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# **The Tigers Abroad**

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*How the LTTE Diaspora Supports the Conflict in Sri Lanka*

Dr. Peter Chalk

Now in its twenty-ninth year of existence and eighteenth year of concerted combat, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has earned a reputation as one of the most sophisticated and deadly terrorist insurgencies in the world. The organization has demonstrated a proven ability to operate along the entire ambit of the conflict spectrum—from selective assassination and indiscriminate acts of terrorism to large-scale, battalion-sized assaults—and retains effective control over significant tracts of territory in northern Sri Lanka where it runs a mini Tamil state complete with its own police, judiciary, tax, health, and educational infrastructure.

To be sure, adroit employment of guerrilla tactics, the dedication of its own fighters, and Colombo's military incompetence have all been important factors in accounting for the LTTE's battlefield success. However, just as significant is the international support structure that the Tigers have developed to tap and harness the Tamil Diaspora, which in the words of one senior Sri Lankan official, constitutes the critical lifeline for Tiger cadres on the ground.<sup>1</sup>

This paper provides an overview of the essential features of the LTTE international support structure. Its purpose is to demonstrate just how effective external Diaspora assistance can

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be when integrated into one all-encompassing network. It needs to be noted, however, that the LTTE example is atypical and should not be seen as indicative of insurgent movements in general. Indeed, with the possible exception of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and possibly the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), no other group has come close to establishing the type of highly organized support structure that the LTTE has been able to call on.

**The Tamil Diaspora.** Much of the Tamil Diaspora stems from a wave of Sri Lankan emigration that was first triggered by bloody ethnic riots in 1983. Essentially instigated under the auspices of the army in revenge for an LTTE landmine blast and ambush that killed thirteen Sinhala soldiers in the country's Northern Province, anti-Tamil disturbances became particularly serious in

referred to as "little Jaffna's"—developed as self-administered Tamil zones complete with their own media, cinema, service, and business outlets.<sup>2</sup>

Today, the Tamil Diaspora is thought to number between 600,000 and 800,000. The bulk of this expatriate population is divided between North America, Western Europe, and the Asia-Pacific, with most migrants concentrated in the following seven countries: Canada (320,000), the United Kingdom (300,000), India (150,000), France (100,000), Germany (60,000), Australia (53,000), and Switzerland (40,000). The middle and professional classes tended to move to richer Western states such as Canada and the UK, which were also known to operate liberal asylum laws, while those from poorer backgrounds mostly migrated to refugee camps in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.<sup>3</sup>

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Colombo and Jaffna where an estimated 400 were killed in wholesale communal massacres. A major hardening of the Sri Lankan internal ethnic divide quickly ensued, with large numbers of Tamils living in predominantly Sinhalese areas forced to flee overseas. The overall tempo of emigration gathered pace in line with the escalating civil war throughout the 1980s and 1990s, resulting in sizeable Tamil enclaves in several Western states. Many of these hubs—sometimes

In countries where large numbers of Tamils have settled, the LTTE has moved to set up front organizations to help manage, control, and integrate the support of the respective expatriate community. Notable groups established for this purpose have included the British Tamil Organization (UTO) in the UK, the Federation of Associations of Canadian Tamils (FACT), the French Federation of Tamil Associations (FFTA), and the Australasian Federation of Tamil Associa-

tions (AFTA).<sup>4</sup> In addition, various World Tamil Movements (WTM) were created, which according to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), work through a "mother" WTM office located in Toronto. Combined, these entities are thought to provide the principal "lens" through which the LTTE central leadership levers and monitors the Tamil Diaspora—a function that is reputedly performed as part of the Tiger Organization of Secret Intelligence Service's (TOSIS, also known as the Aiyanna Group) clandestine global management responsibilities.<sup>5</sup>

**The LTTE Global Diaspora Support Network.** The LTTE global Diaspora support network can be subdivided into two main functional areas—publicity and propaganda and finance generation (a third type of overseas support, arms procurement, is not covered in this paper as it does not directly involve the Tamil Diaspora).<sup>6</sup> Although each component nominally operates independently of the other, their activities invariably overlap and are frequently integrated to coordinated under the auspices of the group's International Secretariat.

**Publicity and Propaganda.** LTTE publicity and propaganda is coordinated through the Eelam Political Administration, which has the responsibility for managing the LTTE's external "diplomatic" representation as well as the group's mediation efforts with the Sri Lankan government and third-party peace envoys.<sup>7</sup> Prior to his death by cancer in December 2006, Anton Balasingham served as the chief architect of Tiger external propaganda activities.<sup>8</sup> His main goal was to galvanize international sup-

port for the Tiger cause, while simultaneously discrediting Colombo, by disseminating a consistent three-fold message:

- Tamils are the innocent victims of Sinhalese discrimination and government-instigated military repression.

- The LTTE represents the only vehicle capable of defending and promoting the interests of the Sri Lankan Tamil community.

- There can be no peace in Sri Lanka until the country's Tamils are granted their own independent state under the governance of the LTTE.<sup>9</sup>

Balasingham headed a quasi-diplomatic structure that consists of sympathetic pressure groups, media units, charities, and benevolent non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Although as of 1998 the Tigers were represented in fifty-four countries as far flung as Burma and Botswana, the concentration of their political activity takes place in Western countries that have large Tamil expatriate communities, including, most notably, Canada, the UK, France, Australia, and Switzerland. As noted above, in each of these states, political support for the LTTE has been effectively harnessed through overarching front organizations that integrate, and thereby inflate, the individual efforts of specific lobbying and charitable bodies.<sup>10</sup>

LTTE propaganda targets both the Tamil Diaspora and the host government. Initially, most lobbying took the form of crude propaganda disseminated via local libraries, mass mail outs, and community television and radio broadcasts.<sup>11</sup> However, at a relatively early stage the LTTE came to realize that its efforts would be substantially augmented through the placement of carefully selected in-country information special-

ists. These "counselors," who have mostly operated out of the front organizations noted above, have proven to be especially instrumental in arranging for cultural and social gatherings that have been specifically calibrated to maximize mobilization among committed LTTE adherents as well as sway potentially sympathetic backers.<sup>12</sup> To bolster their potential impact, these events are often timed to take place in the aftermath of major battlefield successes or coordinated with venerated dates in the Tiger calendar such as Martyr's day, which is celebrated every year on 27 November—the birthday of the group's supreme commander, Velupillai Prabhakaran.<sup>13</sup>

During the last decade, the Tigers have also come to appreciate the importance of additional mediums through which to extend the range and scope of their publicity efforts. Like many other legitimate and illegitimate non-state entities, electronic platforms such as the World Wide Web, news groups (Usenet), and email have been especially favored and are now employed on a routine basis both to galvanize international support and to discredit the policies and counter-insurgency actions of the Sri Lankan Armed Forces (SLAF). Most commentators agree that the LTTE's electronic war has been far more effective than any counter-campaign so far mounted by the Sri Lankan government, allowing the group to continually embarrass Colombo and gain political and financial capital at its expense.<sup>14</sup> As insurgency analyst Sisira Pinnawala observes: "The major distinction between the pro-Tamil struggle websites and those belonging to the other camp is operational sophistication. Pro-Tamil websites cater to a wider audience, [extending] a full service [that provides for the] cultural and social needs of

the Tamil community...There has also been [a vigorous] attempt...to introduce multimedia, including real-time video...The government approach to the Internet is totally the opposite of the above. It is characterized by old Soviet style propaganda...None of the government-operated websites have attempted to attract audiences from among the Sri Lankans overseas by addressing their needs...like the pro-LTTE camp. There is, in other words, no full service approach."<sup>15</sup>

The effectiveness of the LTTE propaganda campaign can be measured by the high degree of legitimacy the group has been accorded among many Western states—the main focus of Tiger international publicity activities. Certainly for most of the 1990s, the LTTE was portrayed as a genuine national liberation movement engaged in bone fide struggle for independence against an oppressive Sinhalese dominated state. This, despite its involvement in numerous terrorist atrocities during the decade, including the assassinations of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 (former Indian head of state) and Ranasinghe Premadasa in 1993 (the former Sri Lankan President) as well as the devastating suicide bombing of Colombo's Central Bank in 1996—an attack that left 100 people dead and over 1,400 injured.<sup>16</sup>

More significantly, it is only comparatively recently that those states most closely associated with the Tamil Diaspora have moved to take a harder line against the LTTE. The UK government banned the group in 2001, with similar measures enacted in Canada and the European Union (EU, which has pertinence for both Germany and France) not until 2006.<sup>17</sup> At the time of this writing the Tigers had yet to be officially proscribed in Australia.<sup>18</sup>

**Fundraising.** Alongside propaganda, the LTTE runs a sophisticated international revenue-generating operation that draws from three main sources: direct Diaspora contributions; funds siphoned off from contributions given to NGOs, charities and benevolent donor groups; and investments made in legitimate, Tamil-run businesses. The exact amount or percentage breakdown that is procured from each of these financial wellsprings is not known. Combined, however, they are thought to provide an annual income base of between \$200 and \$300 million. Taking into account estimated fixed operational costs of \$8 million within LTTE-administered regions of Sri Lanka, this would leave the group with a healthy profit margin of at least \$192 million a year.<sup>19</sup>

A significant amount of money used to support the LTTE insurgency is raised from the international Tamil Diaspora. The Tigers focus most of their efforts in this regard on Canada and Europe—both of which host sizeable, well-off middle class expatriate communities. While some of this money is coerced, the bulk is given voluntarily, frequently in line with a standard baseline “tax” that is levied and paid as a minimum obligation to the Tamil cause. In Canada, the sum runs to between US\$240 and US\$646 a year per household depending on the needs of the group at any one time. In the UK, annual family donations average in the range of \$600, while in France they reportedly run as high as \$2,728.<sup>20</sup>

Funds are not always directly procured from the Diaspora community. Often, the LTTE will siphon off expatriate contributions that are given to non-profit NGOs, donor bodies, and charities that have been ostensibly created to finance

Tamil social service, development, and rehabilitation programs in Sri Lanka. In these cases, it is generally very difficult to prove that funds raised for humanitarian purposes are being diverted to propagate terrorism or other forms of illegality elsewhere.<sup>21</sup> This was particularly true prior to 9/11, when many countries did not physically require organizations to register with governing authorities before engaging in fundraising activities.<sup>22</sup> According to G. H. Peiris, Professor Emeritus at the University of Peradeniya near Kandy, co-opted non-profits, NGOs, and charities afford an estimated \$2 million a month to the LTTE war chest.<sup>23</sup>

Beyond direct Diaspora contributions and siphoned funds, the LTTE has derived funding from investments in legitimate overseas Tamil business and commercial holdings. In many cases, these enterprises run on a system of “ownership by proxy,” where the Tigers cover initial capital start-up costs and then split the subsequent profits with the company’s ostensible owner. The LTTE has established a number of businesses that operate in this manner, including ventures that deal in the gold and jewelry trade, wholesale commodity freight and distribution, and the provision of local Tamil computer, telephone, and bus services. Due to a lack of reliable data, it is not possible to provide a definitive figure for the amount of money the Tigers generate from these sources. However, according to Gunaratna, the revenue earned from Canada—the main locus for this form of financial procurement—can be roughly estimated at \$6.5 million for the period October 1998 to October 1999.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, the LTTE is widely suspected of raising money by exploiting the plight of Tamils wishing to emigrate to the West,

which is now thought to constitute an increasingly central component of Tiger financial procurement. According to intelligence officials in Ottawa, the group plays a pivotal role in the trafficking of illegal migrants and refugees to Canada, charging between \$18,000 and \$32,000 per “transaction.”<sup>25</sup> Given the inherently esoteric character of the human export trade, it is difficult to determine the overall scope of this particular revenue-source. However, in June 2000 Sri Lanka’s Criminal Investigation Department (CID) claimed to have uncovered one major Tiger operation involving some 600 people who had been illegally shipped to the European

place, “illegals” quickly go underground, generally taking menial jobs that have been pre-arranged by established LTTE country representatives. This ensures that the new arrivals remain semi-permanently indentured to the LTTE, which in many cases, has translated into acting as local Tiger henchmen and/or debt collectors.<sup>28</sup>

**Conclusion.** The LTTE insurgency and its Diaspora are intimately tied to one another. So long as the group is able to lever expatriate Tamils for propaganda and fund-raising purposes, its ethno-separatist campaign can be maintained. These communities have not only pro-

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Union (EU) on forged visas.<sup>26</sup> The net profits from such an endeavor—even after taking overhead costs into account—would have been in the millions.

Typically, migrants and refugees are trafficked to North America and Europe via Thailand and Burma, which are used either as identification forgery hubs—high quality but cheap passports can be made to order in Bangkok—or proximate staging points for onward trips.<sup>27</sup> As with human smuggling rings in general, direct passages are avoided whenever possible in favor of staggered journeys or routes that travel through/via neighboring and transit countries characterized by less intrusive immigration checks, including the Balkans in Europe and Mexico/land border crossings in the Americas. Once in

vided two ingredients that are essential to any insurgency—international political recognition and money—they have also formed the basis of a highly effective international support structure upon which to anchor the group’s actual on-ground war effort in Sri Lanka.

Unfortunately, the international community has proven to be particularly amenable to Tiger global operations. In the West, this has largely been a product of tolerance borne of the common Tamil ethnic identity that underscores the LTTE both domestically and in its Diaspora—something that has made it increasingly difficult for governments and law enforcement agencies to differentiate between ordinary Tamils and pro-LTTE activists.

Just as important is the prevalent belief among many Western politicians that it is the ethnic or the minority vote, which makes the difference in an election. As such, they tend to be sympathetic to the political aspirations and the grievances of the minorities and ethnic groups living in their constituencies. Because the Tigers have been able to run effective propaganda campaigns which have successfully mobilized significant sectors of the overseas Tamil Diaspora in their favor, politicians have become increasingly reluctant to support tougher actions against the LTTE for fear that this will impinge on their local electoral support base.

Sri Lanka has long pressed Tamil-rich Western countries to take more concerted steps to identify and root out pro-LTTE Diaspora activities, arguing that if they do nothing they tacitly accede to the group's political and military agenda by allowing its members to organize and fundraise internationally. While these diplomatic exhortations have, at times,

been viewed as interfering and pressuring, a number of states and political entities have now officially designated the Tigers as a terrorist movement, including, as noted, the UK, Canada, and the EU. These proscriptions certainly carry significant symbolic weight and will also have practical import, not least because they make providing material support to the LTTE a criminal offence. However, to truly impact on expatriate support for the Eelam insurgency, host governments must necessarily accompany legal responses with a more active program of community policing and assimilation. If LTTE control over immigrant populations can be curtailed, involuntary and coerced pledges of assistance are likely to decrease. Equally, if Tamil Diasporas are allowed to assimilate fully into their adopted countries, it is reasonable to assume that they will have a weaker cognitive tie to the idea of a separate "homeland" and, as such, will gradually disassociate themselves from the objectives of the Tiger insurgents fighting there.

## NOTES

1 Sri Lankan official, interview by author, Bangkok, Thailand, April 2005.

2 Peter Chalk, "The LTTE Insurgency in Sri Lanka," in *Ethnic Conflict and Secessionism in South and Southeast Asia*, Eds. Rajat Ganguly and Ian Macduff, (London: Sage, 2003), 130; John Solomon and BC Tan, "Feeding the Tiger—How Sri Lankan Insurgents Fund Their War," *Jane's Intelligence Review* (date accessed: 1 September 2007).

3 "Sri Lankan Diaspora," Internet, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sri\\_Lanka\\_Tamil\\_diaspora#References\\_and\\_further\\_reading](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sri_Lanka_Tamil_diaspora#References_and_further_reading), (date accessed: 12 December 2007); John Solomon and BC Tan, "Feeding the Tiger—How Sri Lankan Insurgents Fund Their War," *Jane's Intelligence Review* (date accessed: 1 September 2007).

4 Matthew Rosenberg, "Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger Rebels Run a Global Fund-Raising and Weapons-Smuggling Network," *The Associated Press*, 5 November 2007.

5 Sri Lankan officials, interview by author, Ottawa, Canada and Canberra, Australia, November-

December, 2000. See also Dushy Ranetunge, "British Charities Fund Tamil Tiger Terrorists," information paper published by the Society for Peace, Unity and Human Rights (SPUR), (Melbourne: September 2000).

6 John Solomon and BC Tan, "Feeding the Tiger—How Sri Lankan Insurgents Fund Their War," *Jane's Intelligence Review* (date accessed: 1 September 2007).

7 Responsibility for LTTE arms procurement falls to the Office of Overseas Purchases. Heading this division is Tharmalingham Shunmugam, alias Kumaran Pathmanathan and colloquially known simply as "KP" (the source of the office's nickname, the KP Department). He is the second most wanted man in Sri Lanka (after Villupilai Prabhakaran—the supreme Commander of the LTTE) and he is currently the subject of an international Interpol arrest warrant (Red Notice). Pathmanathan runs a highly proficient arms network that has been linked to weapons deals in Eastern Europe, Africa, the Middle East and South and Southeast Asia and which is thought to own at least ten ocean-going vessels known informally within the group as the "Sea Pigeons."



## THE TIGERS ABROAD

These vessels are charged with transporting procured weapons to Sri Lanka and are typically registered under flags of convenience (FoC) with bureaus in Panama, Liberia, Honduras, Cyprus, Malta or Bermuda). Author interviews, Sri Lankan officials, Bangkok, December 2000. See also Dan Byman et al., *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001); John Solomon and BC Tan, "Feeding the Tiger—How Sri Lankan Insurgents Fund Their War," *Jane's Intelligence Review* (1 September 2007); Rosenberg, "Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger Rebels Run a Global Fundraising and Weapons-Smuggling Network"; and "The Tiger Shipping Empire," *The Island* (Sri Lanka), 26 March 2000.

7 Thamil Cheviam headed the Eelam Political Administration until his death in November 2007 (he was killed in an airstrike by the Sri Lankan military); at the time of writing no successor had been announced by the Tiger leadership.

8 As with Thamil Cheviam, at the time of writing the LTTE leadership had yet to announce a successor to Balasingham.

9 Anthony Davis, "Tiger International," *AsiaWeek*, 26 November 1996.

10 In addition to front groups, the LTTE has effectively exploited the liberal democratic ethos that underscores many Western states to establish offices that are openly representative of the Tiger cause. Foremost amongst these is Eelam House in London, the LTTE's principal headquarters outside Sri Lanka. Although nominally headed by A C Shanthan, the LTTE Chief in the UK, it serves as the LTTE's principal base of operations for coordinating overseas political activity; it is also the location out of which all official Tiger statements, memoranda and proclamations emanate. For an overview of many of the coordinating functions carried out by Eelam House, and its links with other pro-LTTE groups see "LTTE Establishes Global TV Sweep with Merger," *The Island* (Sri Lanka), 20/09/2000.

11 Rohan Gunaratna, "LTTE Organization and Operations in Canada," unpublished document supplied to author, November 2000.

12 Key LTTE political counselors include: T. Jeyakumar (Australia), Manuel Mariyadas (Canada), Nadarajah Illango (France), Rudrakumaraan (United States), A.C. Shanthan (United Kingdom), and Anton Ponrajah (Switzerland).

13 Sri Lankan officials, interview by author, Canberra, Australia, December 2000. See also Dan Byman et al., *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001).

14 Sri Lankan officials and commentators, interviews by author, Ottawa, Canada and Bangkok, Thailand, November–December 2000.

15 Sisira Pinnawala, "Lankan Ethnic Conflict on the Internet," *Daily News* (Sri Lanka), 25 June 1998.

16 The 1996 suicide bombing of the Central Bank remains the worst act of terrorism to have ever been

carried out in Sri Lanka. The attack was the main catalyst for Washington's decision to designate the LTTE a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in 1997.

17 This action was taken after the LTTE's involvement in the 2005 assassination of Lakshman Kadrigamar, the Sri Lankan foreign minister.

18 John Solomon and BC Tan, "Feeding the Tiger—How Sri Lankan Insurgents Fund Their War," *Jane's Intelligence Review* (date accessed: 1 September 2007).

19 John Solomon and BC Tan, "Feeding the Tiger—How Sri Lankan Insurgents Fund Their War," *Jane's Intelligence Review* (1 September 2007); Rosenberg, "Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger Rebels Run a Global Fund-Raising and Weapons-Smuggling Network." *The Island* (Sri Lanka), 26 March 2000.

There have also been periodic allegations that the LTTE has raised money by trafficking Afghan heroin through India and Sri Lanka to the west. However, definitive proof linking the group to drugs running has yet to emerge.

20 Gunaratna, "'LTTE Organization and Operations in Canada"; "Behind the Tamil Tigers" *SBS Dateline* (Australia), 4 October 2000; Solomon and Tan, "Feeding the Tiger—How Sri Lankan Insurgents Fund Their War." *Jane's Intelligence Review* (date accessed: 1 September 2007).

21 Byman et al., *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001) 51.

22 Following al-Qaeda's attacks in the United States on 9/11, many governments quickly moved to introduce legislation designed to constrain proscribed groups from engaging in concerted financial activities on their soil.

23 John Solomon and BC Tan, "Feeding the Tiger—How Sri Lankan Insurgents Fund Their War," *Jane's Intelligence Review* (date accessed: 1 September 2007).

24 Gunaratna, "'LTTE Organization and Operations in Canada" "Behind the Tamil Tigers" *SBS Dateline* (Australia), 4 October 2000; Stewart Bell "Money Trail: Financing War from Canada," *the National Post* (Canada), 3 June 2000.

25 Sri Lankan intelligence officials, interviews by author, Ottawa, Canada, November 2000.

26 "Human Smuggling Racket Busted," *the Daily Mirror* (Sri Lanka), June 26, 2000; "CID Bust Another Multi Billion Rupee Human Smuggling LTTE Operation," *the Daily News* (Sri Lanka), 17 May 2000.

27 See, for instance, Chris Smith, "South Asia's Enduring War," in *Creating Peace in Sri Lanka. Civil War and Reconciliation* Robert Rotberg ed., (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1999), 33; Anthony Davis, "Tracking Tigers in Phuket," *Asiaweek* (16 June 2000); John Nicol, "Passports for Sail," *McLeans* (3 April 2000) 2-8; and Charu Lata Joshi, "The Body Trade," *The Far Eastern Economic Review* (26 October 2000) 100-102.

28 Sri Lankan officials, interviews by author Bangkok, Thailand, December 2000.