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Sri Lanka: Paradise lost?

Since independence in 1948,

Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) has been the site of escalating violence between the majority Sinhalese community and minority Tamils. The current ethnic conflict has deep historical, racio-religious, geo-political and economic roots intermingled with local power politics.

The Sinhalese and Tamils are ethnic groups that migrated from India and have been present in Sri Lanka for at least 2,500 years.¹ There is a strong Sinhala belief that the Sinhalese were chosen by the Buddha to possess the island.² Though both communities have co-existed in their own kingdoms as stable national entities ruled by their own kings, there is disagreement as to which community has a longer history on the island. There has been much positive community interplay³ yet unfortunately 'the collective memory has tended to concentrate on the tensions and hostility which were generated at times of unrest.'⁴

History of conflict

Tensions began with the arrival of foreign colonialists: first the Portuguese in 1505, the Dutch in 1658, and finally the British in 1796. Both the Portuguese and Dutch colonialists administered the kingdoms separately. However under British colonial rule the island became a single politico-geographic administration for the first time. The integrity and independence of the regions were thus violated. This 'forceful annexation and amalgamation of two separate kingdoms, of two nations of people, disregarding their past historical existence, their socio-cultural distinctions, and their ethnic differences was the root of the present

Tamil-Sinhala antagonism'⁵

The peaceful negotiations leading to Sri Lankan independence saw power transferred from the British to the English-educated Sinhala and Tamil elites. But differences and mistrust grew as the minority Tamils and Muslims feared domination by the majority Sinhalese. The constitution did not provide the hoped for protection for the Tamil minority. Sinhalese nationalists dominated and gained control over the state administration. Violent oppression and discrimination against the Tamils was unleashed by the Sinhala majority government – and this has been continued by successive Sri Lankan governments.⁶ Assurances given to the Tamils that minorities would be respected were never realised.

The 'Ceylon Citizenship Act' [1948] denied Sri Lankan citizenship and voting rights to a million Tamils of Indian origin who could not prove paternal ancestry in Sri Lanka for three generations and proof of income or possession of property. Tamils were also required to learn the majority Sinhala language, which denied them access to employment in education and government⁷. State-sponsored Sinhala colonisation and settlement began before independence but was implemented on a greater scale during the 1950s and 1960s⁸, and was designed to destroy Tamil national identity⁹. The Tamils' status in their own land was reduced, they were deprived of their land and denied agricultural development and industrial infrastructure¹⁰. This discrimination has



been continued by successive governments so that a people who have contributed to the island's prosperity for over 150 years have been disenfranchised, deprived of fundamental human rights and reduced to statelessness.

Anti-Tamil riots

Non-violent protests and civil disobedience movements by Tamils against the government was followed by violence against the Tamil community from government supporters. In one riot about 150 Tamil civilians, including women and children, were killed. The major violent anti-Tamil racial riots prior to 1980s occurred in 1956, 1958, 1961, 1974 and 1977. Throughout these years, the Tamils adopted peaceful forms of struggle. For nearly 25 years Tamil parliamentary political parties launched non-violent campaigns to restore basic human rights and obtain devolution of power. These demands were met with military

repression and agreements and pacts not respected.

A generation of Tamil youth emerged in the 1970s that believed their demands were unattainable by democratic means.¹¹ A state of war has existed between the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) since the 1983 anti-Tamil riots when more than 3,000 Tamils living peacefully in the Sinhalese South were massacred by Sinhalese groups led by government Ministers. Since then, Tamil Tiger guerillas have waged a ferocious, bloody struggle against the Sinhalese government for an independent Tamil state. Over 75,000 people, mainly Tamil civilians, have died.

With the recent Government scrapping of a precarious truce, this 25 year civil war could now escalate into the bloodiest period of fighting yet.¹² A promising Cease Fire Agreement signed in February 2002 has been violated by both the Government and the LTTE. The Norwegian-backed peace process has been effectively halted due to escalating violence since the end of 2005. Unfortunately, the ensuing humanitarian crisis, which has involved mass killings, abductions, suicide bombings and displacement, has been largely ignored by the international community. Following the December 2004 Asian tsunami there were great hopes for peace, but this has not eventuated. Few Sri Lankans have been untouched by the violence for which both sides are criminally responsible

Sri Lanka's Sinhalese control the army, navy and air force. The Tigers have only small arms, in large part purchased with money raised by the million-strong expatriate Tamils. The Tigers have used their bodies as human bombs. Over 400,000 internally displaced persons wander the North and East of the island. Neither side can provide the security, food, water and shelter these people seek.

Child abductions for military recruitment are not new in Sri Lanka: the Government has long accused the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) of this.¹³ But the Government is now in the spotlight, with two international reports condemning it for enabling child recruitment by the military wing of the TMVP [Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal, or Tamil People's Liberation Tigers]. A priest who has lived in the area for nearly 60 years and has documented over 8000 human rights violations by the police and army, believes the army is complicit in the abductions and turns a blind eye to the activities of the TMVP.¹⁴ Both Human Rights Watch and Allan Rock, a UN special envoy on children in armed conflict, have pointed the finger at the army for enabling the abductions. However, parents of abducted children are scared of reprisals and civil rights activists question the value of publicising the issue

Long-standing tensions

The Sinhalese who control the Government are largely Buddhist. They constitute about 74% of the country's 20 million people. The largely Hindu Tamils make up about 18% of the population. Each group has strong, distinct cultural, historical and linguistic identities. Long-standing tensions between Tamils and Sinhalese over political control of their respective parts of the island are at the root of the conflict. The bottom line is the determination by successive Sinhalese-dominated Sri Lankan Governments and their backers, to turn multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-lingual, multi-cultural Sri Lanka into a Sinhalese-Buddhist country. The Tamils claim that if this is the objective (now even enshrined in the Constitution), there is no alternative to a separate Tamil State, Eelam. The principle Tamil rebel group, the LTTE, control a swathe of the island's northern end, and continue to

demand full independence there.¹⁵

Germany has called on the international community to persuade both parties to the conflict to seek a political rather than military solution. It has also called on the European Union to impose sanctions unless the hardline government abandons its militarist path. According to reports, Germany has already frozen new development cooperation projects with Sri Lanka and, because of the deteriorating security situation, was withdrawing half their development personnel from the island as well as closing the German Development Bank in Sri Lanka.¹⁶ Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have also demanded that the Government and the LTTE improve the protection of civilians because of enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests, detentions and internal displacement of people. The Human Rights Council in Geneva has been urged to call on both sides of the conflict to improve this protection by complying with international human rights standards and international humanitarian law and a strong monitoring mandate by the United Nations.

The future

The situation in Sri Lanka seems to be hopeless. It leads to anger and despair, yet there are stories of personal heroism, self-sacrifice, and expressions of hope. It is interesting that those who take a hard line at, or about, peace talks are often nowhere near danger. Hardness of attitude is in direct relationship to the person's distance from the war. Those who are suffering want peace. Those removed from the horrors want a military victory.¹⁷

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Full references on the ERC website.



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