

Prabhakaran

by Douglas Ayling

Velupillai Prabhakaran stepped into the press conference on Wednesday and was immediately caught off his guard. He stared through the bright lights at members of the assembled press and looked at first startled and wrong-footed, then imperious, and finally for all the world like a lost schoolboy.

What had happened was this. When Prabhakaran arrived - an hour and a half after the media had been assembled - LTTE plants in the audience spontaneously started up applause. With pavlovian predictability, I couldn't help but join in. The leader of the Tamil Tigers faced his first press conference in 12 years, and these international journalists were applauding him.

Balasingham, on the other hand, bore the attention well. Looking confident and in control, he and his wife joined the table and he began to orchestrate a conference which would last two and a half hours.

You have doubtless read the main points and seen the manner in which Prabhakaran delivered his answers. You will have noticed, no doubt, his immobile posture of stolid solidity, issuing words with finality and an unhurried delivery. You have heard the long pauses, the hushed conferring, and seen his boss-cast eyes slowly roll towards the ceiling as he considered what to tell the world.

There were two answers which seemed to have been carefully scripted in advance, and these - in the absence of a pre-prepared statement - were also the two most important points of the conference. The first was Balasingham's response to the question of whether the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam would give up the demand for Tamil Eelam.

"The three fundamentals are: a Tamil homeland, Tamil nationality, and the Tamil right to self-determination. If these demands are satisfied ... we will consider giving up the demand for freedom," said Balasingham. Crucially, in a later response, Balasingham went on to give his definition of self-determination. The theoretician's official stance is that self-determination means "The right of our people to determine their own political destiny. [Pause] It can also mean economical and political autonomy"; and it can also involve "cession as a last resort".

The breadth of this definition, as Ranil Wickremesinghe has observed, makes constructive peace talks feasible. He responded on Thursday by saying, "Taking cue from this positive reaction, we must work towards a solution".

However, it should also be noted that despite repeated insistences that the LTTE are "sincerely and seriously committed to peace", Balasingham also underscored that the LTTE were, "committed to the emancipation of our people". Before talks can begin, a seemingly immutable precondition for the LTTE is that "we have to be de-proscribed and accepted as the official representatives of our people".

Furthermore, Balasingham and Prabhakaran expressed their doubts as follows: "We don't think that Ranil Wickremesinghe is capable of offering us an acceptable solution

at this stage". He explained that the limitations of the present presidential constitutional structure would create obstacles because Wickremesinghe's government presently lacks the necessary political stability - "it is not powerful enough, it is not authoritative enough" to produce the kind of solutions that the LTTE are seeking.

The other key response from Prabhakaran's first ever international press conference was delivered more spontaneously, yet after some conferring between Prabhakaran and Balasingham. The gentleman from CNN asked if the terrorist leader was ready to be a politician within a democratic system.

"We have been fighting this underground war for the liberation of our people, so we are not that concerned about our personal political life. I am not that concerned about accepting a personal political role in the future," replied Prabhakaran with beguiling sincerity.

And after these things had been said, there was really not much else left to say. Neither Balasingham nor Prabhakaran would be drawn to comment on the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, saying only "we should forget on both sides". Asked what he considered had been his greatest military victory, Prabhakaran laughed and then thought long and hard. "The battle of [Operation] Jayasikuru on the A9" he pronounced.

Yet there were two hours to be filled. This was the first chance in 18 years for the international media to ask questions to this guerilla leader of a ruthless and successful terrorist movement. And there was nothing to say - the exasperation of the journalists was palpable.

A German reporter expressed gratitude for the opportunity, yet pointedly asked "but why have you invited us here?". There was a long, agonising pause which very nearly became comical, before the response began, "There has been a lot of misunderstanding in the past ...".

There was an air of sincerity, of a man who has spent the last 18 years underground - quite literally - a man out of touch with the cynicism of the Western media and the humour of those who do not fear him. Here was a man who has spent the last 18 years giving the orders which killed his enemies, and now suddenly here he was, being asked facetious questions by foreigners with public school accents.

From the Canadian quarter, a voice rode out the clamour - "You make these grand claims ... but in the past you have exterminated your opposition ... Even today we are being filmed ... You have the whole appearance of a military dictator. You are surrounded by goons.

How are we supposed to take you seriously?". The laughter subsided, and we waited, watching the neckless Prabhakaran nod with his eyes fixed to a rigid middle-distance, as Balasingham interpreted this for him. There was not the flicker of a smile, or perhaps there was - one wonders what the Tamil for "goon" is - and the reply came as from a deadpan cold-fish wearing a concealed flak jacket. They would be talking to four other Tamil parties the day after tomorrow - not the actions of a military dictator, and "The time has changed, we are adopting new strategies".

Since September 11th, the LTTE is finding it harder to raise funding from wealthy expatriate Tamils and foreign sources. All that Balasingham would say is that "it is true that several countries have imposed a ban on the LTTE. This is because of the Sri Lankan government's malicious propaganda".

He argued however that the LTTE had commenced peace initiatives before September 11th, he "strongly condemned this act perpetrated in the name of a religion that advocates peace" and his keenness to secure de-proscription in Sri Lanka surely stems from a desire subsequently to persuade foreign governments to re-open channels for foreign support.

With regard to the "War on Terror", Prabhakaran had this to say: "We are not a terrorist organisation, we are fighting for the liberation of our people. You have to distinguish ... Furthermore, there is no clear definition of the concept of terrorism, the word is defined by each country along with its own interests. Those countries waging a war on terror should come up with a clear and concise definition of terrorism - and what constitutes a liberation movement."

This was a press conference which threatened to be overshadowed by the fastidiousness of the security procedures preceding it. As well as queuing for three hours to have their equipment dismantled and photographed, journalists were photographed themselves, and then subsequently filmed during the press conference and watched by young, mustachioed, sunglass-clad bodyguards. A Tamil intelligence officer sat anonymously amid the journalists in his wrap-around shades, listening in to the conversations around him, and desperately trying to read his neighbours' scribbled notes like an ineptly cheating exam student.

During the night before the conference, one group of journalists was singled out for a two hour search by security forces, in which an electronic balance was used to weigh all equipment. Bags were emptied, one video camera was completely dismantled, tripod legs were tapped, dust on the inside of cameras was taken away for inspection and pens were weighed. It became hard to take the venture seriously when a sealed packet of lemon-cream biscuits was weighed by the terrorists.

Before boarding buses to be taken to the conference hall, journalists underwent a body-check so thorough that it involved a 30 second scalp massage, the fondling of earlobes and an examination of the soles of feet. Afterwards, I felt that my testicles were no longer my own. I have since recovered.

Ultimately, I was left with a degree of respect for the man who could have pulled a disparate rural minority together into a coherent and organised force and sustained a successful military operation in guerrilla conditions for so long. He frankly lacked the charisma I would have expected from a man who commands such devotion. He looked pallid, stodgy and inflexible; questions were raised about his health, his heavy catarrh, and that ground-down hard-eyed stare which comes with sleeplessness or a draining illness.

This press conference was not necessary. However, it served as a logistical exercise, as a public relations exercise in the propaganda war; and as a pinnacle in the struggle of the LTTE, which vainly demonstrated how far they have come. One senses also that after four months of peace, this event was critical to the morale and

purpose of the Tamil cadres - the uniformed Tigers who lined the road to the press conference looked genuinely delighted that we had come to see their great prophet.

Balasingham does well to give an air of respectability to the LTTE. Prabhakaran on the other hand, is a guerilla military leader and a killer, not some kind of "intellectual", not a public speaker. It was brave of him to face the questions of the international media, albeit with the invaluable support of his theoretician. At times there was a sense from Prabhakaran and from Balasingham, of their sincere underlying faith in this cause, a faith in the seriousness of a cause which has killed so many, and the seriousness of a struggle which reaps its own sincerity with each anonymous death. On Wednesday, this sincerity met the international media, and was by turns wrong-footed, imperious and lost.