

SUNDAY



'If Jayewardene was a true Buddhist, I would not be carrying a gun'

EXCLUSIVE Interview with V. G. Jayawardene, former Prime Minister of Sri Lanka and



THE FACE OF HATE

Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale

CONVERSATION

'If Jayewardene was a true Buddhist, I would not be carrying a gun'

V. Pirabhakaran, military commander of the Liberation Tiger for Tamil Eelam, tells Anita Pratap

V. Pirabhakaran (30) is the chairman, central committee and military commander of the Liberation Tiger for Tamil Eelam (LTTE), an underground organisation founded in 1972 and outlawed by the Sri Lankan government in 1978. As the most wanted man in Sri Lanka today, Pirabhakaran carries a reward of over one million Sri Lankan rupees on his head. He is gentle and kind but as one who heads the most powerful liberation movement in Sri Lanka, he is ruthless and determined in his mission to free the Tamils of his country from the oppression of the Sinhalese.

Q: What made you opt out of a conventional system and spearhead a liberation movement which you knew would be outlawed?

A: The democratic parliamentary system, or what you refer to as the conventional political system in Sri Lanka, has always tried to impose the will of the majority on the minority. This system not only failed to solve the basic problems of our people but, in fact, aggravated our plight. For decades, the repression by the state has made the life of our people miserable. The non-violent democratic struggles of our people were met with military repression. Our just demands were totally ignored, and the oppression continued on such a scale as to threaten the very survival of the Tamils in Sri Lanka. It was these circumstances which led me to form our liberation movement. I felt that an armed struggle was the only alternative left to our people, not only to ensure our survival but ultimately to free 'our selves from the Sinhala oppression. I have always been aware that our movement would be outlawed. It is for this reason that we organised our movement as a clandestine underground structure from its inception.

Q: Could you elaborate on some of your personal experiences that com-

elled you to believe that an armed struggle was the only solution for the Tamils of Sri Lanka? Were you, your family members and friends, directly victimised by the discriminatory policy of the Sri Lankan government?

A: The shocking events of the 1958 racial riots had a profound impact on me when I was a schoolboy. I heard of horrifying incidents of how our people had been mercilessly and brutally put to death by Sinhala racists. Once I met a widowed mother, a friend of my family, who related to me her agonising personal experience of this racial holocaust. During the riots a Sinhala mob attacked her house in Colombo. The rioters set fire to the house and murdered her husband. She and her children escaped with severe burn injuries. I was deeply shocked when I saw the scars on her body. I also heard stories of how young babies were roasted alive in boiling tar. When I heard such stories of cruelty, I felt a deep sense of sympathy and love for my people. A great passion

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overwhelmed me to redeem my people from this racist system. I strongly felt that armed struggle was the only way to confront a system which employs armed might against unarmed, innocent people.

Q: At what point of time did you lose faith in the parliamentary system? What precipitated this disillusionment?

A: I entered politics at a time—in the early Seventies—when the younger generation had already lost faith in parliamentary politics. I entered politics as an armed revolutionary. What precipitated the disillusionment in parliamentary politics was the total disregard and callousness of the successive governments towards the pathetic plight of our people.

Q: How did you come to start the Liberation Tiger movement?

A: I originally formed the movement with a group of dedicated youths who sincerely believed that armed struggle was the only way to liberate our people.

Q: What was the reason for identifying yourselves as 'Tigers'?

A: I named the movement 'Liberation Tigers' since the tiger emblem had deep roots in the political history of the Tamils, symbolising Tamil patriotic resurgence. The tiger symbol also depicts the mode of our guerrilla warfare.

Q: When you decided to form the 'Liberation Tigers,' what was the reaction of your family members and those close to you?

A: As soon as the Tiger movement was formed, I went underground and lost contact with my family.

Q: When did you last meet your family members? Are they reconciled to your outlawed existence?

A: I have not seen my family members for the last 11 years. I do not think they regard me as an ordinary person leading an ordinary life. They are reconciled to my existence as a guerrilla fighter.

Q: After 14 years of struggle, do you think you are any closer to achieving your goal?

A: After all these years of struggle, I feel that we are advancing towards our goal. The July '83 holocaust has united all sections of the Tamil masses. There is a massive support for the armed liberation programme of our movement. This is certainly a step towards our goal.

Q: In what way have the experiences of the past 12 years changed you as a person?

A: These years of struggle have strengthened my determination and sharpened my vision.

Q: Till now what has been your most rewarding experience?

A: It is difficult for me to identify a particular experience as rewarding. The life of a guerrilla fighter is full of experiences: experiences of sorrow, happiness, frustration; each of which brings its own rewards.

Q: The experience over the years must have changed your outlook. What are some of the dominant impressions and convictions that you gained by virtue of this experience? Moreover, your experiences would have convinced you of the inefficacy of certain principles and theories in practical situations, while at the same time bringing home the validity of yet others. Can you pinpoint some of them?

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Q: After 14 years of struggle, do you think you are any closer to achieving your goal?

A: Twelve years of experience has convinced me beyond doubt that the armed revolutionary path we undertook was the correct one. The other liberation groups who criticised our armed strategy as 'terrorism' have now realised that armed struggle is the only way out for the emancipation of our oppressed people. Moreover the guerrilla warfare has been an effective form of struggle. Several successful guerrilla raids have convinced our people that the Sinhala forces can be defeated and freedom can be won.

Q: Who is your friend, philosopher and guide?

A: Nature is my friend, life my philosopher and history is my guide.

Q: How does it feel to be the most wanted man in Sri Lanka today?

A: An Irish leader once remarked that when the British indict a person as a 'terrorist,' it implied that he was a true Irish patriot. Similarly, when the Sri Lanka government refers to me as the most wanted man, it means that I am a true Tamil patriot. Hence I feel proud to be indicted as a wanted man.

Q: Which was the most frustrating moment of your life?

A: I cannot pinpoint such a mo-

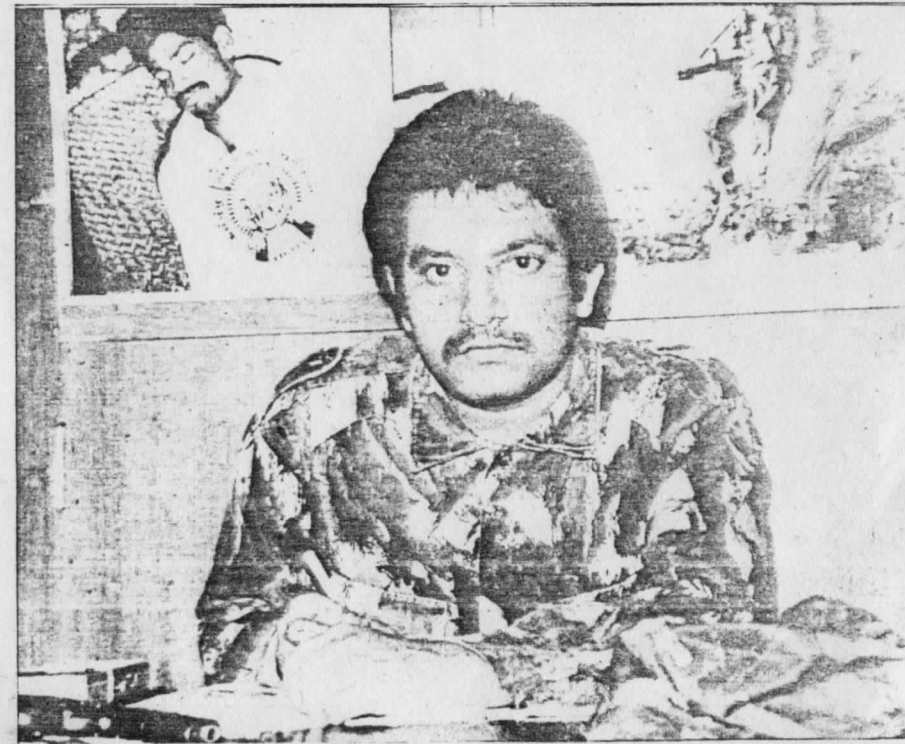
ment in my life. But the most frustrating aspect has been the betrayal of some of my trusted friends: those who pretended to be sincere to the cause, yet turned out to be self-seeking opportunists.

Q: How did the split between you and Uma Maheshwaran come about?

A: I do not approve the formulation of the question. In fact, the issue should not be viewed as a conflict or split between me and Uma Maheshwaran. It was a problem between an individual and the Tiger movement. I am in no way responsible for the problem. It was Maheshwaran who created the issue. A leader of a revolutionary movement should commit himself totally to the discipline of the organisation. If a leader violates the basic rules and principles, then there will be chaos and the organisation will crumble. Uma Maheshwaran violated the rules of our movement and as a disciplinary action he was expelled by the central committee. Being the founder of the movement and the person who appointed Maheshwaran as the chairman, I had no other alternative but to uphold the decision of the central committee.

Q: Today one finds that there are several rival Eelam liberation

V. Pirabhakaran, leader of the LTTE. On his left is a picture of Chelvanayagam who was killed in the July '83 ambush in which 13 Sinhalese soldiers were killed. On his right is a picture of Shankar. Both were close associates of Pirabhakaran and were killed in LTTE military operations



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groups. Invariably they work at cross-purposes. When the goal is the same, should not there be a unification process? After all, there is more to be gained by using your combined strength against the common enemy. In principle, are you opposed to the rival groups uniting?

A: I have clearly and explicitly stated that I am in favour of such unity moves. I even wrote to these groups on 5 September 1982 welcoming the idea and suggested that we are prepared to form a united front if all other liberation groups shed their differences and work out a common programme of action. But, unfortunately, these groups failed to formulate a common working programme. Instead, at every unity meeting they fought against each other and fell apart. The tragedy is that these groups have no sincere intentions to unite and there is a wide gap between their words and their deeds. I sincerely feel that these groups should set an example by forging unity among themselves rather than blaming the Tigers for their disunity. Once they unite we are prepared to join hands with them.

Q: Spokesmen of rival groups have told me that all except you are open to the idea of uniting. Is this true?

A: This is absolutely untrue. It is only a propaganda by other groups to undermine our movement.

Q: Are you alone in the struggle?

A: I am not alone. I lead a powerful national movement and a wide section of the Tamil masses support me.

Q: Do you experience moments of loneliness? And if you do, how do you combat it?

A: I have never felt lonely at any point of time. Loneliness is only a problem with those who are buried in their own individual egos. A true revolutionary transcends individuality and develops a collective, social consciousness. I live and struggle for a common collective cause.

Q: Do you have any regrets about not leading a normal life?

A: There are millions who, as you put it, lead a normal, ordinary existence. But we are fighting for a cause, for a noble ideal which gives us a profound spiritual satisfaction.

Q: Are you worried over the fact that most Tamil youths face a bleak

future in Sri Lanka?

A: The youths are fighting a battle for freedom. I foresee a bright future for them.

Q: Is it true that more and more Tamil youths are taking part in the liberation struggle?

A: Yes, more and more youths are joining the revolution under our leadership since they have realised that armed struggle is the only way to redeem themselves and their society.

Q: How would you defend your movement from being called a 'separatist' one, and that you all are not freedom fighters but 'terrorists'?

A: It is wrong to call our movement 'separatist.' We are fighting for independence based on the right to national self-determination of our people. Our struggle is for self-determination, for the restoration of our sovereignty in our homeland. We are not fighting for a division or separation of a country but rather, we are fighting to uphold the sacred right to live in freedom and dignity. In this sense, we are freedom fighters not terrorists.

Q: Would you rather die than be caught by the Sinhalese army?

A: I would prefer to die in honour rather than being caught alive by the enemy.

Q: The Liberation Tiger for Tamil Eelam (LTTE) staged the 23 July 1983 ambush in which 13 Sinhalese soldiers were killed. The ambush was allegedly the reason for the Sinhalese retaliation on innocent Tamils. Did you expect such a massive retaliation?

A: The July violence should not be assessed simply as a Sinhala retaliation for the guerrilla ambush. This view is a gross oversimplification of the event. The island has been plagued with anti-Tamil racial violence which erupts periodically over the years. There were violent racial holocausts even before the emergence of our movement. Violent riots erupted in Trincomalee a couple of weeks before the ambush. Therefore, the phenomenon of anti-Tamil racial violence cannot be traced to a single event. We are engaged in a protracted guerrilla warfare. There has been several guerrilla raids, several

ambushes, and we have killed several Sinhala soldiers and policemen. The July ambush was only a part of the warfare we are engaged in. It is incorrect to assume that one particular military operation has precipitated the entire violence. The July riots, you would have certainly observed, was not only aimed at the physical extermination of our people but it was also aimed at the destruction of the economic power base of the Tamils in Colombo. Our view is that the July holocaust was a pre-planned, well-orchestrated genocidal programme against the Tamils, carried out by the racist elements of the ruling party. Initially, these racist elements did attempt to put the whole blame on the Tigers. Then, suddenly they blamed the left parties for the riots. But in actual fact, it is the racist leaders of the present government who should bear the responsibility for this tragic loss of life and property of our people.

Q: Why did you stage the July ambush? There are various versions afloat. According to some, it was an act of reprisal as four Tamil women had been raped. Based on my investigations I felt that you had to prove a point to the Sinhalese army who were jubilant over the death of your close associate, Charles Anthony, the leader of the military wing on 15 July. The point, I guess that you had to assert was that the LTTE despite the loss of one of its ablest leaders, was still strong and capable of taking on the Sinhalese army. Is this theory correct?

A: There is an element of truth in your findings about Charles Anthony and the ambush. The attack was partly a retaliation, a punishment to the Sinhala army. But still we feel that the lives of 13 soldiers cannot compensate the life of a great revolutionary and freedom fighter like Charles. The ambush was also a part of the guerrilla warfare directed against the enemy.

Q: Do you think that the round table negotiations will lead to the formulation of a permanent settlement?

A: I am of the opinion that the round table conferences will not bring about a permanent settlement to the Tamil issue. Our view is based on the experience of several decades. The Sinhala leaders never made a sincere attempt to resolve the Tamil issue. The present negotiations will also meet the same fate. All the major Sinhala parties and the Buddhist organisations are opposed to granting any form of regional autonomy to the Tamils. They are even opposed to giving minor concessions. Hence nothing substantial will emerge from this conference.

Q: Do you hold the TULF (Tamil United Liberation Front) leaders responsible for retarding the liberation struggle? Do you view them as betrayers?

A: It is true that the opportunistic politics of the TULF is retarding the liberation struggle. They have never taken any concrete steps to further the struggle. On the contrary they give false hopes, create illusions, and try to keep our people in perpetual bondage. They entered politics only to further their selfish ends. They never had any sincere intentions to liberate our oppressed people, nor did they ever put forward any concrete programme of political action. They never expected that they would be caught in the storm of a liberation struggle. The flame of a revolution is fast spreading all over Tamil Eelam. But the TULF leaders are trying their best to smother the fire. In this sense you can term the TULF leaders as betrayers.

Q: Is it true that the TULF leaders are afraid to go to their hometown and stay there not because of the Sinhalese but because of the Tigers?

A: They are frightened not of the Tigers, but of the fury of the people who voted them to power on the promise of an independent state for the Tamils.

Q: Do you think that India's good offices will result in anything tangible?

A: India's efforts have given a positive hope to our people. But I do not think that the Sinhala racist government will utilise India's offer to resolve the problems of the Tamils.

Q: Ideally, what should India do in such a situation to help the Tamils?

A: I think that the government of India should recognise the fair and legitimate demands of our people and accept our right to self-determination.

Q: Would you suggest military intervention?

A: We have the courage, confidence and determination to fight and win our freedom. We should fight and free ourselves. But we do need India's support and sympathy.

Q: What is your personal assessment of President Jayewardene?

A: If Jayewardene was a true Buddhist, I would not be carrying a gun.

Q: What do you think is Jayewardene's intention behind holding these negotiations? Is he buying time?

A: There are several reasons behind holding these peace negotiations. Firstly, Jayewardene wants to appease the Indians. Secondly, he wants to restore the colossal damage the riots have done to the image of the country. Thirdly, it would help him to seek financial aid from western agencies. Fourthly, the President wants to buy time to build up the Sinhala military machine.

Q: Is President Jayewardene a prisoner in the hands of the hawks in his cabinet or is he acting on his own? Is he being pressurised by the Buddhist clergy?

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A: Jayewardene is acting on his own. He has supreme powers. The hawks in the cabinet and the Buddhist clergy are behind him.

Q: What is the role of the Buddhist clergy in Sri Lanka?

A: The Buddhist clergy has played a dominant role in shaping the political trends in Sri Lanka. They have played a crucial role in whipping up anti-Tamil feelings among the Sinhala people.

Q: Do you think that the Buddhist clergy is well on its way to establishing Sri Lanka as a Sinhala Buddhist nation?

A: Sri Lanka is already a Sinhala Buddhist nation and the Buddhist clergy has contributed a lot for this cause.

Q: Is it the result of the Buddhist clergy's chauvinism or is it the result of a natural alignment following the Catholic clergy's association with the Tamils?

A: The Buddhist clergy's chauvinism has played a significant role in the establishment of a racist state system. Sections of the Tamil Catholic clergy sympathise with the Tamil cause, but the Sinhala Catholic clergy displays strong Sinhala national chauvinism and are opposed to the Tamil demands.

Q: Do you have ties with other liberation movements of the world? Which are the organisations who provide training and arms to the LTTE?

A: We have ties with other world liberation movements. I cannot answer the second part of your question.

Q: Which country in the world has proved to be most sympathetic to your cause?

A: I do not wish to comment on this matter.

Q: What is your ideological commitment?

A: Revolutionary socialism.

Q: Do you expect attacks on the Tamils in the future?

A: Yes, I do. The forces of racism and fascism are actively working against the Tamils in Trincomalee and Vavuniya. Tamils will never be safe until they establish an indepen-

dent state of Tamil Eelam with a powerful patriotic army to protect their life and property.

Q: Is it true that Israelis are training Sinhalese army men on the techniques of anti-guerrilla warfare?

A: So far we haven't got any confirmed reports about the presence of Israeli military experts in Sri Lanka. If the reports are true I won't be surprised. Sri Lanka is turning into a base for US imperialism and its agents. Whoever the trainers are or whatever their expertise may be, the Sinhala army cannot crush the will and determination of the Tigers. We have a great moral power, a supreme sense of sacrifice, and a noble cause.

Q: What is your reaction to the alleged heavy induction of arms and ammunition from the United States to Sri Lanka?

A: Induction of US arms is not only a threat to the Tamil freedom movement but also to India's national security. America's objective, as you will certainly be aware, is not simply confined to helping the Sri Lankan army to crush the Tamil liberation struggle. Their ultimate aim is to secure a naval base at Trincomalee. Such a happening will convert the Indian Ocean into a war zone, and will increase the tension prevalent in the region.

Q: If and when Eelam is achieved, what sort of a nation do you conceive it to be?

A: Tamil Eelam will be a socialist state. By socialism I mean an egalitarian society where human freedom and individual liberties will be guaranteed, where all forms of oppression and exploitation will be abolished. It will be a free society where our people will have maximum opportunity to develop their economy and promote their culture. Tamil Eelam will be a neutral state, committed to non-alignment and friendly to India, respecting her regional policies, particularly the policy of making the Indian Ocean a zone of peace.

Q: In your estimate, how long will it take to achieve this Eelam?

A: There cannot be a blueprint or a time limit for a freedom struggle. Everything depends on the situation in our homeland and happenings on the international scene.

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dent state of Tamil Eelam with a powerful patriotic army to protect their life and property.

Q: Is it true that Israelis are training Sinhalese army men on the techniques of anti-guerrilla warfare?

A: So far we haven't got any confirmed reports about the presence of Israeli military experts in Sri Lanka. If the reports are true I won't be surprised. Sri Lanka is turning into a base for US imperialism and its agents. Whoever the trainers are or whatever their expertise may be, the Sinhala army cannot crush the will and determination of the Tigers. We have a great moral power, a supreme sense of sacrifice, and a noble cause.

Q: What is your reaction to the alleged heavy induction of arms and ammunition from the United States to Sri Lanka?

A: Induction of US arms is not only a threat to the Tamil freedom movement but also to India's national security. America's objective, as you will certainly be aware, is not simply confined to helping the Sri Lankan army to crush the Tamil liberation struggle. Their ultimate aim is to secure a naval base at Trincomalee. Such a happening will convert the Indian Ocean into a war zone, and will increase the tension prevalent in the region.

Q: If and when Eelam is achieved, what sort of a nation do you conceive it to be?

A: Tamil Eelam will be a socialist state. By socialism I mean an egalitarian society where human freedom and individual liberties will be guaranteed, where all forms of oppression and exploitation will be abolished. It will be a free society where our people will have maximum opportunity to develop their economy and promote their culture. Tamil Eelam will be a neutral state, committed to non-alignment and friendly to India, respecting her regional policies, particularly the policy of making the Indian Ocean a zone of peace.

Q: In your estimate, how long will it take to achieve this Eelam?

A: There cannot be a blueprint or a time limit for a freedom struggle. Everything depends on the situation in our homeland and happenings on the international scene.