

SRI LANKA/TAMIL TIGERS

"We are not fighting a separatist cause"

UMA MAHESHWARAN tells SUNDAY

On 1 August 1983, Uma Maheshwaran, chairman of the People's Liberation Organisation for Tamil Eelam (PLOT) was released from the Madras Jail on conditional bail. He was arrested following a shoot-out incident in May 1982 in Madras. The Liberation Tiger movement, started in 1974, suffered a major split in 1978 with Mr V. Prabhakaran forming the Liberation Tiger for Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Maheshwaran's group came to be known as PLOT. Between them, these two outlawed organisations have been giving the Sinhalese army a run for their money. Prabhakaran and Maheshwaran are considered to be the two main leaders of the Tamil Eelam movement. The Sri Lanka government had, in fact, announced a reward of Rs 100,000 to anyone providing information leading to Maheshwaran's arrest. Both the rival leaders slipped into India in early 1982. The gang warfare that erupted between them led to their arrest.

Following their arrest, the Sri Lanka government pressurised the Indian government into extraditing them to Sri Lanka. The centre refused to yield to the demand primarily due to the pressure from Tamil Nadu. When I asked what would have been their fate had the Indian government extradited them, Maheshwaran replied, "Our fate would have been the same as Kuttimani and Jagan (two leading Tigers who were brutally killed in the prison massacre in Colombo on 27 July). Prabhakaran has jumped bail and is now very active in Jaffna organising counter-attacks. But Maheshwaran plans to go back to Jaffna only after his trial is over. He has to report to the IG's office every week. His aide said that Maheshwaran never stayed in one place for more than an hour. The interview lasted exactly an hour. Right through the interview, Maheshwaran made it clear that he was a "revolutionary" and not a "terrorist" and was waging a "liberation" and not a "separatist" struggle.

Damaged buildings in Colombo; (inset) Uma Maheshwaran



Interviewed by Anita Pratap

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Q : Now that the conditions of the Tamils are really bad in Sri Lanka, don't you think you and Prabhakaran should unite and pool your resources?

A : We are willing to align with any progressive force. We are not holding back regarding unity. We are all for unity. Ideologically, Prabhakaran's group and my group are different—we want to mobilise a mass organisation for armed struggle led by the working classes, whereas they (Prabhakaran's group) just want to indulge in terrorism, purely to paralyse the army.

Q : Ultimately what you both want is the same—Tamil Eelam. Achieving this will be all the more difficult if you are divided among yourselves. Have you initiated any unity moves?

A : About six months ago we gave a call to unite. Most organisations agreed except Prabhakaran's. They also agreed theoretically, but practically they did nothing.

Q : Did your call for unity include terrorist organisations as well?

A : We don't classify ourselves as terrorists. We are nationalists. We are not indulging in terrorism. We are not fighting a separatist cause. Ours is a "liberation struggle."

Q : Which are the organisations that responded to your unity call?

A : EROS—Eelam Research Organisation—headed by Ratnasabapathi based in London; GUES—General Union of Eelam Students—based in India. We expected Prabhakaran's group to send a representative but it did not.

Q : Who are the students involved in GUES?

A : It's a Jaffna students' organisation.

Q : What do you think has provoked this current spate of violence in Sri Lanka?

A : It is provoked by the government to threaten and intimidate the Tamils not to ask for liberation ever again. The impression being given is that it is a civil war between the Tamils and the Sinhalese. This is not true. It is a calculated massacre by the chauvinist, capitalist government.

Q : If it is a calculated rash of violence by a capitalist government, how can you account for the fact that this time even the Tamil capitalists and industrialists have not been spared?

A : The clash between the Tamils and Sinhalese escalated. It expanded to include the Sinhalese leftists and capitalists. That's why the government banned the three leftist parties. They were banned because Gnanam's and Gunaratnam's (leading Tamil industrialists of Colombo) properties were also looted. And these people fund the United National Party (UNP).

See, there is always a distinct pattern to all this. When the armed forces go berserk, they burn and loot the Tamil houses. That is when they wish to take the law into their own hands. But when the government sponsors violence, they attack places like our library (the Jaffna Public Library that was burnt down in 1981) because that is a deliberate attack on our cultural institutions. During those riots when the library was burnt, two ministers were present on the spot—Cyril Mathew (minister for industries and scientific affairs) and Mr Gamini Dissanayake (minister for land irrigation). They

were also present in Tricomalle when arson started.

Q: So you feel the Jayewardene government has instigated the violence against the Tamils?

A: Yes, they are fully responsible.

Q: What sparked off the killing of the 13 army soldiers in Jaffna on 23 July by the Liberation Tigers (Prabhakaran's group)?

A: That was an act of revenge.

Q: Revenge for what?

A: One of the Tigers was killed by the army so they wanted to avenge his death.

Q: Are you referring to Charles Anthony's death?

A: Yes. How do you know that?

Q: Logical deduction. But have not the Tamils paid dearly for the killings?

A: That was unfortunate. It was a premature attack. You see, at the moment we are not fully equipped to start a battle with the army. There is no point in hit-and-run tactics. It does us more damage. Isolated incidents of violence are not going to achieve anything. In this case we knew the army would stage a counter-attack. But we were not yet prepared to fight this counter-attack. This kind of *modus operandi* (terrorism of Prabhakaran's group) is anti-revolutionary. There is no point in going and indulging in an act of terrorism. You must have a plan. You must have a mass mobilisation for an armed struggle. We (our group) are not terrorists, we are revolutionaries.

Q: Do you think the Tamils and the Sinhalese can ever live together again?

A: It is impossible. We will have to repatriate to our areas. See, the refugees are coming to Jaffna. Jaffna is the only safe place for the Tamils.

Q: But are the Tamils safe from the army in Jaffna?

A: I agree. We will have to mobilise the people for a struggle.

Q: Struggle for a separate state?

A: Not a 'separate state'. It is what we call liberation. We treat Jaffna as an occupied territory. The Sinhalese have occupied our territory. Our liberation struggle is only to regain what we have lost.

Q: Is this not the opportune moment for you to be in Jaffna? Do you also plan to jump bail like Prabhakaran and slip into Jaffna?

A: I must go to Jaffna. But I don't want to go there as a wanted man in India. I want to clear everything and go. I don't want to alienate India because we need Indian assistance to press the non-aligned countries to support us.

Q: But sitting in Madras you cannot mobilise much support, can you?

A: You'd be surprised.

Q: What will become of the Tamil refugees in Sri Lanka?

A: They will all go back to Jaffna.

Q: Do you feel that the TULF has betrayed your cause?

A: Yes, they have betrayed our cause. In 1974 we wanted to be the underground organisation and had agreed that the TULF would be the mass organisation. But in the 1977 general elections, TULF changed its stance. They moved over to the capitalists.

Q: You feel that the TULF has been bought over by the UNP government?

A: Yes—particularly the leadership.

Q: Do you feel that the mass base of the TULF has been eroded?

A: Definitely. Just see what happened in the May '83 municipal elections. Prabhakaran urged the Tamils to boycott the elections. They even assassinated the three UNP candidates for the elections. Only five per cent of the Tamils voted and as there were no opponents, TULF won.

Q: Does the resentment against the TULF stem from the fact that they have not adequately represented the cause of the Tamils?

A: Yes. They are capitalist-minded. They are only interested in participating in elections and getting back

to the Parliament.

Q: What do you think will be the repercussions of President Jayewardene's decision to proscribe parties that advocate a separate state?

A: TULF will now be forced to take up arms. They have to. There is no other way. Now, what will happen is that even the working class of the Sinhalese will rebel against the Jayewardene government because the communist parties have been banned. So we can expect more support to fight the government.

Q: What is the future of the TULF?

A: As an organisation it has no future. It will become extinct.

Q: Why do you think the riots changed from anti-Tamil to anti-Indian?

A: Most Sinhalese think all Indians are Tamils. Why, when I was working in Colombo, everybody thought Mahatma Gandhi was a Tamil. In 1977 all the statues of Gandhi in Jaffna were destroyed because the Sinhalese army thought that Gandhi was a Tamil. Now they think that Mrs Indira Gandhi is also a Tamil.

Q: Your main task now is the mobilisation of the Tamils. How will you set about it?

A: We will first train our youth. Our military unit will go on training. Our trade unions will start functioning with a specific purpose. What we first intend to do is to build up a cadre. They will then go around spreading the message.

Q: Finally, you will have to have a confrontation with the security forces of the Sinhalese government, isn't it?

A: Yes.

Q: How soon will that be?

A: As early as possible. We don't want to stage a premature attack like this ambush that killed the 13 soldiers. That is what has upset our plans. At the moment we are not prepared or we would have made use of this chance. I think it will take us about two years for the complete mobilisation of the Tamils.

Q: Many Tamils feel that you should have fought the discrimination against the Tamils but should not have asked for a separate state.

A: "Separatism" is after all viewed unfavourably. We went through the entire democratic process of redressal before we reached this stage. We first asked for equal rights in 1984, then we asked for a federal state. In 1965, we asked for district councils. In 1977, we submitted a six-point charter of demands which included points like plantation workers being given citizenship and voting rights, and Sinhalese colonisation in Tamil areas should be stopped. All were refused.

Q: A number of refugees that I spoke to in Colombo said that they were going back to Jaffna because that was where they expected some amount of protection. They looked upon the Liberation Tigers for protection. What do you have to say to that?

A: Yes, it is our responsibility to protect them.

Q: But do you have the resources to protect them now?

A: Not at the moment. But coming to motherland (Jaffna) itself shows their attitude. Today they themselves realise that Jaffna is the only safe place for them.

Q: Do you seriously think that Jayewardene is going to grant you an Eelam?

A: We are not expecting an Eelam from Jayewardene. He is not that enlightened. But within two or three years will create such a situation that we will be invited there.

Q: Do you propose to get an Eelam by completely paralysing the government machinery including the security forces in Jaffna?

A: Yes, that's how.

Q: But are you being fair in wanting a part of a country that is so small? There is no other place where the Sinhalese can go. And moreover, they will be genuinely worried, that once having given Tamil Eelam to you, you will then harbour expansionist ideas and gradually take over Sri Lanka.

A: Geographical size has nothing to do with it. Besides, we have no ambitions to rule the rest of Sri Lanka. We only want what is legitimately ours.