


Tamils on mission to rebrand Tigers

But with no presence inside Sri Lanka, and a wanted arms smuggler as leader, defeated rebels face an uphill battle

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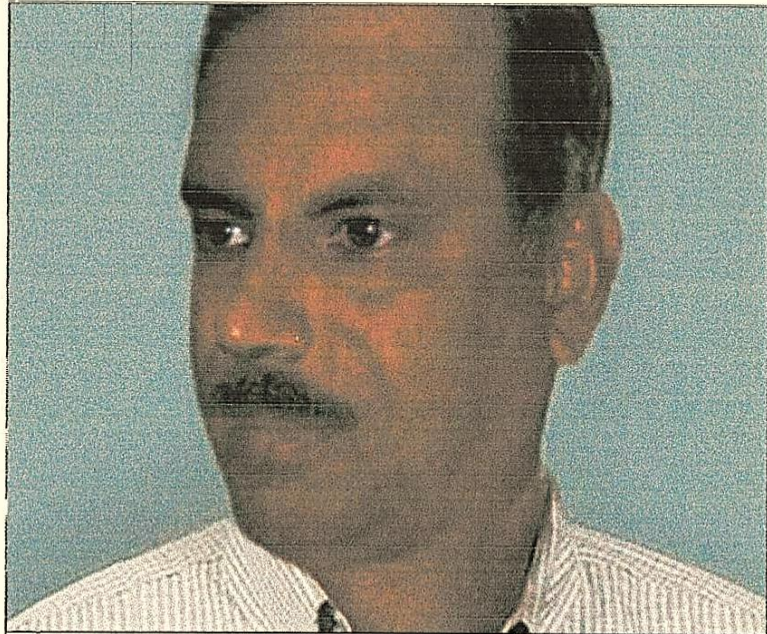
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COLOMBO – Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels are trying to rise from the ashes of their devastating battlefield defeat, swearing off violence and pledging to transform their internationally shunned terror group into a democratic movement for Tamil statehood.

Their rebranding effort faces long odds. The Tamil Tigers' self-proclaimed new leader is a wanted arms smuggler, the group has no presence inside Sri Lanka and the government has brushed off the remaining rebels as irrelevant. It's not even clear if anyone is really in charge of the tattered and demoralized group.

"There is no LTTE now, because we have totally destroyed their capabilities and their hierarchy," said Media Minister Anura Yapa, referring to the rebels by an acronym of their formal name, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.


The rebels once controlled a shadow state across northern Sri Lanka backed by thousands of




SPECIAL TO THE STAR


Tamil Tiger leader Selvarasa Pathmanathan ran an international smuggling ring and is a wanted man around the world.

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month after a quarter century of civil war.

In the final days of the battle, the military killed much of the Tamil Tigers' leadership, including Velupillai Prabhakaran, the unquestioned ruler of the group. His dispatch of hundreds of suicide attackers – whose victims ranged from former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi to commuters in a train station – landed the group on terror lists around the world.

Now, nearly 300,000 ethnic Tamil civilians from the rebels' former stronghold are being held in displacement camps in the north as security forces sweep through the rest of the country searching for remaining sleeper cells.

But the rebels also maintained a vast international support network among the estimated 800,000 Tamil expatriates living in Canada, Australia, Britain and other countries.

In the wake of Prabhakaran's death, Selvarasa Pathmanathan, the group's chief of international relations, has seized the leadership mantle and immediately begun trying to recreate the Tamil Tigers' image.

He acknowledged the rebels could no longer hope to achieve their dream of a separate state for minority Tamils – known as Eelam – on the battlefield and renounced violence. He promised the group would reorganize itself based on democratic principles – a major change from Prabhakaran's almost cultlike leadership style. And he announced the creation of a committee to set up a "provisional transnational government" for the proposed Tamil state.

"The struggle of the people of Tamil Eelam for their right to self-rule has reached a new stage," he said in a statement Monday. "It is time now for us to move forward with our political vision towards our freedom, bearing in mind the practical realities in our homeland."

Visuvanathan Rudrakumaran, a former rebel legal adviser appointed to head the committee, said he planned to register Tamils abroad to vote for a constitutional assembly. The committee would also reach out to foreign governments and create a platform for negotiations with Sri Lanka.

But Pathmanathan may not be the ideal person to transform the Tamil Tigers into an internationally respected liberation movement.

Known as "KP," he ran the group's vast international weapons-smuggling ring and remains a wanted man internationally. The government has appealed to foreign governments in recent days to find and arrest him.

"I don't know where he is, but basically we are asking his extradition from whatever country (he is in)," Yapa said.