

An end to the war?

Tamil Tiger leaders are declared dead in Sri Lanka. Conventional fighting seems to be over.



AFP/AP

The discovery on Monday May 18th of the bodies of senior Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, including a vicious supremo, Velupillai Prabhakaran, and his son, brings to an end the rebels' long-running conventional battle. The movement has fought violently against six administrations and assassinated a former Indian prime minister in a bid to carve out a separate Tamil state in Sri Lanka.

Officials stated on Monday that the "entire country" has been "liberated", as everyone in the rebel leadership has been killed. Earlier, officials had said that the remains of Mr Prabhakaran's oldest son, Charles Anthony, who had led the air wing of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the head of its peace secretariat, Seevaratnam Pulidevan, and special commander for the east, Thambirajah Ramesh, were identified on Monday morning by troops conducting "mop-up operations" in the last patch of territory wrested from the Tigers.

State television showed hundreds of corpses scattered around the battlefield and floating in a nearby lagoon as the armed forces combed the ruins where the Tigers made their last stand. These included a complex network of fortified underground bunkers. The bodies were found of Sivershankar Pottu Amman, who led the rebels' intelligence wing, and of Thillaiyampalam Sivanesan, alias "Soosai". These men were powerful second-rung leaders.

Soosai was last heard from on Sunday, when in a fleeting voice-clip posted on the pro-rebel TamilNet website, he raged at the world's failure to end the war. There is so much fire, he cried. They were continuing to fight but their people were dying and "the international community is not even looking at us". It was the last rebel message, probably conveyed by satellite phone, known to have been broadcast from the battlefield. Soosai died soon after making his frantic plea.

Surrounded by at least 25,000 government soldiers and deserted by the civilians they had been forcibly holding as hostages, the LTTE conceded defeat on Sunday in a downcast statement that blamed the world for failing to save them. This battle has reached its bitter end, accepted Selvarasa Pathmanathan, the head of the movement's international diplomatic relations, who is based abroad. The rebels said that they had decided to silence their guns. Yet the last remaining cadres continued fighting on Monday, deploying suicide bombers and lighting fires to slow down troops.

In Sri Lanka's Sinhalese-dominated south, the defeat of the LTTE—a brutal organisation that had controlled roughly a quarter of the country at its peak—was greeted by bursts of firecrackers. More than 1,000 noisy protesters accusing Britain of meddling in Sri Lanka's

affairs converged on the British High Commission in Colombo, the capital, on Monday, carrying placards and burning an effigy of the country's foreign secretary, David Miliband. Mr Miliband had repeatedly called for action by the UN Security Council on Sri Lanka, saying that hundreds of civilians had died in government artillery fire.

Celebrations drowned out muted voices that called for exultation to be tempered with respect for the dead and with concern for more than 250,000 displaced Tamils who had fled the bloodshed with little but the shirts on their backs. How many soldiers, rebels or civilians perished in the military campaign launched two years ago by President Mahinda Rajapaksa's government is unknown: the government stopped releasing statistics of troop deaths in October. The Tigers had done the same long before that. Citing two government doctors who had worked in the civilian "safe zone" until the weekend, the UN has conservatively estimated that over 8,000 civilians have been killed in the fighting since January 20th.

Mr Rajapaksa will make a national address during a special parliamentary session on Tuesday morning. On Sunday, he cut short a visit to Jordan, returning to Bandaranaike International Airport, near Colombo, where he knelt and worshipped the ground. He will need to offer more than canny public relations to pull together the country now that the conventional fighting, at least, is over. He still faces international fury over allegations of mass civilian deaths caused by government fire.

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