

Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization

AT A GLANCE

Overview
Organization
Strategy
Major Attacks
Interactions
Maps

HOW TO CITE

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SUMMARY

Formed: September 1977

Disbanded: 1987

First Attack: 1981: TELO carries out a bank heist in Jaffna that leaves the group with 7.8 million rupees. (Unknown casualties)¹

Last Attack: July 30, 1986: TELO attacks government forces in the town of Kandikulam. (4 killed, 3 wounded)²

OVERVIEW

The Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO) is a militant organization that fought for an independent homeland for Sri Lanka's Tamils. TELO, which was officially founded in 1977, first entered into a cooperative alliance with the LTTE, as both were driven by the same fundamental goals. After the death of its co-founders in 1983, TELO's new leader Sri Sabaratnam reached out to RAW and established close ties with the external unit of the Indian Intelligence Services. With Indian funding, TELO grew in both numbers and capabilities. However, in April 1986, LTTE launched a full-out assault on TELO, which it now perceived as a moderate group. By May, the LTTE had successfully killed several hundred TELO cadres, as well as Sabaratnam. With little leadership structure and an over-reliance on Indian support, the organization was never able to re-emerge as a militant group. In 1987, TELO officially disbanded as a military organization and transitioned to a political party.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

The Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO) was officially formed in September 1977 by Nadarajah Thangathura and Selvarajah Yogachandran (better known as Kuttimani). The group, however, had existed since 1969 as a small, underground organization that carried out random acts of arson and other petty criminal activities. Upon formation, Thangathura and Kuttimani decided that TELO would be the political wing of the group and TELA the military wing, although the group as a whole was generally referred to as TELO.

In 1978, TELO entered into a coordinating alliance with the LTTE. Unlike other Tamil militant groups operating at the time, TELO and the LTTE were both driven fundamentally by a desire for an independent Tamil homeland regardless of ideology. Other groups, such as PLOTE and EROS, were influenced more by Marxism. In 1983, TELO was one of the first groups to develop close ties with RAW, the external unit of the Indian Intelligence Services after the death of the group's co-founders Thangathura and Kuttimani. Hundreds of TELO cadres were subsequently trained in Indian camps and under RAW's patronage, TELO flourished. Between 1984 and 1986, the group's membership more than doubled. In 1985, however, RAW began to pressure the Tamil groups it supported to scale back their demands. TELO could not survive without Indian aid and, as a result, was forced into accepting political autonomy rather than independence for Sri Lanka's Tamils. In 1985, EPRLF, TELO, LTTE, and TULF joined forces to form the Eelam National Liberation Front (ENLF) to participate in the Thimphu Talks brokered by India. However, in April 1986, LTTE undertook a systemic campaign to eliminate TELO, which they now saw as a moderate group. In May, they succeeded in killing Sri Sabaratnam, TELO's leader, and virtually destroying the group. By 1987, TELO was a minimalist group with little power and agreed to disarm as provided by the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord of 1987. Since then, the group has disbanded and become a minor political party.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A. LEADERSHIP

TELO was founded by two radical students in 1977, Nadarajah Thangathura and Selvarajah Yogachandran, better known as Kuttimani. Both Thangathura and Kuttimani were caught and arrested by Sri Lankan authorities in 1981 after attempting to flee the country with the loot from a bank heist TELO carried out in Jaffna.³ On July 25, 1983, both leaders were brutally killed in a prison riot conducted by Sinhalese prisoners.⁴ After their death, Sri Sabaratnam took over as head of TELO. Under Sabaratnam, TELO formally divides into a political wing run by Dayasekaram Kulasekaram and a military wing. The military wing consisted of several district commanders who were responsible for all operations within their areas of control.⁵ Sri also established close ties with RAW, the external unit of the Indian Intelligence Services. However, Sri's over-reliance on RAW, as well as his inability to establish strong central leadership, led to the demise of TELO in mid-1986.⁶

Nadarajah Thangathura (September 1977 to July 25, 1983): Co-founder of TELO.⁷

Selvarajah Yogachandran, better known as Kuttimani (September 1977 to July 25, 1983): Co-founder of TELO.⁸

Sri Sabaratnam (July 25, 1983 to May 5, 1986): Last leader of TELO before being killed by the LTTE in 1986.⁹

B. NAME CHANGES

There are no recorded name changes for this group.

C. SIZE ESTIMATES

- 1984: 1,500 cadres (Furtado 2007)¹⁰
- 1985: 2,500 cadres (Furtado 2007)¹¹
- 1986: 4,500 cadres (Furtado 2007)¹²

D. RESOURCES

TELO secured the majority of its funding from criminal activities, such as bank robberies. For example, in 1981, TELO conducted a bank heist in Jaffna securing 7.8 million Sri Lankan rupees for the group.¹³ In terms of weapons, the group was armed primarily with revolvers and homemade explosives, although TELO did receive further weapons from India once they aligned themselves with RAW in 1983.

LTTE and TELO shared a similar recruitment base in Sri Lanka. The majority of TELO, as well as LTTE, recruits came from three major fishing villages in northern Sri Lanka: Velvetithurai, Vadimaratchi, and Point Pedro. This meant that the majority of TELO members were from the Karaiyars, or fishermen's, caste.¹⁴

E. GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATIONS

Disclaimer: This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

Like other Tamil militant groups in the 1980s, TELO was mostly active in northern and eastern Sri Lanka and carried out a number of attacks in the region and its capital, Jaffna.

STRATEGY

A. IDEOLOGY AND GOALS

TELO, like other Tamil militant groups operating during the 1980s, was fighting for an independent homeland for Sri Lanka's Tamil Hindus. However, in 1985, TELO scaled back its demands from secession to autonomy because of pressure from RAW and the Indian

government.¹⁵ Unlike EROS and PLOTE, TELO did not have a Marxist orientation. According to TELO leader Sri Sabaratnam, the group did not adopt a theoretical approach to Tamil independence: “Our people want Eelam immediately. They are not concerned with Marxism or any other ‘ism.’ It (ideology) is only the next step after Eelam is achieved.”¹⁶

B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

After the murder of Sri Sabaratnam in 1986 by the LTTE, TELO began to fall apart. Its new leader, Selvam Adaikalanathan, could not hold the group together and in 1987 decided that TELO should be reconstituted as a political party. Today, TELO is a minor, functioning political party.¹⁷

C. TARGETS AND TACTICS

TELO primarily targeted symbols of government, such as public transportation. TELO also targeted moderate Tamil politicians and other individuals it deemed were in collusion with the Sri Lankan government.¹⁸

In terms of strategy, the group was much more focused on developing a highly militarized organization like LTTE, whereas other groups like PLOTE and EROS were more concerned with obtaining popular support. TELO also targeted Tamil youth as recruits and attempted to radicalize them through indirect affiliations with the Tamil Youth Front (TYF) and the Tamil Students Federation (TSF).¹⁹

MAJOR ATTACKS

Disclaimer: These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization's history. It is not a comprehensive listing but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.

1981: TELO carries out a bank heist in Jaffna that leaves the group with 7.8 million rupees. (Unknown casualties)²⁰

November 1984: TELO attacked a police station in Chavakachcheri. (27 killed)²¹

December 3, 1984: TELO attacks a train in Sri Lanka, taking hostages for ransom. (0 killed)²²

December 3, 1984: TELO attacks a train in Sri Lanka, taking hostages for ransom. (0 killed)²³

1985: Attack on the Kokkavil Army Base. (Unknown casualties)²⁴

January 1985: TELO attacked a train from Annuradhapura to Jaffna. (43 killed, 25 wounded)²⁵

May 14, 1985: TELO launches an armed assault against a game sanctuary in Wilpattu. (23 killed)²⁶

May 14, 1985: TELO attacks a police station in Nochchiyagama. (1 killed)²⁷

July 30, 1986: TELO attacks government forces in the town of Kandikulam. (4 killed, 3 wounded)²⁸

INTERACTIONS

A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

TELO did not have much popular support in the Tamil community, due to their use of violent tactics.²⁹

C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

Like many other groups, TELO had a somewhat tenuous alliance with the LTTE until the LTTE began systemically eliminating its rivals in mid-1986. From 1978 to 1981, the LTTE and TELO formed a brief coordinating alliance. Distrust between the two groups, however, arose after TELO's bank heist in 1981. Prabhakaran, the leader of the LTTE, was involved in the heist along with TELO leaders Thangathura and Kuttimani.³⁰ However, when Sri Lankan forces later captured the two TELO leaders, TELO cadres suspected that Prabhakaran had betrayed them to the police. On April 29, 1986, the LTTE launched an all-out offensive against the LTTE. On May 5, LTTE forces killed TELO's leader Sri Sabaratnam.³¹ By the end of the month, TELO had essentially been eliminated by the LTTE. LTTE justified its attack on TELO by arguing that the group consisted of a collection of criminals and robbers, and that the group was acting as an agent of Indian imperialism.³²

In 1982, the Tamil Eelam Liberation Army (TELA), the military wing of TELO, split off from the group under the leadership of "Oberoi" Devan. Shortly after the split, TELA aligned itself with PLOTE, another Tamil militant group that had fought both the LTTE and TELO in the past. The group, however, was short-lived; after the death of Devan in 1983 by two suspected LTTE militants, the group went into decline. By 1985, TELA had succumbed to in-fighting, split into two, and was finally disbanded.³³

In 1985, EPRLF, TELO, LTTE, and TULF joined forces to form the Eelam National Liberation Front (ENLF) to participate in the Thimphu Talks brokered by India. The group, however, was short-lived; in 1986, relations between the groups deteriorated as the EPRLF, TELO, and EROS loosened their demands on the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE undertook a campaign to eliminate these more 'moderate' groups.³⁴ PLOTE was not included.

When Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) landed in Sri Lanka, they attempted to revive the TELO as a fighting force against the LTTE. These efforts were, however, short-lived; the group constantly came under LTTE attack and was never able to re-emerge as a militant organization.

D. STATE SPONSORS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

After the anti-Tamil riots in 1983, TELO was one of the first groups to develop a close relationship with RAW, the external unit of India's Intelligence Services. In 1983, India first chose to train 350 TELO cadres in India because they thought that TELO was the most pro-Indian group.³⁵ RAW also favored the group because they did not have a Marxist orientation, unlike other Tamil militant groups that it would later support like EROS and PLOTE.³⁶ TELO benefited greatly from this relationship; from 1983-1986, TELO experienced rapid growth in membership, as well as capabilities. RAW trained and armed TELO cadres, as well as helping them set up their own training camps in Sri Lanka.³⁷ However, TELO's over-dependence on RAW eventually contributed to the group's demise and elimination by the LTTE.

¹ Furtado, Christina S. "Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation or Competition, the Case of South Asia." University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007.

² "TELO Incidents." Global Terrorism Database. Web. Accessed 2 August 2013.
<<http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?perpetrator=2443>>

³ Furtado, Christina S. "Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation or Competition, the Case of South Asia." University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007.

⁴ Furtado, Christina S. "Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation or Competition, the Case of South Asia." University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007.

⁵ Furtado, Christina S. "Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation or Competition, the Case of South Asia." University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007.

⁶ Furtado, Christina S. "Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation or Competition, the Case of South Asia." University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007.

⁷ Furtado, Christina S. "Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation or Competition, the Case of South Asia." University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007.

⁸ Furtado, Christina S. "Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation or Competition, the Case of South Asia." University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007.

⁹ Furtado, Christina S. "Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation or Competition, the Case of South Asia." University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007.

¹⁰ Furtado, Christina S. "Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation or Competition, the Case of South Asia." University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007.

¹¹ Furtado, Christina S. "Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation or Competition, the Case of South Asia." University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007.

¹² Furtado, Christina S. "Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation or Competition, the Case of South Asia." University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007.

¹³ Furtado, Christina S. "Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation or Competition, the Case of South Asia." University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007.

¹⁴ Samaranayaka, Gamini. *Political Violence in Sri Lanka, 1971-1987*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2008.

¹⁵ Furtado, Christina S. "Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation or Competition, the Case of South Asia." University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007.

¹⁶ Samaranayaka, Gamini. *Political Violence in Sri Lanka, 1971-1987*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2008.

¹⁷ Krishna, Sankaran. *Postcolonial Insecurities: India, Sri Lanka, and the question of nationhood*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

¹⁸ Furtado, Christina S. "Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation or Competition, the Case of South Asia." University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007.

¹⁹ Furtado, Christina S. "Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation or Competition, the Case of South Asia." University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007.

²⁰ Furtado, Christina S. "Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation or Competition, the Case of South Asia." University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007.

²¹ Furtado, Christina S. "Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation or Competition, the Case of South Asia." University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007.

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- ²² "TELO Incidents." Global Terrorism Database. Web. Accessed 2 August 2013.
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- ²³ "TELO Incidents." Global Terrorism Database. Web. Accessed 2 August 2013.
<<http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?perpetrator=2443>>
- ²⁴ Samaranayaka, Gamini. *Political Violence in Sri Lanka, 1971-1987*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2008.
- ²⁵ Furtado, Christina S. "Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation or Competition, the Case of South Asia." University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007.
- ²⁶ "TELO Incidents." Global Terrorism Database. Web. Accessed 2 August 2013.
<<http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?perpetrator=2443>>
- ²⁷ "TELO Incidents." Global Terrorism Database. Web. Accessed 2 August 2013.
<<http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?perpetrator=2443>>
- ²⁸ "TELO Incidents." Global Terrorism Database. Web. Accessed 2 August 2013.
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- ²⁹ Furtado, Christina S. "Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation or Competition, the Case of South Asia." University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007.
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- ³² Krishna, Sankaran. *Postcolonial Insecurities: India, Sri Lanka, and the question of nationhood*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- ³³ Marks, Thomas A. "Maoist Insurgency Since Vietnam." New York: Frank Cass, 1996.
- ³⁴ Furtado, Christina S. "Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation or Competition, the Case of South Asia." University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007.
- ³⁵ Furtado, Christina S. "Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation or Competition, the Case of South Asia." University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007.
- ³⁶ Krishna, Sankaran. *Postcolonial Insecurities: India, Sri Lanka, and the question of nationhood*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
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