British newspapers expose cold-blooded killing of LTTE leaders in Sri Lanka

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The British press last week revealed that senior leaders of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were in negotiations with British and American diplomats to surrender, immediately prior to their killing by the Sri Lankan army on May 18. Also involved in the talks was the United Nations secretary general's chief of staff, Vijay Nambiar.

The *Guardian* and the *Sunday Times* both published reports stating that Balasingham Nadesan, the leader of the LTTE's political wing, and Seevaratnam Puleedevan, the head of its peace secretariat, held talks with Nambiar through a series of intermediaries, including a journalist and a delegation of British diplomats.

The *Guardian* states that the LTTE leaders also made further contact with Norwegian Environment and Development Cooperation Minister Erik Solheim prior to their deaths. Solheim had been involved as a special envoy in attempts to broker a peace agreement following the 2002 ceasefire in Sri Lanka's protracted civil war.

The *Sunday Times* article by journalist Marie Colvin was headlined, "Tigers begged me to broker surrender." She explained how the initial contact between the LTTE, British and United States officials, and the United Nations had been facilitated through her.

Colvin has covered the civil war in Sri Lanka since being "smuggled into territory eight years ago" in order "to investigate reports that the government was blocking food and medical supplies to half a million Tamils." She had met and came to know Nadesan and Puleedevan since that time.

The *Guardian* details how the two leaders of the LTTE attempted to agree to a last minute deal with the Sri Lankan government just hours before they were killed by the army in the early hours of May 18—while in the process of surrendering.

A British official states that UK involvement was "at most indirect", but the article includes a quote from Nambiar saying that he had had "direct contact" with British diplomats in New York and also with an unnamed British minister. Nambiar added, "There was a ministerial demarche [a formal diplomatic representation] to the secretary general from the UK office in New York."

Nambiar passed on the information obtained by the *Times* journalist regarding the proposal of Nadesan and Puleedevan to surrender to the Sri Lankan government. He says that he also spoke to Sri Lankan Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona about the proposal.

The government had no intention of brokering a ceasefire or allowing any surrender by the LTTE leadership. Nambiar told the *Guardian*, "The Sri Lankan government did not say that they would accept the surrender. They said it may be too late."

After being contacted by the LTTE regarding the surrender, Solheim "then contacted the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Sri Lankan government".

A text message was then sent from Kohona to the Red Cross, which read, "Just walk across to the troops, slowly! With a white flag and comply with instructions carefully. The soldiers are nervous about suicide bombers."

In Colvin's *Times* article she described the harrowing conditions facing the LTTE fighters as they were cornered into a tiny strip of jungle and a beach area during the final army offensive: "Tens of thousands of Tamil civilians were trapped with them, hiding in hand-dug trenches, enduring near constant bombardment."

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"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," she writes. "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."

Colvin corroborates the *Guardian*'s report. She states that in conversation with Nambiar during the morning of May 18, he told her that he had been told by Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse that the two leaders would be able to surrender by hoisting "a white flag high".

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

"I told him the Tigers had laid down their arms. He said he had been assured by Mahinda Rajapakse, 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."

Shortly after this Colvin lost contact with Nadesan's satellite phone and spoke to an LTTE contact in South Africa, to whom she relayed the instructions to hoist the white flag.

Colvin reports, "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 incident underscores the ruthlessness with which the Sri Lankan government and army slaughtered the LTTE leadership on the morning of May 18. Virtually all of the top LTTE leaders, including LTTE chief V. Prabhakaran, died in circumstances that have not been adequately explained. The Sri Lankan government claimed that Prabhakaran was killed in a gun battle trying to flee, but he may well have met the same fate as Nadesan and Puleedevan.

Certainly the army pursued the destruction of the last pocket of LTTE resistance with criminal indifference to the consequences of nearly a quarter of a million Tamil civilians trapped in the war zone. While Rajapakse's government denies responsibility for any civilian deaths, the latest reports based on leaked UN estimates put the death toll at more than 20,000 since January.

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