

The Washington Times

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Terrifying 'heroes'

Published November 29, 2006

In his annual "Heroes' Day" statement, the leader of the terrorist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, Velupillai Prabhakaran, attempts to shift blame for the conflict that is tearing apart the small South Asian country away from his violent rebel group and onto the Sri Lankan government. The speech, which in theme varies little from the statements of previous years, likely marks the outright end of the slowly crumbling 2002 ceasefire and augurs very badly for the hope of renewing peace talks.

Prabhakaran's argument, more propaganda than fact, that the Tigers have worked for peace but been forced to fight is based on a series of false premises, and is an attempt to win sympathy and support from the international community.

Prabhakaran contends, for instance, that the Sri Lankan government has imposed an embargo on food shipments to the Tamil people. Quite to the contrary, the government sends close to 20,000 tons of food items monthly in aid to Tiger-controlled regions. And while Prabhakaran's statement professes sincere efforts to build peace, the Tigers have historically come to the negotiating table only from a weakened position, and done so with the goal of refortifying their military position.

In the past, Sri Lanka's Tamil minority has suffered discrimination and mistreatment. But the Tigers are not the representatives of the Tamil people and, as this statement makes even more clear, are not interested in assuring political equality for the Tamil people. The Tigers' only goal, rather, is the division of the small country that results in a disproportionately large autonomous Tamil state -- an arrangement that is unreasonable to expect the Sri Lankan government to accept. Both the Tamil people and the Sri Lankan government should share a strong desire for peace. The death toll has passed 65,000 in a country of 20 million people, and Sri Lanka is a poor country that can ill afford the material costs of the conflict. Until the Tigers feel similarly compelled to enter into a peace accord, however, no lasting settlement can be reached.

Washington has strongly condemned the Tamil Tigers, and U.S. policy is unequivocally critical of the terrorist group. The State Department's decision to classify the group as a terrorist organization in 1997, which was followed this year by similar restrictions by Canada and the European Union, dealt a serious

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blow to the Tigers. And Prabhakaran admits as much in his statement, noting that the decisions "disturbed the parity of status and balance of power [the Tigers] held with the Sinhala regime." Western countries have posed a formidable, unified opposition to the Tiger organization. As it remains clear that the Tigers are committed to the violence that has marked the last two decades of conflict in Sri Lanka, it becomes increasingly important for the United States, the European Union and Canada to continue to crackdown on Tiger operations and fund-raising in the West.

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