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Sri Lanka conflict: 'Two of us fled. 75 other women killed themselves with grenades,' says Tamil Tiger

As the Sri Lankan army intensifies its campaign against the last remnants of the Tamil Tigers, Gethin Chamberlain hears the harrowing stories of the captured female fighters who chose not to carry out suicide orders

Gethin Chamberlain

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By the time Arulmathy and her fellow Tamil Tigers realised they were surrounded, it was too late. They had fallen asleep and now Sri Lankan soldiers were swarming into their bunker. Arulmathy watched aghast as 75 women she had fought beside for so many months reached for their hand grenades, pulled the pins and blew themselves to pieces, as they had been ordered to do.

But Arulmathy had had enough of the Tigers' war. She had no wish to die for a cause in which she no longer believed. As the grenades detonated, she slipped into a supply trench and ran for her life. In January, as the Sri Lankan army intensified its campaign against the dwindling rebel force, she surrendered.

Trapped inside a tiny coastal strip no larger than 20 sq km, the last fighters of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are almost out of time. Since the start of the year, the Sri Lankan military has stepped up its campaign. Outgunned, they have fallen back to an area designated a "no-fire zone", where civilians were told to gather to escape the fighting. In the past week, more than 500 rebel fighters were reported killed.

Alongside the LTTE fighters are tens of thousands of civilians, unwilling or unable to leave. The Sri Lankan government says they are being used as human shields, and independent humanitarian workers say there is no doubt that many who tried to escape have been shot by the Tigers. One UN worker described how a five-year-old boy was shot in the head as he tried to flee. Yesterday Sri Lankan forces claimed to have made further advances, killing 28 rebel fighters in fresh fighting on the edge of the no-fire zone. The military said 606 civilians managed to escape from the zone on Friday and the operation was continuing.

Doctors working in the no-fire zone say that over the past week they have treated hundreds of civilians, accusing the Sri Lankan government of shelling the zone; one claimed that about 50 civilians are dying every day. The government denies these charges and there is no way of proving the claims because independent media are barred from entering the area. The military says that, even when surrounded, many Tigers refused to surrender. Asked to explain how

more than 500 Tigers had been killed in the most recent fighting, against an official military death toll of just 11, Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara, the military spokesman, said the rebels had been cut off and were unable to get fresh supplies: "They were pretty much out of ammunition, but they were determined to fight to the end. It was hand-to-hand fighting."

With many of their leaders dead, some Tigers, like Arulmathy, have chosen to surrender. She was taken to what the Sri Lankan Ministry of Justice describes as a "rehabilitation centre", built on a hillside amid dense jungle outside the town of Ambepusse, about an hour-and-a-half's drive from the capital, Colombo. Others among the 22 female inmates held behind barbed wire confirmed that they had received orders from the LTTE to use hand grenades to commit suicide rather than be taken alive. The instruction was simple: hold the grenade against your head or stomach and detonate it.

The women at Ambepusse have been told they must spend a year undergoing what Piyumanthi Peries, the assistant commissioner-general of rehabilitation, called "psycho-social rehabilitation" - a mixture of psychiatry, therapy, medical treatment and vocational training. The Ministry of Justice says the women are there for protection from LTTE reprisals and to be trained to find jobs on release. The women say they are well treated and have rejected the Tigers.

Arulmathy was 19 when she entered the LTTE training camp in 2003. In her purple-and-white check shirt and long purple skirt, she does not look much like a guerrilla. But she had signed up voluntarily, angered by a video she had watched. "It showed some fighting and cruel things done by the Sinhalese army, so I joined for the adventure," she says. "I joined for the Tamil nation." She trained for seven months. In 2006, she was injured by shrapnel. By the time her unit was surrounded the following year, she had already resolved to get out.

"We were careless and we had fallen asleep," she says. "The army were only 10 metres away when we saw them. They started to jump into the bunker. We couldn't do anything. Seventy-five committed suicide with their grenades. There were parts of them spread on all sides. I can never forget that scene. Only two of us escaped. This war has been useless." Arulmathy tried to get away, but was recaptured by the Tigers and beaten. She made two more unsuccessful attempts before making it to safety. She surrendered in January this year, as the Sri Lankan army swept north.

Suba, 26, was also a willing volunteer when she joined up in 2002. She, too, was happy to accept the Tigers' line: "The LTTE said we must fight for freedom for the area." She fought in two major operations. "It was very cruel, a very big jungle with no food or water. We had to walk long distances and it was very painful."

Suba was with 40 other young women when they ran into a stronger army force. "They surrounded us and we could not escape, so we fought them," she says. "Most of the girls were killed and three or four of us escaped, but the others committed suicide by grenade ... But I didn't want to kill myself."

What appears to have turned some former supporters against the LTTE was its decision in 2007 to start conscripting fighters to fill their depleted ranks. Niraiesai, 26, says she was given no choice but to fight. She had just finished teacher training when the Tigers turned up at her home in 2007. Every family had to send one member to fight, they were told. "Many people

didn't like it, but they compelled us so we had to join."

She was sent to an orphanage to teach before being transferred to a battalion as a computer operator, but, as the war intensified in August last year she was sent to the front. "Many cadres had been killed or injured ... so the administration staff were sent to the front line. The first time I had to fight, I was frightened. We came up on them hiding behind some trees and we shot at them, but no one was killed. I prayed to god that I didn't kill anyone. I closed my eyes and fired my gun." In November she and the six other women in her unit were surrounded. "We couldn't escape. Two of the girls went outside to get help and the army shot them and they were killed. After that, there were five of us in the bunker. I thought that day I would be killed. At first we fought, but we ran out of rounds and so we surrendered." But two women, 18-year-old Nallisai and Mathuvanthi, 22, stayed behind. "They removed the clips from their hand grenades and put them on their stomachs and committed suicide. We begged them not to, but they were afraid of what the army would do to them. They were very young."

Niraiesai was held in a military camp for two months, then sent to Ambepusse. She says the Tigers stole her youth. "For 25 years, we were ruled by the LTTE and we believed them. But after 2007 people hated them because they compelled the children to fight. We were brainwashed that the Sinhalese were bad and we believed them," she says. "But now I think we can live together."

Names have been changed

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