

# Sri Lankan paramilitary leader convicted in Britain

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13 March 2008

A British court case against Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan, alias Karuna, the former leader of the Tamileela Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP), has shed further light on the collaboration between the Sri Lankan government and various paramilitaries in the resumed war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The TMVP, originally known as the Karuna group, is a breakaway faction of the LTTE and based in the Eastern province of Sri Lanka.

On January 25, the Isleworth Crown Court in Britain sentenced Karuna to nine months imprisonment for identity fraud and violating the UK Identity Card Act of 2006. This reactionary law allows for the holding of an increasing amount of personal information on individuals and has been used by the British government to target immigrants in particular.

In the case of Karuna, however, he admitted that he had travel documents falsely identifying him and pleaded guilty. The main charge against Karuna was travelling to UK on a diplomatic passport, which had his own photograph, but the name of someone else. How he obtained a diplomatic passport and British visa raises questions about his relationship with senior government figures in Sri Lanka.

According to court reports, Karuna entered Britain on September 18 last year. On November 2 he was arrested by British officials in an apartment in South Kensington, London. He had a Sri Lankan diplomatic passport in the name of Kokila Dushmantha Gunawardena, an ethnic Sinhala name.

British police confirmed that the travel documents were genuine although under a false name and that a valid visa had been issued by British High Commission in Colombo. The High Commission in turn claimed it had received the passport used by Karuna from the Sri Lankan Foreign Ministry with a supporting visa request.

Based on local sources, the *Sunday Leader*, a Sri Lankan weekly, claimed that the Sri Lankan Immigration and Emigration Department had issued the passport under orders from top government authorities on August 18. His visa application falsely declared the person was the director general of the Wildlife Conservation Department, the report stated. Other newspapers, including the *Sunday Times*, reported that Karuna received Sri Lankan diplomatic help in the UK during his visit.

The Sri Lankan government has simply stonewalled. Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama denied any government involvement in securing a diplomatic passport for Karuna. But he did not deny the media reports.

Karuna's formal statement, read in open court on January 25, was a serious embarrassment for the Sri Lankan government. In pleading guilty, Karuna stated that defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the brother of President Mahinda Rajapakse, had "arranged everything" concerning his travel to the UK. Karuna added that he had known Gotabhaya Rajapakse since he defected from the LTTE.

Gotabhaya Rajapakse denied the claim, telling *Lakbima News* on January 27: "I haven't helped him [Karuna]." *IANS News* quoted the defence secretary as saying: "I do not know how Karuna got the passport". He also queried how Karuna got a British visa, implying collusion by the High Commission or officials in London.

However, Rajapakse admitted in the course of the *IANS News* interview to knowing Karuna who had asked "a long time ago" for help in travelling to the UK. Karuna had wanted to see his children who were already there, he said. Rajapakse claimed that he had tried to arrange the travel through a friendly third country, but failed.

In a particularly revealing statement, Rajapakse declared: "Why should I want to send him away when he could be useful in Sri Lanka?" Rajapakse did not elaborate, but over the past two years the Karuna group has colluded with the military in terrorising the Tamil population in the East and attacking the LTTE. While the government has repeatedly denied such collaboration, the defence secretary's admission testifies to the close relationship with Karuna.

Before breaking from the LTTE, Karuna was a senior figure. He participated as an LTTE representative in peace talks initiated by the Colombo government in 2002 with the backing of major powers. The peace process was not based on granting democratic rights to the Tamil masses, but on securing a power-sharing arrangement that would enable the mutual exploitation of the working class—both Tamil and Sinhala.

Sections of the ruling elite rallied behind former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who, along with the military top brass and chauvinist groups such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna

(JVP), opposed the “peace process”, claiming it was a betrayal. Kumaratunga seized three key ministries in November 2003 from the United National Party (UNP)-led government and in February 2004 she sacked the entire cabinet.

Karuna broke away from the LTTE in March 2004. He and his allies were bitterly critical of the LTTE leadership for favouring the North over the East. He demanded that the LTTE’s eastern wing be allowed to “function independently” and called for a separate administrative district for the eastern Batticaloa-Amparai area. In seeking to cut a deal with Colombo for the benefit of the Tamil elites in the East, Karuna’s outlook was simply the logical extension of the LTTE’s own politics.

One of the LTTE’s senior female commanders, Nilavani, lined up with Karuna and accompanied him to Colombo in mid-2004. Shortly after, she broke with Karuna, made amends with the LTTE leadership and went to its northern headquarters in Kilinochchi. She explained to the BBC in June 2004 how Sri Lankan military intelligence had protected and held lengthy discussions with Karuna in Colombo.

“Initially we were all together in Colombo under Sri Lankan security forces. Later Karuna moved to a separate place,” Nilavani told a press conference. In Colombo, they were kept at the five-star Hilton Hotel for three days before being taken to military safe houses. Her statement is further evidence that Sri Lankan, and possibly Indian, intelligence was involved in engineering the split in the LTTE.

A few months later, Karuna was able to open public offices for his political party, the TMVP, in Colombo and the East, with the tacit protection of the security forces. The split was one factor in the push by sections of the military for a renewal of the war to take advantage of the weakened LTTE position in the East. Rajapakse narrowly won the presidency in November 2005 on a program designed to provoke a conflict by demanding a review of the ceasefire agreement.

The Karuna group is widely believed to have been involved in the violent provocations that commenced shortly after the election. It was implicated in the assassination of Joseph Pararajasingham, a prominent pro-LTTE parliamentarian, at St. Mary’s cathedral in the government-controlled town of Batticaloa on Christmas Eve in 2005.

On April 7, 2006, V. Vigneswaran, another prominent pro-LTTE politician, was killed in Trincomalee inside a High Security Zone. A report issued by the University Teachers for Human Rights (UTHR, Jaffna), which is known to oppose the LTTE, declared in October 2006 that “Vigneswaran was killed by a Karuna cadre named Riyaseelan (Seelan).”

In November 2006, special advisor to the UN Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Allen Rock, told the media after a 10-day fact finding mission in Sri Lanka, that there was “strong and credible” evidence that sections of the military had supported and participated in the abduction of children for the Karuna faction. He complained that members of the Karuna group roamed the Eastern province with impunity, openly

carrying arms through military checkpoints and engaging in violence and intimidation.

According to UNICEF, families in the Ampara, Batticaloa, and Trincomalee districts had reported 208 child abductions by the Karuna group as of December 31, 2006. Human rights groups, as well as officials of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which oversaw the ceasefire, reported the collusion of the Karuna faction with the military and police. After the Rajapakse government relaunched the war in 2006, reports indicated that sections of the Karuna faction collaborated in military operations.

In mid-2007, an internal conflict erupted within the TMVP between Karuna and his deputy S. Chandrakanthan, also known as Pillayan. Increasingly discredited among Tamils in the East for his group’s child abductions and killings, and under fire from international human rights organisations, Karuna left for Britain on his diplomatic passport. Three days after his arrest, Pillayan loyalists seized the TMVP offices in Batticaloa in a quick, decisive coup on November 5 and placed the remaining Karuna loyalists in custody.

Now the Karuna group is known as the Pillayan group. The government and the military quickly established a working relationship with the new leadership. Rajapakse’s ruling United Freedom Peoples Alliance (UPFA) entered a formal alliance with TMVP to contest local government elections in Batticaloa district held on March 10. UPFA leaders justified the alliance by declaring that previous governments had also collaborated with rival paramilitaries to the LTTE.

The exact role of the Rajapakse brothers in obtaining a passport for Karuna and in his subsequent arrest remains to be seen. While his comments in court may have caused some embarrassment, the fact that Karuna is out of the way in a British jail is very convenient for the Sri Lankan government and military, who have much more to fear if he were to tell the whole story of their involvement in his violent crimes.



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