

Losing patience with independence fight. (1993, November 16). *The Globe and mail.*



Teen-age members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam receive training at a camp near Jaffna.

(ROBERT ADAMS/Associated Press)

SRI LANKA / Many Tamils support the rebels, but life has become difficult on the Jaffna Peninsula.

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Losing patience with independence fight

BY DEXTER CRUEZ
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Jaffna, Sri Lanka

AFTER 10 years of guerrilla warfare, life has become so grim on the Jaffna Peninsula that some Tamils are losing patience with the rebel army fighting for their independence.

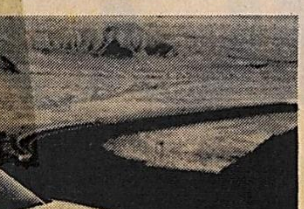
A few years ago, Tamils were enthusiastic about the war and supported the rebels. Now, some civilians even stop visiting reporters in the street to complain.

A farmer said: "The Tigers take part of our produce, calling it a tax. What we grow is so little and parting with anything is so difficult."

In the words of a shopkeeper, "We are caught between the government and the Tigers, who believe in a logic only they can understand."

Both requested anonymity, for fear of reprisals.

Newspapers censor themselves. They never criticize the Tigers — the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam — and carry every statement the rebels provide. The Tigers also have their own radio and television stations.



"We feel the Tigers are fighting a legitimate freedom struggle, but this does not mean that we approve of everything they say and do," said John Ambalawana, the Anglican bishop in Jaffna.

The peninsula is surrounded by government soldiers and ships. Warplanes fly overhead, sometimes dropping bombs on villages.

Last Thursday, the Tamil Tigers overran a base on the southern shore of Jaffna Lagoon.

The four-day battle for the Pooneryn army and navy base was the largest battle of the decade-old war. On Sunday, the rebels withdrew and the army recaptured the base, but more than 1,000 combatants were believed killed, about half on each side.

The Tigers had been preparing for a counterstrike since a government offensive last month in which 500 rebels, soldiers and civilians were killed. In Jaffna, the Tigers used posters, newspaper ads and street dramas to recruit young fighters.

"The future is gloomy, the army is at our door," Anton Balasingham, spokesman for the rebels, said in an interview a few days before the latest offensive. "We are mobilizing the entire Tamil nation for war."

Beat Schweizer, who works for the International Committee of the Red Cross in Jaffna, said the people are under "tremendous pressure" from both government forces and the Tigers.

Analysts and Western diplomats say both sides are getting ready for

major battles next year.

"We are on the eve of the decisive stage of the war," said Dayan Jayatilake, director of the government-financed Institute of Policy Studies in Colombo, capital of the island off the tip of India.

"Next year's battles will either give one side a victory or make both sides so punch-drunk they stagger to the negotiating table."

Sri Lanka's Tamil minority endured decades of discrimination from the Sinhalese majority before the insurrection, which has claimed more than 18,000 lives, began in 1983.

Many Tamil civilians still support the rebels, who seek an independent state in northern and eastern Sri Lanka, but life has become very difficult on the Jaffna Peninsula.

A few journalists based in Colombo reached the peninsula on a Red Cross ferry to the rebel-held port of Point Pedro and were taken to Jaffna in a Red Cross jeep. A Tiger vehicle returned them to the port several days later.

Scars of battle are everywhere: bombed-out buildings, destroyed automobiles, craters left by artillery shells. Drawings of dead rebels line walls along the roads, and 250,000 of the area's 800,000 people live in refugee camps.

Depression and other stress-related ills are widespread. Many farms no longer function and food prices have soared. An embargo of 48 items the government says might benefit the rebels includes even toys,

chocolate and candles.

There has been no electricity since 1990. People run their radios with bicycle-powered generators because there are no batteries either. What few motor vehicles the rebels operate use a fuel concocted from vegetable oil and kerosene. Most transport in Jaffna is by rickshaw and bicycles.

The rebels have done their own part to make life difficult.

They operate prison camps that some human-rights groups have likened to those of the Nazis. But the Tigers claim to hold only 30 to 40 people who were caught acting as government informants.

About 10 per cent of the 11,000 tonnes of dry food the government ships to Jaffna's civilians every month is taken by the rebels, according to Karthigasu Manikawasaker, chief government administrator in the region.

Tiger tax collectors skim 10 per cent of the profits of small businesses. Larger firms pay fixed monthly assessments whether they made profits or not. A hotel reported paying the equivalent of \$400 a month, and a photo-developing store \$275.

Tamils who want to leave the peninsula must risk their lives by riding small boats at night across the lagoon, which the government closed a year ago. Navy gunboats and soldiers on shore have killed at least 300 people who tried to flee.

"This is like a prison where you cannot leave without being shot," Bishop Ambalawana said.