

## Rift seen weakening rebels. (1994, May). Lanka news.

**A** smouldering rift between Sri Lanka's Tamil guerrilla chief and his deputy has given authorities a rare opportunity to weaken the group, military officials and analysts say.

"Now is the time to hit them," a senior defence official said in an interview. "When the Tigers are divided we must deepen the rift with psyops (psychological warfare operations) and go on the offensive."

The split came to light when rebel chieftain Velupillai Prabhakaran sent his elite bodyguards on a midnight raid last August on which he was reported to have arrested his deputy, Gopalaswamy Mahendrarajah.

Mahendrarajah was accused by his captors of trying to kill Prabhakaran and seize control of the rebel group in a plot hatched by India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) external intelligence agency.

The secretive, 39-year-old Prabhakaran, who is rarely seen in public, has moved out of his northern stronghold of Jaffna into the jungles of Sri Lanka's northern mainland, apparently fearing an attempt on his life by Mahendrarajah loyalists, military intelligence sources say.

The military said Mahendrarajah was sentenced to death late last year by the guerrilla

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leadership and has not been seen since. Some reports say he has already been executed. The rebels say he is still in their custody.

Up until the August raid the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), into an eleventh year of fighting for a separate Tamil state in the island's north and east, had maintained an aura of monolithic invincibility.

The rebels crushed rival militias, exterminating their leaders, and overran military camps in a vicious guerrilla campaign that has cost more than 30,000 lives.

Internal dissent was dealt with by summary executions usually made public, such as the December announcement of the execution of nine "informants".

But the sensitivity of the Mahendrarajah case has left the details unclear.

"Right now people have accepted Prabhakaran's version (of what happened)," said David Jeyaraj, a Tamil journalist who publishes a newspaper in Canada for Tamil expatriates.

"But if the mood changes and

people believe Mahendrarajah was not a traitor then this may be the beginning of the end of the movement," he added.

A local man in the north said Mahendrarajah was a popular figure there but lacked the charisma and power to take over.

Meanwhile, Prabhakaran is on trial in absentia in India for planning the murder of Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, blown up by a Tiger woman suicide bomber three years ago. The Tigers have denied killing him.

India originally helped the Tigers but later sent troops to fight them under a peace pact between New Delhi and Colombo.

Tamils are the second largest ethnic community in Sri Lanka, about 18.5 percent of Sri Lanka's 17 million people.

"India is worried the Tamil rebellion in northern Sri Lanka could fuel separatist sentiment in her southern Tamil Nadu state," an analyst said. "Even if Mahendrarajah was not involved in the alleged plot India succeeded in creating a rift by making

Prabhakaran and the LTTE leadership believe he was," the analyst said.

Though Sri Lankan defence officials monitoring the rift say the time is ripe to exploit it, political analysts say the military has done little but promote anti-Prabhakaran or pro-Mahendrarajah media coverage.

Government media say

Prabhakaran fell out with his deputy because the latter was popular and ready to hold peace talks for example.

The absence of Mahendrarajah, for long the Tigers' military commander, does not appear to have hurt their fighting capability, given the devastating manner in which they overran a key military base, Pooneryn, last

November.

The rebels, who launched a major recruitment drive last year, say they inducted 5,000 cadres just before the raid.

"As long as Mahendrarajah is living Prabhakaran has a big problem," the senior defence source argued. "A sizeable section in the LTTE is loyal to Mahendrarajah."