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Ceasefire Over as Tamil Tigers' Leader Calls for Independence

By Randeep Ramesh

The Tamil Tigers' reclusive leader last night effectively ended the rebels' support for the 2002 ceasefire with the government of Sri Lanka, saying that it was "defunct". In his annual address to the island nation's Tamil population, Velupillai Prabhakaran put the government on notice that war was the only option left for his guerrilla forces.

"It is now crystal clear that the [Sri Lankan] leaders will never put forward a just resolution to the Tamil national question. Therefore, we are not prepared to place our trust in the impossible and walk along the same old futile path," he said.

The Tigers' leader made his "heroes' day" speech, which commemorates 18,700 killed rebel fighters, from a secret location. It was then broadcast by the rebels' TV and radio network. Roads and buildings in rebel-held territory were decked out in flags and bunting. Pictures of Prabhakaran in characteristic Tiger-striped fatigues and cap, and carrying a gun, lined streets and squares.

Although the two sides in the conflict are supposed to be observing a truce, the reality is that a bloody war is taking place on the ground. More than 3,000 people have been killed in fighting this year alone.

A round of peace talks took place a month ago but quickly broke down amid bitter arguments. "What [Prabhakaran] is saying is that the war is on and there is no getting away from that fact," said one diplomat. "Schools have been bombed. There are raids from both sides. Territory is being fought over. This has obviously shifted Tiger thinking."

Prabhakaran is again talking of Tamil independence. After peace talks in 2003, the Tigers' leadership had proposed an autonomous region within Sri Lanka for Tamils but this solution appears to have evaporated.

Iqbal Athas, an analyst with Jane's Defence Weekly, told Reuters that Prabhakaran's words meant the island should brace for more war. The civil war, which began in 1983, has cost almost 70,000 lives.

"He is putting the government on notice of war," Mr. Athas said. "By saying that they want an independent state, it is clearly getting away from the peace process."

The Sri Lankan government reacted sharply. "Duplicity is all over the speech. Every word, every sentence is duplicity," said chief government spokesman, Keheliya Rambukwella, blaming the rebels for the current state of the ceasefire.

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