged in Indian states such as Punjab, Kashmir, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka. When the Sri Lankan crisis erupted, the Third Agency was asked to handle it. The Agency was headed by Kao. Shankaran Nair, Director, Prime Minister's Secretariat, and Girish Chandra Saxena, head of RAW, assisted Kao.

### **Sri Lanka Operation**

The three top men of the Third Agency - Kao, Shankaran Nair and Saxena - drew up the plan to destabilize Sri Lanka. They called it the 'Sri Lanka Operation.' The plan was to finance, train and arm Tamil militants. S.Chandrasekaran, Additional Secretary of the Cabinet Secretariat, a Sri Lanka specialist, was in charge of the Sri Lanka Operation.

தமிழ்த் தேசிய ஆவணச் சுவடிகள்

Implementation was made the responsibility of RAW. It created a Special Bureau to manage the Sri Lanka Operation. Romesh Shanmugam, deputy director RAW, who served in Colombo before Mathew, was attached to RAW's Special Bureau. Unnikrishnan was the head of the RAW branch in Chennai. Karthikeyan was the head of the IB in Chennai. Unnikrishnan did not bother much about the Sri Lankan Tamil groups in Chennai before the riots. He confined his contacts thereafter to Chandrakasan, the late S. J. V. Chelvanayakam's youngest son who fled Colombo after the riots, and some other Indian Tamil businessmen who had returned to Tamil Nadu. Karthikeyan cultivated friendships with the leaders of the Tamil groups.

It was rumoured that Chandrakasan was in touch with RAW even before going to Chennai. He was also in contact with the Tamil militant groups. He was close to Kuttimani and Thangathurai, the TELO leaders. He had appeared for them in court after their arrest. He had also developed a close relationship with Sri Sabaratnam, who succeeded Kuttimani and Thangathurai, after they were killed in Welikada prison.

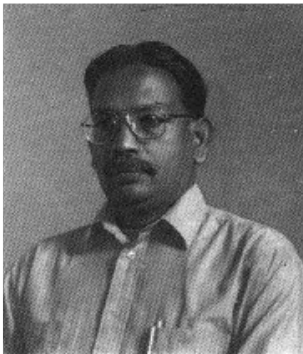
Chandrakasan, who was in contact with Karunanithi, was instrumental in forging a close link between him and Sri Sabaratnam.

Chandrakasan was also in touch with the other Tamil militant groups – PLOTE, LTTE, EROS and EPRLF. He was involved in trying to patch up the quarrel between Pirapaharan and Uma Maheswaran after the Poondy Bazaar shoot out.

Unnikrishnan sought the assistance of Chandrakasan to inform the militant groups of the Indian decision. Chandrakasan, naturally, informed Sri Sabaratnam first. The TELO chief seized the opportunity. He and Rasupillai met Unnikrishnan and informed him of their decision to accept Indian training. Unnikrishnan was pleased to have TELO as the first group. The main reason was TELO's pliability. Unnikrishnan and the RAW chiefs felt TELO was easier to manage because it lacked ideological rigidity like PLOTE or nationalistic commitment like the LTTE. RAW was reluctant to touch the EPRLF because of its Marxist beliefs and its links with Indian Marxist groups. EROS was not taken seriously because it was only a little more than a debating society.

*Frontline* asked Sri Sabaratnam in 1985 why TELO was chosen first. His answer was, "We do not believe in 'isms.'" He added in another interview that he told the RAW, "We will do whatever India wants us to do."

EROS, its top men Arudpiragasam and Shankar Raji told me, debated the Indian offer for a few days. Its London wing headed by Ratnasabapathy opposed the offer. It said the acceptance of the Indian offer would hinder the attainment of the group's objective of Tamil Eelam. The Jaffna wing wanted the group to accept the offer. Their terse message was: "Accept the offer. Otherwise we are doomed. "



Jaffna wing, abandoning the customary debating, wanted EROS to be realistic if it was to survive. The youth wanted to fight the Sinhala state. If we fail to accept the offer they would simply join the TELO and go in for training, was the Jaffna wing's explanation.

Arudpiragasam said they checked with the IB with which they had contact. It asked them to accept the training.

Arudpiragasam then met the Russian envoy in Delhi with whom the Lumumba University-educated civil engineer had maintained a close relationship. "I was told to do what India wants us to do," he said.

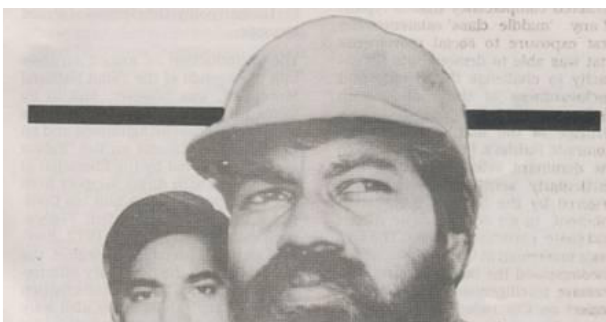
*A.R. Arudpragasam*

EROS then sent Raji and Chandran to meet Unnikrishnan and it became the second group to accept training.

PLOTE was the third group Chandrakasan contacted. Uma Maheswaran insisted that RAW contact him independently. He told others that he had no trust in Chandrakasan and that he was a CIA agent. Chandrakasan then sent Arudpiragasam and Velupillai Balakumar to persuade Uma to accept the training offer. Uma relented and joined.

### **Pondichcheri Meeting**

Pirapaharan and Pathmanabha were in Jaffna at that time. The LTTE did not have a political office in Chennai. Only Baby Subramaniam, Nesan and a few others were in Chennai. Several others were in their training camp in Madurai. Pirapaharan had taken most of the cadres to Jaffna. The LTTE's cadre strength at that time was below 50. Chandrakasan sent the message to Baby Subramaniam. Subramaniam passed the message to Pirapaharan in Jaffna.



Pirapaharan was furious. He felt that India was activating the dormant groups. TELO had not conducted any military operation since April 1981. EROS was a mere talking shop. A Jaffna academic told me, "EROS will not do anything and will not allow anyone to do anything. "

Pirapaharan made known to RAW his displeasure and his stand that RAW should contact him directly.

He also wanted someone whom he trusted to study the situation in Tamil Nadu. He telephoned

தமிழ்த் தேசிய ஆவணச் சுவடிகள்

*Pathmanabha (l.) and Suresh Premachandran (r.)*

Anton Balasingham who was in London and asked him to proceed to Chennai. In London, Balasingham's flat was then the centre of activity. Several expatriates who were on the fence till then pledged their support for the armed struggle. Funds poured in. A few volunteered to return to Jaffna and join the fight.

Balasingham and his wife Adele went to Chennai in the latter part of August. Baby Subramaniam, dressed in a white verti and a brown shirt, took them to Woodlands Hotel. From there Balasingham and Adele wrote the lengthy pamphlet "The Liberation Tigers and the Tamil Freedom Struggle." The aim of the booklet was to promote the aims, objectives and the political ideology of the LTTE and to generate funds. Balasingham and Adele moved to a two bedroom flat in Santhome in mid-September.

A few days after Balasingham moved to the Santhome home, Jumbo Kumar from the Tamil Nadu Intelligence Bureau Special Branch met Balasingham to find out what he was doing. Kumar then introduced Balasingham to the head of the Special Branch DIG Alexander who put Balasingham in contact with RAW which made the offer to train LTTE cadres.

Balasingham wanted Pirapaharan to travel to Tamil Nadu to seal the deal with RAW. Balasingham sent an urgent message to Pirapaharan to come to Chennai. He told him that unless the LTTE accepted the offer it would be left out and urged that it was essential to get closer to India.

This message was debated at depth by the LTTE's high command, which met at the LTTE's training camp in Vanni. A section of the high command was suspicious of the RAW offer. Was it a trick to arrest Pirapaharan when he entered India? The fact that Pirapaharan had jumped bail weighed heavily on their minds. They decided to seek further clarification from Balasingham.

Ragu and Mahattaya crossed over to Madurai to get that clarification. Balasingham and Adele went to Madurai to meet them. The meeting took place in a hotel at night. Mahattaya asked Balasingham whether it was safe for Pirapaharan to travel to Tamil Nadu. Balasingham told him that he was convinced that RAW was not tricking them. He pointed out that the jumping of bail was a matter concerning the Tamil Nadu state and the central government had no interest in that. The training offer came from the central government and Indira Gandhi was personally interested in it. Balasingham also explained to them in detail the Indian training program.

Ragu and Mahattaya were not convinced. They insisted that the training program was a ruse to get Pirapaharan to come to India. Balasingham then wrote a letter to Pirapaharan urging him to come to Tamil Nadu. In that letter he said the political climate in Tamil Nadu would not permit the police to arrest Pirapaharan. He requested Pirapaharan to place trust in his judgment and travel to Tamil Nadu.

Pirapaharan trusted Balasingham's judgment and crossed over to Tamil Nadu. A secret meeting was held in Pondichery and the only direct report about that historic meeting is from Adele. I quote from her book, *The Will to Freedom*:

So, in the middle of the night, Bala, myself and a couple of bodyguards piled into a car and drove the long distance to Pondichery for the 'secret' meeting between the LTTE leaders and the big guns of the RAW. At a specified time, the crucial meeting took place between Mr. Pirapaharan, Bala and RAW officials. Bala's and Thamby's smiling faces on their return to our rooms indicated that the meeting was a success.

Narayan Swamy gives additional information about the meeting. He says in his book,

RAW officials realized that Pirapaharan was justifiably angry over the training facilities promised to groups like TELO. When they met him, RAW officials, apparently to mollify him, brought along a gift for Pirapaharan - a 7.62 mm German Lugar pistol.

Narayanan Swamy, naturally must have obtained this information from the RAW officials who took part in that meeting.

P.S.Suriyanarayana, who interviewed Pirapaharan for his book *Peace Trap* asked Pirapaharan about the place and the time of the meeting. Pirapaharan confirmed that the meeting took place in Pondichery, but was not specific about the date. Suriyanarayana did not ask Pirapaharan about the discussions that took place and any agreements reached at the meeting.

My enquiries show that the meeting took place in late-September, by which time cadres of TELO and EROS had commenced their training. Shankar Raji told me that RAW told him to bring 300 EROS cadres to their training camp in Tamil Nadu in the first week of September and RAW had transported them in batches to Delhi, from where the training program was coordinated. Arrangements with other groups were also similar. The groups took their cadres to their camps in Tamil Nadu and RAW took them over from there.

The EPRLF was the last group to join the Indian training project. Earlier, RAW was reluctant to touch the EPRLF because of its links with the Marxist and Naxalite groups in India. RAW knew that Pathmanabha was critical of India. Pathmanabha had said publicly that India was a capitalist state and it would never permit Sri Lankan Tamils to establish a socialist state in the northeast. He had also expressed strong condemnation of the policies of the Soviet Union.

Suresh Premachandran, who headed the Chennai office, was worried when he learnt about the Indian training program. He asked Pathmanabha to travel to Chennai. He convinced Pathmanabha that, if the EPRLF failed to make use of the opportunity, it would wither away. He took Pathmanabha with him and saw Unnikrishnan. They took with them a few



copies of their publication *Eela Mulakkam* and showed him the series of articles the EPRLF had published in support of the Soviet Union. RAW officials relented and took the EPRLF into the training program. But they wanted the EPRLF to sever its links with the Indian Naxalite groups. Pathmanabha gave that undertaking.

### The Carnival

By the end of September all the five main Tamil militant groups had joined the training program. RAW gave them only two weeks to bring their first batch of trainees to Tamil Nadu.

"We were told to bring at least 300 youths within two weeks," Shanker Raji said. "We heard TELO was asked to bring down 500 cadres," he added.

TELO and EROS promptly sent the message to Jaffna. The news spread like wildfire. "India is going to train us," was the talk among the youth of Jaffna.

Thanks the riots, Jaffna was flooded with angry youths by the beginning of August 1983. Trainloads and shiploads of Tamil families, violently uprooted from their southern homes, were disgorged into Jaffna. They came from Colombo, Kandy, Kurunegala, Anuradhapura, Galle and even far-off Matara. They came empty handed, bereft of all their worldly possessions, but armed with anger and defiance.

"We have lost everything but definitely not our pride," a 22-year-old youth from the Kadirgamar family in Kandy told me when I met him in a refugee camp. "My grandmother is taking us to Jaffna where her sister lives. This is going to be my first visit to Jaffna. We are going in search of our roots," he said. Later I heard that he had joined the TELO.

Kumar Nadarajah was from Anuradhapura. His grandfather had settled down in the Buddhist holy city and practiced law. They owned a shop, a nice house and a large extent of agricultural property. "Fortunately we had relatives in Jaffna. We are going there to stay with them," he told me. He did not stay in Jaffna for long. He joined EROS.

Kadirgamar, Kumar Nadarajah and many more like them had never been to Jaffna before. They were born in the south among the Sinhalese. They lived there. Emotionally, they belonged to the south. They were violently uprooted and sent to the north, being told that they belonged to that part of the country.

The then Jaffna University Vice Chancellor Prof. K. Kailasapathy pithily summed up: "That violent uprooting imprinted in the minds and body of the Tamil people that they are a separate nation and their homeland is the northeast. That was the greatest contribution Jayewardene made to Tamil nationalism. Since then, for the Tamils there was no looking back."

Youths of the northeast, too, were equally indignant. For them it was wounded racial pride. "Sinhalese are attacking the Tamils and Tamils should fight back" was their general response to the riots.

"The mood of the Tamil youths underwent a sea change," said Prof. K. Sivathamby who was then teaching in the Jaffna University. "Before the riots youths admired the heroic deeds of the militants but were reluctant to join or support them. After the riots their reluctance vanished. They did not want to continue to be onlookers. They wanted to be participants," he said.

But the youth were not sure whether the militant groups were capable of waging the war against the Sinhala state without outside help. They had two models before them. The Bangladesh struggle succeeded because India supported it. The JVP insurrection failed because it did not have such outside backing. The Indian offer removed that uncertainty. And the floodgates opened.

TELO acted fast. It hired a mini bus and went round the peninsula shouting, "Those who want to fight the Sinhalese join us. We are taking our heroes for Indian training."

"There was a mad rush. We were shocked at the response," a former TELO member recalled. He said he was stunned when an entire GCE Advanced Level class from Hartley College offered to go for training.

EROS did not have the resources to hire a mini bus. It printed a leaflet and distributed it throughout the entire peninsula. It did not follow the TELO policy of



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"Whoever wants to come can come." It maintained some semblance of procedure. It looked for capability and commitment.

PLOTE, which entered the cadre recruiting race a little later, threw all its recruitment procedures to the winds. It opened up its membership to everyone. It had no financial problems. It was wealthy after the Kilinochchi bank robbery.

The EPRLF, which entered the fray last, was the poorest of the five groups. "We did not have even ten rupees," Ramesh Nadarajah told me a few years ago when he was with the EPDP. He said sending cadres to India for training was a costly affair. He related to me an interesting event.

Pathmanabha had telephoned the Jaffna office and asked it to send 1000 recruits. He told them not to worry about collecting the recruits because the Batticaloa office had promised to find them.

Ramesh said their worry was something else. They had to keep the recruits in Jaffna, feed them and transport them to Tamil Nadu by boat. All that cost money.

"To send a boatload of recruits, it cost Rs. 25,000. The boat hire alone was Rs. 15,000. Where to go for all this money? So we decided to rob."

The first robbery, he said, was at the Main Post Office in Jaffna. "We learnt that there was cash in the post office. But it was close to the Jaffna police station. But we had no option. Seven of us walked into the post office. We threatened the postmaster and the staff. Cash was packed in about fifty small parcels. We got the employees to open the parcels and hand over the cash to us. The operation took over half an hour."

Spurred by this success, the group hijacked a car a few days later and robbed Kokuvil, Pandatharippu and Urumpirai post offices. Next they robbed cooperative societies. With this money EPRLF sent for training everyone who was willing to join.

In Jaffna they still relate hilarious incidents that happened during those days.

For instance, one of the recruits in the TELO camp had the nickname '*Thenkai*,' meaning coconut. His mother had sent him to the shop to buy coconut for cooking. On his way to the shop he met a group of classmates who told him they were going to catch a boat to go to India for training. He joined them.

This is an even more interesting story. One of the new recruits waiting in the Tamil Nadu EPRLF camp to be transported for training in north India was found preparing a poster which said, "Long Live Pirapaharan."

The supervisor who found it asked the recruit, "Comrade, Why do you wish Pirapaharan long life?"

The recruit innocently asked, "Why? Is he not our leader?"

Some of the boys taken for training did not know anything about the militant organizations and about their rivalry. Lake House reporters from the Jaffna peninsula related to me several interesting stories. The *Iyakkams*, as the militant organizations were called in Tamil, would spread by word of mouth the time and place from which the boat would be leaving to Tamil Nadu. Boys would assemble on the coast at the designated places and run to the boats, which waited in waist deep water. They do not care to which group the boat belonged. To them all are fighting for Tamil Eelam.

One boy ran with his rubber slippers on. When he jumped into the boat drenched all over he found the slippers merrily floating away. "My slippers! My slippers!" he yelled. Mocking laughter greeted his cry.

Nadarajah bemoaned the decision most of the militant leaders had made to taken in everyone who volunteered to join. "They wanted to show themselves as big organizations and get applauded by Delhi. They were only concerned about numbers and not the quality," he said. And added, "Pirapaharan is what he is today because he did not fall to this illusive temptation."

Pirapaharan was the only one who exercised maximum care about his recruits. He did not relax the basic requirements for recruitment. When asked about his strict approach, his answer was:

"Fifty committed and disciplined cadres are better than 500 stragglers."

It is this policy of recruiting committed, active, daring youths absolutely loyal to him and maintaining discipline that has distinguished the LTTE from other militant groups.

[Index to previous chapters](#)

**Next**

**Chapter 12. Conflicting Objectives**

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