

Tamil Tigers

Tamil Tigers, byname of **Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)**, guerrilla organization that sought to establish an independent Tamil state, Eelam, in northern and eastern Sri Lanka.

The LTTE was established in 1976 by Velupillai Prabhakaran as the successor to an organization he had formed earlier in the 1970s. The LTTE grew to become one of the world's most sophisticated and tightly organized insurgent groups. During the 1970s the organization carried out a number of guerrilla attacks. In 1983, after the killing of 13 soldiers by Tamil guerrillas and retaliatory attacks by the Sri Lankan military, large-scale violence erupted between the government and the LTTE. By 1985 the group was in control of Jaffna and most of the Jaffna Peninsula in northern Sri Lanka. Under Prabhakaran's orders, the LTTE had eliminated most of its rival Tamil groups by 1987. To fund its operations, the group engaged in illegal activities (including bank robberies and drug smuggling) and the extortion of Tamils in Sri Lanka and elsewhere, but it also received considerable voluntary financial support from Tamils living abroad.

The LTTE lost control of Jaffna in October 1987 to an Indian peacekeeping force (IPKF) that had been sent to Sri Lanka to assist in the implementation of a complete cease-fire. However, following the withdrawal of the IPKF in March 1990, the Tigers grew in strength and conducted several successful guerrilla operations and terrorist attacks. On May 21, 1991, a suicide bomber killed former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi while he was campaigning in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Other attacks included an August 1992 land-mine explosion in Jaffna, which killed 10 senior military commanders; the May 1993 assassination of Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa; a January 1996 suicide bomb attack on the central bank of Colombo that killed 100 people; and a July 2001 attack on Colombo's international airport that destroyed half of the country's commercial airliners. An elite unit of the LTTE, the "Black Tigers," was responsible for carrying out suicide attacks. If faced with unavoidable capture by Sri Lankan authorities, those operatives and others purportedly committed suicide by swallowing cyanide capsules that they wore around their necks.

Negotiations between the LTTE and the government broke down in the mid-1990s. In December 2000 the LTTE declared a unilateral cease-fire, which lasted only until April. Thereafter, fighting between the guerrillas and the government again intensified until February 2002, when the government and the LTTE signed a permanent cease-fire agreement. Sporadic violence continued, however, and in 2006 the European Union added the LTTE to its list of banned terrorist organizations. Soon after, heavy fighting erupted between the rebels and government forces, and thousands were killed.

In January 2008 the government formally abandoned the 2002 cease-fire agreement, and authorities captured major strongholds of the LTTE over the following months. The town of Kilinochchi, the administrative centre of the LTTE, came under government control in January 2009. By late April, government troops had cornered the remaining LTTE fighters along a small stretch of the northeast coast. A final offensive by army forces in mid-May succeeded in overrunning and occupying the rebels' last stronghold, and the LTTE leadership (including Prabhakaran) was killed. The number of civil-war-related deaths in Sri Lanka since the early 1980s was estimated at between 70,000 and 80,000, with many tens of thousands more displaced by the fighting.

The number of LTTE fighters was never determined conclusively, and the figure undoubtedly varied over time as the organization's fortunes rose and fell. Estimates from various sources range from a few thousand to some 16,000 or more. The highest totals appear to have been during the first years of the 21st century. A United Nations report on Sri Lanka from 2011 listed some 5,800 rehabilitated LTTE fighters.

"Tamil Tigers". *Encyclopædia Britannica*. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2016. Web. 28 Feb. 2016. <<http://www.britannica.com/topic/Tamil-Tigers>>.