

IT was a desperate last phone call but it did not sound like a man who would be dead within hours. Balasingham Nadesan, political leader of the Tamil Tigers, had nowhere to turn, it seemed. “We are putting down our arms,” he told me late last Sunday night by satellite phone from the tiny slip of jungle and beach on the northeast coast of Sri Lanka where the Tigers had been making their last stand. I could hear machinegun fire in the background as he continued coolly: “We are looking for a guarantee of security from the Obama administration and the British government. Is there a guarantee of security?”

He was well aware that surrendering to the victorious Sri Lankan army would be the most dangerous moment in the 26-year civil war between the Tigers and Sri Lanka’s Sinhalese majority.

I had known Nadesan and Seevaratnam Puleedevan, the head of the Tigers’ peace secretariat, since being smuggled into rebel territory eight years ago.

At that time the Tigers controlled a third of the island; now these two men were trying to save the lives of the remaining 300 fighters and their families, many of them injured. Tens of thousands of Tamil civilians were trapped with them, hiding in hand-dug trenches, enduring near constant bombardment.



Marie Colvin

For several days I had been the intermediary between the Tiger leadership and the United Nations as the army pressed in on the last enclave at the end of a successful military campaign to defeat the rebellion.

Nadesan had asked me to relay three points to the UN: they would lay down their arms, they wanted a guarantee of safety from the Americans or British, and they wanted an assurance that the Sri Lankan government would agree to a political process that would guarantee the rights of the Tamil minority.

Through highly placed British and American officials I had established contact with the UN special envoy in Colombo, Vijay Nambiar, chief of staff to Ban Ki-moon, the secretary-general. I had passed on the Tigers' conditions for surrender, which he had said he would relay to the Sri Lankan government.

The conflict seemed set for a peaceful outcome. Puleedevan, a jolly, bespectacled figure, found time to text me a smiling photo of himself in a bunker.

By last Sunday night, however, as the army pressed in, there were no more political demands from the Tigers and no more photos. Nadesan refused to use the word "surrender" when he called me, but that is what he intended to do. He wanted Nambiar to be present to guarantee the Tigers' safety.

Once more, the UN 24-hour control centre in New York patched me through to Nambiar in Colombo, where it was 5.30am on Monday. I woke him up.

I told him the Tigers had laid down their arms. He said he had been assured by Mahinda Rajapaksa, the Sri Lankan president, that Nadesan and Puleedevan would be safe in surrendering. All they had to do was "hoist a white flag high", he said.

I asked Nambiar if he should not go north to witness the surrender. He said no, that would not be necessary: the president's assurances were enough.

It was still late Sunday night in London. I tried to get through to Nadesan's satellite phone but failed, so I called a Tigers contact in South Africa to relay Nambiar's message: wave a white flag high.

I was woken at 5am by a phone call from another Tigers contact in southeast Asia. He had been unable to get through to Nadesan. "I think it's all over," he said. "I think they're all dead."

That evening, the Sri Lankan army displayed their bodies. What had gone wrong with the surrender? I would soon find out.

I discovered that on Sunday night Nadesan had also called Rohan Chandra Nehru, a Tamil MP in the Sri Lankan parliament, who immediately contacted Rajapaksa.

The MP recounted the events of the next hours: "The president himself told me he would give full security to Nadesan and his family. Nadesan said he had 300 people with him, some injured.

"I said to the president, 'I will go and take their surrender.'

"Rajapaksa said, 'No, our army is very generous and very disciplined. There is no need for you to go to a warzone. You don't need to put your life at risk'."

Chandra Nehru said Basil, the president's brother, called him. "He said, 'They will be safe. They have to hoist a white flag.' And he gave me the route they should follow."

The MP got through to Nadesan at about 6.20am local time on Monday. The sound of gunfire was louder than ever.

“We are ready,” Nadesan told him. “I’m going to walk out and hoist the white flag.”

“I told him: ‘Hoist it high, brother – they need to see it. I will see you in the evening’,” said Chandra Nehru.

A Tamil who was in a group that managed to escape the killing zone described what happened. This source, who later spoke to an aid worker, said Nadesan and Puleedevan walked towards Sri Lankan army lines with a white flag in a group of about a dozen men and women. He said the army started firing machineguns at them.

Nadesan’s wife, a Sinhalese, yelled in Sinhala at the soldiers: “He is trying to surrender and you are shooting him.” She was also shot down.

The source said all in the group were killed. He is now in hiding, fearful for his life. Chandra Nehru has fled the country after being threatened, the MP says, by the president and his brother.

Over the past few days, Nambiar’s role as UN envoy has come into question. His brother, Satish, has been a paid consultant to the Sri Lankan army since 2002. Satish once wrote that General Sarath Fonseka, commander of the Sri Lankan armed forces, “displayed the qualities of a great military leader”.

Although the Tamil Tigers are internationally banned because of past acts of terrorism, including suicide bombings, Nadesan and Puleedevan favoured a political solution to the conflict. Had they lived, they would have been credible political leaders for the Tamil minority.

It was Velupillai Prabhakaran, their commander, who built the movement into a military machine. He was paranoid and ruthless, and he remained committed to military means even as the Tamil Tigers lost ground in the face of the Sri Lankan army onslaught.

Last week, although rumours circulated that Prabhakaran had survived, the organisation was in disarray. Surviving Tamil leaders spoke of turning to a political process, while more militant representatives threatened revenge attacks.

I am in a difficult position as a journalist reporting this story. I first went to Sri Lanka in 2001 to investigate reports that the government was blocking food and medical supplies to half a million Tamils. Journalists had been largely banned from the northern Tamil area for six years.

I found people living in squalor and doctors pleading for medicine. Leaders such as Nadesan and Puleedevan told me they had reduced their demands from independence to autonomy within Sri Lanka.

As I was being smuggled out of the area at night, we were ambushed by the Sri Lankan army. I was unhurt until I shouted, "Journalist, journalist." Then they fired an RPG at me, severely wounding me.

After intermittent contact with the Tamils since then, I had a series of phone calls from the leadership in recent months as the Tigers fell back in the face of the army's new offensive. In one call, Nadesan said the Tigers would abide by the result of any referendum and begged for a ceasefire. His plea was rejected by Colombo.

There was dancing on the capital's streets last week after the defeat of the Tigers. Victory has come, however, at a shocking cost to Tamil civilians. The United Nations says that at least 7,000 died in the last onslaught, although the toll is believed to be much higher. Some 280,000 who had been trapped by the fighting have been herded into "welfare" camps surrounded by razor wire where conditions are said to be deteriorating fast.

Yesterday international aid agencies claimed up to three families were crowding into each tent and being forced to queue for hours for water and food. One aid worker said there was only one doctor in a camp holding 44,000 people.

Refugees reached by The Sunday Times through aid organisations vented their fury. "Look at

how we live,” said one woman in a camp with her two children. “We have no space, no protection from the sun. We are prisoners with armed guards and barbed wire. What do they think I will do – a mother and her two children? Why are we here?”

Reports were circulating that members of paramilitary gangs were seizing young people from the camps, accusing them of being Tigers and holding them in secret facilities, although this could not be confirmed.

The president has talked of reaching out to the Tamil community, unifying the country and resettling 80% of the refugees by the end of the year.

“I do not think that is realistic,” said Anna Neistat, of Human Rights Watch. “There is no procedure to release anyone.”

Whatever the declared intentions of the government, there seems to be little prospect of uniting Sri Lanka in the foreseeable future unless the Tamil grievances that enabled the Tigers to flourish are dealt with.

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article6350563.ece>

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