

# Intractable Ethnic War?: The Tamil-Sinhalese Conflict In Sri Lanka

## INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we shift our focus to South Asia and to “dirty wars” by studying the prolonged Tamil–Sinhalese ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Typically **dirty wars** are deep-rooted and highly internationalized ethnic conflicts, that are ruthlessly fought by the adversaries, produce great human suffering and human rights abuses, and are difficult to resolve through international third-party involvement. As recent developments in Sri Lanka vividly demonstrate, such conflicts often end with the complete military defeat and destruction of one side. But, while a “fight to the finish” may lead to the end of the conflict, it usually leaves behind a war ravaged country and a complex humanitarian emergency. At the conclusion of dirty wars, therefore, peace building, reconstruction and reconciliation emerge as the main challenges. Sustained international commitment and support is usually needed to meet these challenges.

## WHY DID ETHNIC CONFLICT OCCUR IN SRI LANKA?

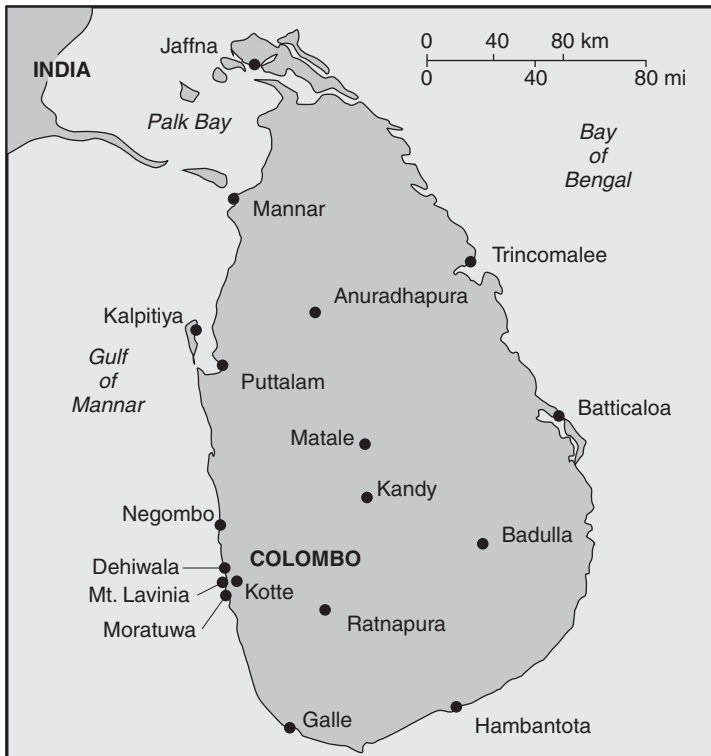
Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon), a small island off the southern coast of India, has a total population of around 20 million, of which roughly 74 percent are **Sinhalese**; 18 percent are Tamils; 7 percent are **Moors**; and the rest are **Burghers, Malays, and Veddhas**.<sup>1</sup> In terms of the population’s religious orientation, approximately 70 percent are Sinhalese-Buddhists, about 15 percent are Hindus, around 7 percent are Muslims, and Roman Catholics and other Christian groups account for 8 percent.<sup>2</sup> The Sinhalese mostly inhabit the wetter southern, western, and central parts of Sri Lanka. The roots of their civilization are largely Indian, although over the years, they have been influenced by other cultures, including the Portuguese; the English; and to a lesser extent, the Dutch, the Burmese, and the Thais. The bulk of the Tamil

population is concentrated in the drier northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka and is split into two distinct groups: the **Sri Lankan Tamils**, who are mainly descendants of tribes that first arrived on the island well over 1,500 years ago, and the **Indian Tamils**, who originate from indentured plantation workers brought to the island by British tea planters during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>3</sup>

Historically, Tamil–Sinhalese ethnic relations have been marked by both traditional rivalry and peaceful coexistence. During British colonial rule, however, contentious issues that could inflame interethnic relations remained firmly in check. But after independence in 1948, successive Sinhalese-dominated governments openly pandered to Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalist sentiments, and they tried to resolve these contentious issues in ways that favored the Sinhalese community at the expense of the minorities, especially the Tamils. The result was a steep deterioration in interethnic relations in the immediate postindependence era, which turned into a brutal insurgency–counterinsurgency war starting in the early 1980s.

One of the most serious issues between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities concerns the Sri Lankan Tamils' demand for political autonomy or independence, based on their notion of a national territorial homeland comprising the northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan Tamils' insistence on their "right" to a national homeland derives from their belief that they had been the first people to settle on the island and that they had a long history of separate political existence

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from the Sinhalese prior to British rule. The Sinhalese community and the Sri Lankan government, however, completely refute the Sri Lankan Tamils' territorial claims over any parts of Sri Lanka. Myths and legends composed by *bbikkhus* (Buddhist monks) maintain that the Sinhalese were the first civilized people to settle on the island, long before the Tamils came. These stories also allege that the Sinhalese arrival in Sri Lanka was at the request of Lord Buddha himself, and hence it is the "religious-ethnic destiny" of the Sinhalese community to control the entire island so that the Buddhist religion can be protected and promoted there. Based on this schema, the Hindu Tamils, whose presence in Sri Lanka are claimed by the Sinhalese to be the result of invasion, conquest, and British labor and emigration policy, are denied any territorial rights to a separate national homeland.

Cultural and religious differences and insecurities have also contributed to destroying ethnic harmony in Sri Lanka. The Tamils are mostly Hindus, although their identity has no specific religious or Hindu dimension. This probably explains why the Sri Lankan Tamils have historically not expressed fears about the Sinhalese community's desire to protect and promote Buddhism, which many Hindus consider to be an offshoot of Hinduism that expounds similar themes on life and religion.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, the Sinhalese, who are overwhelmingly Buddhist, despite some conversions to Christianity in the colonial period, have an aversion to the Tamils. The *bbikkhus* have been apprehensive that the preeminent position of the Buddhist religion in Sri Lanka faces a grave threat from Hindu Tamils, not only from within Sri Lanka but also from the strong Tamil diaspora in India, numbering about 80 million. The *bbikkhus'* apprehension was formed over centuries due to repeated invasions of Sri Lanka by South India's powerful Tamil kingdoms, which eventually led to the overthrow of the ancient Sinhalese-Buddhist kingdom in the north and the forced migration of Sinhalese people from the north to the south in the thirteenth century. Spurred also by the fear that their privileged position within the Sinhalese-Buddhist community would be at grave risk if Sri Lanka ever came under the political domination of Hindu Dravidian rulers,<sup>5</sup> the *bbikkhus* tried to influence Sinhalese national consciousness in the postindependence period "by deliberately exaggerating historical events dealing with Sinhalese-Tamil conflict."<sup>6</sup> For instance, the *bbikkhus* evoked legends and myths to advocate the view that Sinhalese-Buddhist society faced the constant danger of being destroyed or polluted by the Dravidian Hindu civilization and that past Sinhalese rulers had made heroic efforts to curb Tamil invasions. Such legends and myths made a deep impression on Sinhalese national consciousness, leading to the creation of a minority complex—that is, the majority Sinhalese community came to see itself as a small minority living under the shadow of a grave threat posed to its religious, cultural, and national identity by 100 million Hindu Tamils in Sri Lanka and India. To a large extent, this explained "the negative way [the] Sinhalese . . . reacted to Tamil demands for regional autonomy for the northern and eastern areas of the country, which the Tamils [considered] to be their traditional homeland."<sup>7</sup>

Another issue that contributed to the conflict was language rights and the choice of a national language after independence. The Tamil and Sinhalese communities are both essentially linguistic groups, and within each community, language acts as a source of emotional identification.<sup>8</sup> But this issue also had important implications for the economic and financial well-being of both communities. When Sri Lanka was under Portuguese and Dutch colonial rule, administrative functions were generally carried out in the island's languages, and the languages of the colonial

power were used only for record keeping and some central government tasks. Under the British, however, Sri Lanka was governed in the English language. After the British established a centralized form of government in 1833, the local demand for English education rose swiftly because people realized that knowledge of English was essential for employment. But the colonial administration faced such enormous difficulties in providing English education that, by 1885, the government changed its education policy to emphasize vernacular education for the masses. This left Christian missionaries as the only ones still teaching English in schools they established.<sup>9</sup> As a consequence of this new education policy, the division between the English-educated (who were mainly Tamils because they wholeheartedly embraced English education offered by Christian missionaries) and the vernacular-educated local people (who were mainly Sinhalese because they were suspicious about Christian missionaries and English education) grew rapidly and formed a formidable class hierarchy.<sup>10</sup> The people who obtained an English education (mostly the Tamils) found it easier to procure well-paid government jobs and thus came to enjoy greater wealth, prestige, and power compared with the vernacular-educated masses (mostly Sinhalese) who worked mainly as cultivators, laborers, village traders, and service workers. Friction gradually grew between the Sinhalese and the Tamils when it became apparent to the Sinhalese that the Tamils had secured a huge advantage in the competition for government jobs by virtue of their proficiency in the English language.<sup>11</sup>

Another aspect of the economic problem concerned the status of a substantial number of Indian Tamils who were brought by the British from southern India in the 1830s to work in the coffee, tea, and rubber plantations located mainly in the Kandy Hills.<sup>12</sup> The Sinhalese considered the Indian Tamils to be foreigners with no abiding interest in the country except for their low-wage jobs on the plantations. The Sinhalese also feared that the Indian Tamils and the Moors, together with the Sri Lankan Tamils, would dominate the island's economy and pose a challenge to the survival of the Sinhalese race, religion, and civilization. Right after the island obtained independence from the British, Sinhalese politicians and the *bhikkhus* fanned these fears within the Sinhalese community for their own political advantage.

The conflict over language rights and the choice of a national language after independence took the form of the ***Swabhasha* movement** (“the people’s own language movement”), which pushed for the Sinhalese language to be the sole official language of government instead of English.<sup>13</sup> Supported by the *bhikkhus* and Sinhalese political parties, the *Swabhasha* movement symbolized for the Sinhalese “their aspirations to retrieve their ancestral heritage and reassert their position and prerogatives as the majority, which they felt were denied them under colonial rule.”<sup>14</sup> To the Tamils, however, the *Swabhasha* movement symbolized the Sinhalese majority’s dreaded domination, which could threaten Tamil existence as a separate group.<sup>15</sup>

The fallout from these differences, fears, and insecurities occurred on the political front. Under British colonial rule, communal representation in the legislative council was the vehicle through which the various communities participated in the political process. Starting in the 1920s, however, Sinhalese politicians began to demand that communal representation be replaced by some form of territorial representation that would reflect the majority community’s size relative to that of the minority communities.<sup>16</sup> Anxious for self-government, the Sri Lankan Tamils at this stage were willing to accept a Sinhalese majority in the legislative council provided

that the Ceylon National Congress (CNC) “actively supported the proposal for the reservation of a special seat for the Tamils residing in the Western Province.”<sup>17</sup> When no such support came from the CNC, the Tamils began to suspect that Sinhalese politicians were willing to sacrifice Tamil interests, a suspicion that was reinforced when the CNC came under the sway of the Buddhist Revivalist Movement. Subsequently, the Sri Lankan Tamils sought to convince the Donoughmore Commission, which was given the task of recommending constitutional reforms, to retain communal representation. In this effort, the Tamil community failed. The Donoughmore Constitution, which was adopted in 1931, abolished communal electorates, granted the franchise to all adults over 21 years of age, and created a state council whose members were to be elected through a territorial electoral system based on area and population. In the state council, Sri Lankan internal administration was to be carried out under the direction of elected ministers, and the powers reserved for the governor were to be handled by the British officers of state.

The implications of the Donoughmore Constitution for interethnic relations were obvious: with the Sinhalese constituting two-thirds of the island’s population, the introduction of universal suffrage was bound to create an overwhelming number of territorial constituencies that had a Sinhalese majority, in turn allowing the Sinhalese community to assert its strength politically. The Sri Lankan Tamils, therefore, demanded that any constitutional arrangement for an independent Sri Lanka must incorporate safeguards for minority interests. Toward this end, it recommended to the **Soulbury Commission**, which was asked to draft a new constitution for an independent Sri Lanka, to incorporate a **50:50 formula** in the new constitution—that is, 50 percent of the seats in the parliament of independent Sri Lanka to be reserved for the Sinhalese and the remaining 50 percent for the Sri Lankan Tamils and other minorities, such as the Muslims and the Burghers. The Soulbury Commission rejected this proposal. Instead, the Soulbury Constitution prohibited the parliament of independent Sri Lanka from enacting laws prejudicial to minority interests. Except for this limitation, which could be overcome by constitutional amendment, the Soulbury Constitution did not provide any other safeguards for the minorities.<sup>18</sup> This made the country ripe for the emergence of postindependence ethnic conflict.

The first sign of trouble came when, contrary to assurances made by Prime Minister D. S. Senanayake, the first prime minister of independent Sri Lanka, that no harm would come to the minorities, the United National Party (UNP) government passed the Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948 and the Indian and Pakistani Residents (Citizenship) Act of 1949. These two pieces of legislation, along with the Parliamentary Elections (Amendment) Act of 1949, laid down strict requirements and documentation for eligibility for Sri Lankan citizenship, which very few Indian Tamils could meet. Consequently, a vast majority of Indian Tamils became stateless, and the minorities’ overall parliamentary capacity to defend their legitimate civil rights as citizens was reduced.<sup>19</sup> Thereafter, successive Sinhalese-dominated governments utilized their parliamentary strengths to implement discriminatory measures such as the Official Language Act of 1956,<sup>20</sup> the policy of “standardization,”<sup>21</sup> and state-aided programs of colonization of Tamil areas by Sinhalese peasants,<sup>22</sup> which reduced the minorities, particularly the Sri Lankan Tamils, to an inferior status. Even at the societal level, persecution of minorities continued, often with tacit governmental approval. The resurgence of extremist Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism after independence greatly influenced the governments of Sri Lanka in these efforts.<sup>23</sup>

Faced with grim prospects after independence, the Sri Lankan Tamils resorted to agitation, strikes, demonstrations, and civil disobedience movements to “protect their community from domination and possible assimilation by the large Sinhalese majority.”<sup>24</sup> Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Sri Lankan Tamil demands were mainly autonomist in nature: to protect the Sri Lankan Tamils’ cultural, linguistic, economic, educational, and political rights through decentralization and devolution of political power that could lead to substantial autonomy for the Sri Lankan Tamil homeland. Sri Lankan Tamil leaders believed that, without regional autonomy, it would be impossible to protect and promote their civil rights and liberties and improve the economic condition in their traditional homeland. But they never demanded a separate Tamil state. It was only in the mid-1970s that “serious calls for a separate Tamil state were made by leading political figures and organizations.”<sup>25</sup> A primary reason for the rise of secessionist sentiments among the Sri Lankan Tamils was the failure of negotiations between the Sinhalese and Tamil political leaders and the impatience of Tamil youths with conventional methods of agitation.<sup>26</sup> The Tamil youths were further encouraged by the successful secession of East Pakistan in 1971 and the creation of the new state of Bangladesh.<sup>27</sup>

The Tamil youths’ drift toward militancy received an impetus in 1978 when the ruling UNP government of J. R. Jayewardene introduced a new constitution that created a presidential form of government (with Jayewardene as the first executive president) and provided certain concessions to the minorities: it gave Tamil the status of a “national language,” although Sinhalese remained the only “official” one; it introduced a new system of voting whereby minorities’ votes would count in national politics;<sup>28</sup> and it created new district councils that gave the Sri Lankan Tamils considerable autonomy in Tamil-majority areas. But all these concessions came to nothing because the ruling party was not serious in implementing them. For instance, the increased official use of Tamil did not come about as the minorities had expected; district councils were not given enough powers of autonomy; and parliamentary elections, in which the Sri Lankan Tamils could have played an important part, were declared unnecessary by the ruling party.<sup>29</sup> To the frustrated Tamil youths, therefore, militancy seemed to be the only option left. By the early 1980s, several Tamil insurgent organizations had cropped up. The largest and the most powerful of these groups was the **Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)**, led by Velupillai Prabhakaran. Founded in 1972 as the Tamil New Tigers, the group changed its name to Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in 1976, which coincided with the demand for a separate state to be called **Tamil Eelam**. In 1981, a faction of the LTTE broke away to form the People’s Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE). A host of other groups also emerged in the early 1980s: chief among these were the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO); the Eelam People’s Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF); the Tamil Eelam Liberation Army (TELA); and the Eelam Revolutionary Organization of Students (EROS).

The Tamil insurgency became more potent in the aftermath of the anti-Tamil riots of 1983. During the riots, senior government personnel used state machinery and resources in a blatant and concerted effort directed against the lives and properties of the Tamils.<sup>30</sup> In retaliation, the LTTE and the other guerrilla organizations changed their style of operation “from isolated attacks on policemen and Tamil politicians who cooperated with the government to organized attacks on [Sinhalese] military units.”<sup>31</sup> These attacks brought about harsh reprisals from the Sri Lankan security forces against the Tamil civilian population of Jaffna, which further increased

support for the Tamil insurgents in the north and east. The growing popularity of the Tamil insurgents also drove the final nail in the coffin of moderate Tamil politics practiced by political parties such as the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF).<sup>32</sup> Full-blown secessionist war thus can be traced to the events in 1983.

## INTERNATIONALIZATION OF THE ETHNIC CIVIL WAR

International reaction to the onset of full-blown ethnic civil war in Sri Lanka after the July 1983 anti-Tamil riots was immediate. One of the states directly affected was neighboring India, which had more than 80 million Tamils in the southern province of Tamil Nadu who were naturally sympathetic toward their ethnic kin and urged the Indian government to protect the Tamil community in Sri Lanka. New Delhi therefore formed the view that the protection and promotion of India's national interest required an immediate deescalation of violence and the start of a peace process aiming at a peaceful settlement of the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict. From the Indian perspective, a peaceful settlement required the preservation of Sri Lanka's territorial integrity and sovereignty, and the simultaneous accommodation of the Sri Lankan Tamils' demand for regional autonomy.<sup>33</sup>

Other states generally followed India's line toward Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict. Through Indian diplomatic channels, the Sri Lankan Tamil political parties and insurgent organizations were able to reach a wide global audience with accounts of systematic Sinhalese discrimination against their community, which helped to earn them international goodwill and political support. For instance, Britain offered prominent Sri Lankan Tamil politicians asylum and allowed the LTTE to open a public relations office in London. Canada also took a sympathetic stand and allowed many Sri Lankan Tamil refugees to settle in the country. The United States and the Soviet Union also accepted as legitimate India's concerns for the Sri Lankan Tamils and professed full faith in New Delhi's ability to effect a peaceful settlement of the conflict. Consequently, when President Jayewardene visited the United States in 1984 to seek U.S. support for the Sri Lankan government's position on the ethnic issue and to obtain military assistance, Washington declined to provide such help.<sup>34</sup>

Sri Lanka, however, received military help from some other states. Within South Asia, it received some arms and military training from Pakistan.<sup>35</sup> China, South Africa, Singapore, and Malaysia also supplied some weapons to Sri Lanka.<sup>36</sup> The Sri Lankan government even hired some British, Rhodesian, and South African mercenaries to train its armed forces in counterinsurgency warfare.<sup>37</sup> The Sri Lankan government also sought assistance from Israel, a country with which it had severed diplomatic relations in 1970. Responding to Sri Lanka's call, Israel set up an interests section in the U.S. embassy in Colombo; the Mossad, Israel's external intelligence agency, and Shin Beth, which dealt with counterinsurgency, started providing training in **counterinsurgency operations** to Sri Lankan security forces.<sup>38</sup>

While New Delhi was officially using diplomacy to push for a peaceful settlement of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, by 1984, the existence of guerrilla training camps in India for Sri Lankan Tamil insurgents was an open secret. These training camps were located mostly in southern Tamil Nadu and were under the aegis of the **Research and Analysis Wing (RAW)**, India's foreign intelligence agency. RAW's interest in Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict had started in the late 1970s for a number of reasons: the election of the pro-West and anti-India Jayewardene as the prime

minister of Sri Lanka in 1977, increased American interest in the strategic Trincomalee Harbor in eastern Sri Lanka as a potential forward base for its rapid deployment force, and the formation of Tamil insurgent groups on the island. The first Sri Lankan Tamil group to be trained by RAW was the TELO. RAW also provided military training to the LTTE, the PLOTE, and the EROS. Training consisted of field craft; tactics; map reading; jungle and guerrilla warfare methods; and the operation of weapons such as light and medium machine guns, automatic rifles, pistols, and rocket-propelled grenades. Apart from RAW instructors, regular Indian army personnel were also reported to have taught the insurgents how to use bombs, set mines, and establish telecommunications.<sup>39</sup> Political parties in Tamil Nadu also provided the Sri Lankan Tamil insurgent groups with substantial material and financial support, as well as lots of free publicity and media exposure. The Indian government was well aware of the help that Tamil politicians in India were providing to Sri Lankan Tamil insurgent groups but chose to turn a blind eye to such developments.

As we have discussed in Chapter 3, one way that intrastate ethnic conflicts become internationalized is through the flow of refugees. This issue assumes a greater importance as the duration and intensity of the conflict increases. The anti-Tamil riots of 1983 drastically intensified Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict and resulted in substantial numbers of Tamil refugees fleeing the war zones in northern and eastern provinces and crossing over into Tamil Nadu in India. These refugees brought with them stories of Sinhalese atrocities against the Sri Lankan Tamils that fueled local anger in Tamil Nadu against the Sinhalese. Tamil political parties in turn applied intense political pressure on the Indian government to intervene on behalf of the Sri Lankan Tamils. For internal security and political reasons, the Indian government could not ignore these pleas for action. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi therefore warned that India could not remain indifferent toward the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka because it affected people of Indian origin.<sup>40</sup>

## India's Attempt at Conflict Resolution

India's decision to intervene in Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict as a third party interested in conflict resolution stemmed from New Delhi's realization that undertaking such a role was the perfect "compromise option" between the two extreme policies of supporting Eelam and doing nothing. To prepare for this role, in the immediate aftermath of the 1983 ethnic riots in Sri Lanka, New Delhi enunciated the **Indian Doctrine of Regional Security**.<sup>41</sup> This clarified India's position that, if any south Asian state required external assistance to deal with serious internal conflict, it should seek it from within the region, including from India, and that the "exclusion of India in such circumstances will be considered an anti-Indian move."<sup>42</sup>

In August 1983, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi announced that President Jayewardene of Sri Lanka had accepted India's offer of good offices and agreed to have a broad-based conference with the Sri Lankan Tamil leaders to work out a peaceful settlement to the ethnic conflict. This set the stage for intense diplomatic efforts to induce the various Sri Lankan Tamil and Sinhalese parties to come to the negotiating table. Indira Gandhi's personal envoy, G. Parthasarathy, was given the task of mediating between the Tamil groups and the Sri Lankan government. What emerged from Parthasarathy's efforts came to be known as the **Parthasarathy Formula**. Its key provision was Annexure C, which envisaged the formation of



elected regional councils in the northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka, with the power to levy taxes and with jurisdiction over law and order, social and economic development, and administration of justice and land policy.<sup>43</sup> An **all-party conference** was called to discuss these proposals. Most recognized political parties, including the TULF and several Sinhalese-Buddhist religious and nonpolitical organizations, participated in a series of meetings throughout 1984, but the discussions failed to provide a breakthrough.

There were no more Indian initiatives to resolve Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict until the middle of 1985. In the interval, India faced a major domestic tragedy when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards; she was succeeded as prime minister by her eldest son, Rajiv Gandhi. Meanwhile, in Sri Lanka, ethnic violence reached unprecedented levels after the Sri Lankan government announced plans to settle 3,000 Sinhalese families in the north and provide them with military training and weapons. Colombo also initiated a major program of weapons procurement from all possible sources. The Tamil insurgents reacted by forming a government in exile in Tamil Nadu and by stepping up violent attacks against the Sri Lankan security forces. Sensing that the situation was getting out of hand, New Delhi organized another round of talks between the Sri Lankan government and the Sri Lankan Tamil insurgents in Thimpu, the capital of Bhutan. At the negotiating table, the Sri Lankan Tamil delegation insisted that the Sri Lankan government's acceptance of the following principles were crucial for a settlement:

- The Sri Lankan government must recognize the Sri Lankan Tamils as a distinct nationality.
- The Sri Lankan government must recognize that the northern and eastern provinces together constitute the Sri Lankan Tamils' traditional homeland.
- The Sri Lankan government must recognize the Sri Lankan Tamils' right of self-determination.
- The Sri Lankan government must grant Sri Lankan citizenship to all Tamils on the island.<sup>44</sup>

The Sri Lankan government countered that recognizing the above principles was tantamount to conceding Eelam. The talks fell through as a result.

Following the failure of the Thimpu talks, the Tamil insurgents and the Sri Lankan security forces sought a military solution to the conflict and engaged in heavy fighting in the northern and eastern provinces. Simultaneously, severe infighting broke out among the Tamil insurgent organizations. The Sri Lankan government tried to take advantage of this situation by dealing directly with the LTTE, which had emerged as the most powerful of the Tamil insurgent groups. Recognizing that it was losing the initiative to resolve the conflict, India made another effort in 1986 to work out a negotiated settlement between the Sri Lankan Tamil insurgents and the Sri Lankan government. Under Indian pressure, President Jayewardene met Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, Tamil Nadu chief minister Ramachandran, and LTTE supremo Prabhakaran in Bangalore, India. In this meeting, President Jayewardene "proposed the break-up of the present Eastern Province into three separate units representing Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims."<sup>45</sup> This proposal refuted the Tamils' traditional-homeland theory that was based on the merger of the northern and eastern provinces in two ways: the Sri Lankan government signaled that it did not consider the eastern province to be a predominantly Tamil area

and furthermore that any merger of the northern and eastern provinces would be detrimental to the interests of the Sinhalese and Muslim populations of the eastern province.<sup>46</sup> The LTTE rejected this proposal outright, setting the stage once again for renewed fighting.

As fighting once again intensified in Sri Lanka, President Jayewardene, acting under pressure from Sinhalese nationalists and *bhikkhus*, imposed a food and fuel embargo on the Jaffna Peninsula and ordered the aerial bombardment of the area with the aim of destroying or at least severely weakening the LTTE. The humanitarian crisis that rapidly unfolded in Jaffna created a tremendous backlash in Tamil Nadu. Shaken by the severe criticism emanating from Tamil Nadu, New Delhi announced its intention to send relief supplies to the civilian population of the beleaguered and embattled Jaffna Peninsula, despite warnings from President Jayewardene that such an act would be considered an infringement of Sri Lankan sovereignty. India initially attempted to send the supplies by sea. When the Sri Lankan navy intercepted and turned back the Indian flotilla, Indian air force jets dropped 25 tons of food and other relief supplies over Jaffna. Amidst rumors of a possible Indian military intervention, a nervous Jayewardene indicated to India that his government was willing to work out a political solution to the conflict. As proof of sincerity, the Sri Lankan government terminated the military operations in Jaffna and released a large number of Tamil detainees from prison.

This prepared the way for renewed Indian diplomatic efforts that eventually led to the signing of the **Indo-Sri Lankan Accord** in 1987. Given the level of animosity between the Sri Lankan government and the Sri Lankan Tamil insurgent groups (especially the LTTE) and the long history of failed negotiations, New Delhi brought considerable pressure on both sides to accept the terms of the accord. The accord comprised six key provisions. First, it recognized the unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka, thereby “eliminating Tamil claims for a sovereign state (Eelam) and averting the threat of an Indian invasion.”<sup>47</sup> Second, it recognized Sri Lanka as a multiethnic and multilingual plural society composed of Sinhalese, Tamils, Moors, Malays, and Burghers. Third, although the northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka were recognized as “areas of historical habitation of Sri Lankan Tamil speaking peoples,” the accord also recognized the territorial rights of other groups that lived in this territory. Fourth, the accord provided for the temporary merger of the northern and eastern provinces as a single administrative unit after the newly created provincial council elections were completed by the end of 1987; the permanency of this merger was to be determined by a referendum to be held within a year. Fifth, it provided for the cessation of hostilities, the surrender of arms by the Sri Lankan Tamil insurgent groups, and the return of the Sri Lankan security forces to the barracks; it also provided for a general amnesty to all political detainees and the repeal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act and other emergency laws. Last, India agreed to be the guarantor of the accord and promised to provide military assistance as and when requested by Colombo to implement the various provisions of the accord.<sup>48</sup> The Indo-Sri Lankan Accord also served to protect India’s security interests. Through letters exchanged between the Indian prime minister and the Sri Lankan president, India sought and received three important guarantees from Sri Lanka, including the following:

- There will be an early understanding between the two countries about the employment of foreign military and intelligence personnel, with a view to ensuring that such presence will not prejudice Indo-Sri Lankan relations.

- The port of Trincomalee will not be made available for military use by any country in a manner prejudicial to India's interests, and India and Sri Lanka will jointly undertake the restoration and operation of the oil tank farm at Trincomalee.
- Any broadcasting facilities in Sri Lanka to foreign organizations will be reviewed to ensure that such facilities are not used for any military or intelligence purposes.<sup>49</sup>

The Indo-Sri Lankan Accord came as a huge disappointment to the Sri Lankan Tamil insurgent groups and to extremist-nationalist elements within the Sri Lankan political establishment. The insurgent groups were upset that the accord did not grant the right of national self-determination to the Sri Lankan Tamil people. None of the Sri Lankan Tamil political parties and insurgent organizations happened to be cosignatories to the accord, so they were not technically and legally bound by its provisions. Extremist-nationalist Sinhalese politicians and segments within the Sri Lankan military also had serious reservations about it. Given these oppositions, the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord was ineffective from the beginning. Yet clause 6 of the Annexure to the Accord committed an **Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF)** to Sri Lanka to help implement the accord, although the accord itself was ambiguous about the IPKF's specific role. A day after the accord was signed, 8,000 IPKF troops entered Sri Lanka. Because the force was not supposed to engage in military action, the maxim of concentration of force was ignored, and it brought in no heavy weaponry. Within a few months of its induction, the IPKF became bogged down. In violation of the accord, the LTTE refused to surrender weapons and ammunition to the IPKF, and the Sri Lankan government continued to colonize traditional Tamil areas in the eastern province by resettling Sinhalese families there. This soon led to a renewal of hostilities between the LTTE insurgents and the Sri Lankan security forces.

The IPKF was criticized by all quarters in Sri Lanka for failing to restrain the combatants and protect civilian lives and property. Stung and humiliated by the criticisms, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi ordered the IPKF to crack down on anyone violating the terms of the accord. Consequently, from November 1987 to December 1989, the IPKF became embroiled in the ethnic violence in Sri Lanka, which it was incapable of effectively halting for a variety of reasons. First, the IPKF's preparation for a large-scale military action in Sri Lanka was grossly inadequate. For instance, the IPKF lacked reliable intelligence on the military strength of the various Sri Lankan Tamil insurgent groups, which prevented it from calculating accurately the strength of the forces it required for the task. Consequently, the Indian peace keepers were often surprised to find how powerful an enemy the LTTE was, and this greatly increased their losses.<sup>50</sup> Second, the success of counterinsurgency operations against modern-day insurgents depends to a great extent on the degree of support the troops receive from the local population. However, by the time the IPKF received orders to engage the LTTE and the Sri Lankan forces, it had clearly alienated both the Tamil and Sinhalese communities, which undermined its operational effectiveness. Third, the IPKF had to function under certain tactical and logistical restrictions because the Indian government did not want to appear insensitive to its own Tamil supporters by cracking down brutally on the LTTE. As a result, the IPKF could not use heavy weapons, tanks, and aircraft against the LTTE, thereby reducing its battlefield capabilities and increasing its casualties. And fourth, the IPKF's failure in the battlefield drew criticism from all sides that affected its morale. Units

in the field were dejected because of the very high casualty rates they suffered. Officers in Sri Lanka were critical of the military top brass for being insensitive to their problems. The military top brass criticized the Indian government for imposing restrictions on the IPKF that reduced its fighting capability. On their part, Indian government officials criticized the IPKF for failing to wipe out what they deemed a handful of insurgents. The Sri Lankan government also criticized the IPKF whenever its operations bogged down or failed.

With the IPKF stymied, opposition to the accord in Sri Lanka gathered momentum. Interested in scoring political points against the ruling UNP government, the opposition Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) openly criticized the accord as violating Sri Lanka's sovereignty. More disturbing was the revival of militant Sinhalese nationalism under the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), or the People's Revolutionary Front, which was anti-India and anti-accord in orientation.<sup>51</sup> Within a short period, the JVP unleashed a reign of terror, assassinating ruling UNP members that it considered traitors to the Sinhalese cause and massacring Tamil and Indian civilians as reprisals for LTTE killing of Sinhalese civilians. The JVP-led terrorist campaign received support from the Buddhist monastic order and from opposition political parties. Some of Jayewardene's UNP colleagues who were opposed to the accord also provided support to the JVP, mainly as a ploy to put pressure on President Jayewardene to call for the withdrawal of the IPKF from Sri Lanka. By the early 1990s, this complex conflict opened a new front, with violent clashes between Sri Lankan Tamils and Muslims in the eastern province.<sup>52</sup>

The IPKF's failure to disarm the LTTE and prevent violent clashes demonstrated why regional powers are poor international third-party managers of ethnic conflicts. Regional powers are often distrusted by the warring parties, as was evident in Sri Lanka, where the Tamils and the Sinhalese not only did not trust each other but also did not trust India. New Delhi's offer of good offices to resolve the ethnic conflict after providing covert partisan support to the Sri Lankan Tamils only helped to sharpen both sides' suspicion that India had its own vested interests in the matter and was hardly sincere in helping the parties find a fair solution. When the adversaries distrust the third party, it may also adversely affect the peace process because the adversaries lack a positive attitude toward a peace agreement. When India urged negotiations between the Tamils and the Sinhalese, it gradually became clear that the disputants had agreed to talk to each other, not because they believed that such talks would resolve the dispute but because they were in no position to antagonize India. Hence, while they negotiated, they also prepared for war. Furthermore, in their haste to find a solution, regional powers often do not take the time to understand the basic nature of the dispute, which may undermine their role. This was evident when the Indian government did not recognize the most important factors in its dealings with the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE: the Sinhalese unwillingness to share power meaningfully with the Sri Lankan Tamils and the LTTE's uncompromising demand for Eelam. The Indians also did not fully appreciate the difficulty of convincing the adversaries that they needed to commit to the peace process. For instance, President Jayewardene's faction-ridden cabinet included prominent hard-liners, which reduced the government's ability to offer meaningful concessions to the Sri Lankan Tamils; by the mid-1980s, the Tamil nationalist movement had clearly been taken over by extremist groups such as the LTTE, which was steadfast in its demand for Eelam. Yet in its eagerness to reach a deal, India continued to recognize the moderate TULF as the prominent insurgent

group because it was more likely to accept a compromise peace agreement. It was not surprising, therefore, that the LTTE lost faith in the peace process and came to regard India and the moderate Tamil groups as traitors to the Tamil cause.

## THE ETHNIC CIVIL WAR IN THE 1990s

Under pressure from its own citizens and the Sri Lankan government, New Delhi finally withdrew the IPKF from Sri Lanka in March 1990. Once the IPKF was gone, the LTTE quickly consolidated its position in the northeastern province, thereby demonstrating the support and popularity that the Tigers enjoyed among the Sri Lankan Tamil population. The Sri Lankan government attempted to counter the LTTE's gains by annulling the merger of the northern and eastern provinces. This led to the resumption of serious fighting in the north and east. In the south, the JVP insurrection assumed even bloodier proportions. The government responded by organizing death squads that killed thousands of youths and students belonging to or sympathizing with the JVP, including the organization's leader, Rohana Wijeweera, and his immediate followers.

In 1993, President Premadasa (who had taken over from Jayawardene in 1988) was assassinated by an LTTE suicide bomber. In the presidential election that followed in 1994, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga of the People's Alliance won by a comfortable margin. In 1995, the Kumaratunga government entered into a ceasefire agreement with the LTTE and promised to come up with a set of new proposals for the devolution of power. After waiting for three months for the new proposals, the LTTE finally repudiated the ceasefire agreement. As fighting between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan military once again intensified, President Kumaratunga's new peace proposals (released in August 1995) had no takers and, in frustration, she endorsed the military's plan to launch a massive operation (code-named **Operation Riviresa**) to reestablish government control over the northern Jaffna Peninsula, the main LTTE stronghold.<sup>53</sup> By mid-1996, the Sri Lankan military had recaptured most of the Jaffna Peninsula, a great achievement for the Sri Lankan government and a major setback for the LTTE. The LTTE, however, was far from being completely wiped out. After lying low for a while and regrouping, the LTTE retaliated through a series of spectacular terrorist attacks on civilian and military targets.

Colombo responded to these LTTE attacks through another forceful counterinsurgency operation (code-named **Operation Jayasikuru**) designed to (1) establish a secure land corridor between Jaffna and the rest of Sri Lanka, (2) clear the northern jungles of the Wannai district, and (3) gain full control of the upper sectors of the eastern province. But despite launching repeated offensives, the Sri Lankan military failed to gain full control of Jaffna and suffered heavy casualties at the hands of the LTTE in the process, which led to large-scale desertions from its ranks.<sup>54</sup>

By the late 1990s, the LTTE had regained much lost ground. Although it had failed to recapture Jaffna City from the Sri Lankan military, it effectively ruled a wide belt of territory bordered by Kalmunai and Vannankulam in the far northwest and northeast, Kokkilai in the east, Vavuniya in the south, and Chirunaatkulam in the west. The LTTE had also augmented its military strength by procuring both basic and advanced combat weapons from foreign sources, paid for from funds raised by the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in North America, western Europe, and the Australasia region. The LTTE further appeared to be having no major problem in

recruiting new cadres, and the total strength of the group was estimated to be between 8,000 to 12,000 well-armed and well-trained soldiers. The LTTE seemed capable of striking almost at will, as borne out by several terrorist strikes, the most spectacular being the attack on a Buddhist holy shrine in Kandy. The LTTE also showed no signs of giving up the demand for a separate Tamil state.

The LTTE's obduracy, potency, and ruthlessness, however, were major factors in undermining the organization's international image. Although, in general, international sympathy and support for the Sri Lankan Tamils in their just struggle remained intact, international opinion in the late 1990s came to regard the LTTE as the main obstacle to peace in Sri Lanka. This international sentiment was most evident in India's attitude toward the LTTE. After the humiliating withdrawal of the IPKF from Sri Lanka in early 1990, New Delhi had adopted a hands-off approach toward Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict. The assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 at the hands of an LTTE suicide bomber, however, raised India's ire toward the organization. In the aftermath of Gandhi's assassination, the Indian government, over the objection of the Tamil parties in Tamil Nadu, classified the LTTE as a terrorist organization and launched a massive manhunt to nab Prabhakaran and other key LTTE leaders. The Indian government also publicly blamed the LTTE for prolonging the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka and resolved to strengthen the Sri Lankan government's hands in its fight with the Tamil Tigers. The Chennai High Court hearing the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case issued death sentences for the captured suspects, all of whom were known to be LTTE cadres and working under direct orders from Prabhakaran. These revelations by the Indian government led to a significant public mood swing in India (including Tamil Nadu) against the LTTE and its stated goal of Eelam. The Indian military, too, nursed a deep resentment against the LTTE, mainly for its brutal attacks on Indian soldiers serving in the IPKF in Sri Lanka.

India's hostility toward the LTTE rubbed off on other major international actors. For instance, when the Sri Lankan military launched Operation Riviresa, the Sri Lankan government was surprised to find widespread international support for its position.<sup>55</sup> Then, after the Sri Lankan military captured Jaffna and forced the LTTE to withdraw to the east, few tears were shed internationally for the LTTE's military defeat, even though the LTTE's public relations office in London tried hard to project the Sri Lankan military offensive as genocide of the Tamil people. The reasons for this international apathy were obvious. The LTTE was widely regarded as a terrorist organization involved in various kinds of criminal activities, such as narcotics trafficking and arms smuggling, to finance its campaign of terror.<sup>56</sup> The LTTE was also condemned internationally for indiscriminately killing civilians, for torturing and mutilating captured enemy soldiers, and for using children and women as frontline combatants.<sup>57</sup> The LTTE's policy of assassinating key political leaders further revolted and upset the international community and earned the organization the reputation of a ruthless criminal gang.

## THE NORWAY-FACILITATED PEACE PROCESS

Throughout the 1990s, the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka showed all the signs of a classic dirty war. Because of the heavy destruction and suffering that this conflict caused, there was widespread international support for Norway's initiative in early 2000 to facilitate peace negotiations between the Sri Lankan government and the

LTTE. The key player in the facilitation process was Erik Solheim, special adviser to Norway's foreign minister and previously the leader of the Norwegian Socialist Left Party. In 2000, Solheim held discussions with Prabhakaran regarding the framework for a ceasefire agreement leading to negotiations. Later that year, Prabhakaran and Solheim had another meeting, which resulted in the LTTE agreeing to a unilateral ceasefire.

Nothing much came of this unilateral ceasefire. In April 2001, immediately after the LTTE had ended its unilateral ceasefire, the Sri Lankan military launched a major offensive (code-named Rod of Fire) in an effort to recapture the strategic Elephant Pass, a causeway that links the Jaffna Peninsula to the south mainland. For the Sri Lankan military, control of the Elephant Pass was vital for providing needed supplies to almost 35,000 trapped soldiers in Jaffna City and the surrounding areas through a more reliable land corridor. A fierce battle raged for almost four days. The Tamil Tigers put up a strong resistance, and the Sri Lankan forces suffered heavy casualties.<sup>58</sup> The LTTE followed this military victory by attacking the international airport in Colombo and destroying half the fleet of Air Lanka, the national carrier, and eight military planes.<sup>59</sup> The government retaliated by carrying out air strikes against LTTE positions in the north. The prospects for peace negotiations appeared bleak.

Parliamentary elections in Sri Lanka at the end of 2001 resulted in a change of government and a realignment of political forces in the country. The opposition United National Front (UNF), led by Ranil Wickremesinghe, replaced the People's Alliance as the largest group in parliament and formed the new government. With the formation of the UNF government, hopes were raised that Norway-facilitated peace negotiations between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government would be revived. As a prelude to Norway-facilitated peace talks, the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government agreed to observe a month-long ceasefire starting on December 24, 2001 (the ceasefire was subsequently extended). The government also lifted a ban on goods destined for areas under LTTE control.

Several key developments made it increasingly difficult for the LTTE to say no to Norway-facilitated peace talks with the Sri Lankan government. First, the 2001 elections brought in a new government in Colombo and, with it, a new willingness to negotiate with the LTTE. Prime Minister Wickremesinghe had long indicated his desire to deal directly with the Tamil Tigers and favored the creation of an interim administration for the Tamil-majority northeastern province in which the LTTE would have a major role. Such a stance was different from the Kumaratunga policy, which favored constitutional change to give the northeastern province more autonomy and have it accepted by the moderate Tamil parties and (hopefully) a militarily humbled LTTE. Wickremesinghe was also in favor of lifting the ban on the LTTE, the Tamil Tigers' main demand for participating in the peace talks.

Second, as a result of the new political alignments brought about by the 2001 elections, the Tamil Tigers found new political clout in Colombo. The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), a conglomeration of four Tamil parties that had, in the past, been victims of LTTE-sponsored violence but now backed the position that the Tamil Tigers, would represent the Sri Lankan Tamils in negotiations with the government. For the first time in Sri Lanka's political history, the LTTE had something akin to a political wing, with seats in parliament.<sup>60</sup> This would definitely strengthen the Tamil Tigers' hands at the negotiating table.

Third, it was becoming increasingly difficult for the LTTE to sustain a high level of fund-raising in western countries, especially in the aftermath of the 9/11

terrorist attacks and the subsequent U.S.-led global war on terror. Most of the key western states from which the Tamil Tigers had previously raised vast amounts of funds, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, had already designated the LTTE as a terrorist organization and tightened their law enforcement machinery, which made it difficult for the Tamil Tigers to sustain their fund-raising activities.<sup>61</sup> This in turn may have had a detrimental effect on the LTTE's military preparedness and fighting capabilities. The LTTE's reputation of being a ruthless terrorist group that had massacred thousands of innocent civilians; of showing no interest in negotiated peace; and of being involved in smuggling, gun running, and drug trafficking further tarnished its international image and created difficulties in fund-raising, especially after 9/11.<sup>62</sup>

Fourth, there were clear indications that the Sri Lankan military was actively seeking weapons and counterinsurgency training from several sources. After their Elephant Pass defeat at the hands of the Tamil Tigers in 2001, the Sri Lankan military turned toward Israel for weapons and counterinsurgency training. Full diplomatic ties between Sri Lanka and Israel were quickly established, and Israeli military officers and advisers arrived in Sri Lanka with a large quantity of weapons. These weapons were subsequently used by a more confident Sri Lankan military in battles against the Tamil Tigers. The Sri Lankan defense budget also increased to around US\$1 billion in the aftermath of 9/11, and there were growing signs that the Sri Lankan government was actively trying to secure military supplies and training from India, China, the United Kingdom, and the United States.<sup>63</sup> The LTTE thus faced the future prospect of being challenged by a better-trained and better-equipped Sri Lankan military that was backed politically by powerful allies.

Fifth, the Tamil Tigers were reported to be suffering from war fatigue and were facing problems in recruiting new personnel to sustain their military campaign. Although the LTTE had won spectacular victories against the Sri Lankan military in 2000 and 2001, it had suffered heavy casualties in the process. Being war weary, the LTTE had failed to recapture Jaffna City from an expensively rearmed Sri Lankan army. Sri Lankan military observers, as well as independent media and non-governmental organization (NGO) sources, also reported that recruitment difficulties had forced the LTTE to replace fighters lost in battle with women and young children.<sup>64</sup>

From Colombo's viewpoint, negotiation rather than confrontation with the LTTE was also advantageous for several reasons. First, in the post-9/11 world, for reasons mentioned above, the LTTE was clearly under pressure to move away from its steadfast demand for a separate Tamil state to be achieved through armed struggle. Press reports also suggested that Prabhakaran might be willing to drop the demand for a separate state in favor of greater autonomy in the northeast region.<sup>65</sup> Second, in the aftermath of 9/11, world opinion had clearly turned against groups that employed terrorism, regardless of the justness of their cause. The Sri Lankan government received pledges of support from many different quarters in its war against the LTTE. Because almost no country of significance within the international community (especially neighboring India, with its population of almost 80 million fellow Tamils) supported the LTTE's demand for a separate state, the Sri Lankan government's position was further strengthened for negotiations with the Tamil Tigers. Third, creation of a stable and lasting peace was crucial for the economic regeneration and recovery of Sri Lanka. As an island economy, Sri Lanka is heavily dependent on external trade and tourism. Throughout the nineties, as the civil war



continued to cause havoc, its gross domestic product (GDP) growth was badly affected. Since the late nineties, however, Sri Lanka's economy had started to revive, mainly as a result of the economic liberalization policies of the government. Consequently, GDP growth increased from 4.3 percent in 1999 to 7.4 percent by 2000. Experts forecast a far higher growth rate if peace could be achieved on the island. And fourth, Prime Minister Wickremesinghe represented a new generation of political leadership in Sri Lanka that was less concerned with ethno-religious nationalism and zero-sum military conflict and more interested in peace and prosperity in the context of globalization and market liberalization.<sup>66</sup> Unencumbered by past failures in the decades-long ethnic conflict, Wickremesinghe was in a position to take bold decisions to achieve peace.

## Peace Negotiations

After months of separate talks with representatives of the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, Norwegian facilitators were able to procure an indefinite ceasefire agreement between the two sides in February 2002.<sup>67</sup> The signing of the agreement was followed by a visit to Jaffna by Prime Minister Wickremesinghe. This was the first visit to the Jaffna Peninsula by a Sri Lankan government leader since 1982. Wickremesinghe's message to the people of Jaffna seemed sincere and raised hopes for peace among the local population. Providing a further impetus to peace following the prime minister's visit to Jaffna, the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC) declared that it was willing to enter into a "sincere dialogue" with the LTTE regarding Muslim problems in the northeastern province. Reciprocating the SLMC's gesture, the LTTE admitted that the Muslims had suffered severely at its hands and apologized for committing such ethnic cleansing; it further recognized the Sri Lankan Muslim people's "unique cultural identity" and pledged to address Muslim concerns and apprehensions.<sup>68</sup>

On April 10, 2002, LTTE chief Prabhakaran came out of his jungle hideout to hold a press conference—his first in more than a decade—with the national and international media in Kilinochchi, in northern Sri Lanka. Flanked by the LTTE's chief negotiator and political strategist, Anton Balasingham; the head of the LTTE's political section, Thamil Chelvan; and two of his top commanders, Prabhakaran fielded questions from more than 200 journalists for more than two and half hours. After indicating that he was pleased with the onset of the peace process and thanking Prime Minister Wickremesinghe for his bold actions, Prabhakaran pledged that the LTTE was "sincerely and seriously committed to peace." He pointed out, however, that "the right conditions have not arisen for the LTTE to abandon the policy of an independent statehood." He stressed that, for any solution to Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict to be acceptable to the LTTE, it must incorporate three fundamentals—Tamil homeland, Tamil nationality, and Tamil right to self-determination—and that "once these fundamentals are accepted or a political solution is put forward by Sri Lanka recognizing these three fundamentals and if our people are satisfied with the framework of a solution that recognizes these core issues, then we will consider giving up the demand for Eelam."<sup>69</sup> Balasingham further expanded the LTTE's understanding of self-determination: "We mean the right of people to decide their own political destiny—it can also apply to autonomy and self-governance. If autonomy and self-governance is given to our people, we can say that internal self-determination is to some extent met. But if the Sri Lankan government rejects our demand for

autonomy and self-governance and continues with repression, then as a last resort we will opt for secession—that also comes under self-determination.”<sup>70</sup> Both Prabhakaran and Balasingham noted in their press conference that, because the Wickremesinghe government was politically weak and not in a position to offer an acceptable permanent solution, it had accepted the LTTE’s suggestion to create an **interim self-governing authority (ISGA)** for the northeastern province to give time to prepare the people for a permanent solution.<sup>71</sup>

On the eve of the much anticipated peace talks, scheduled to be held in Thailand, two key developments took place that augured well for future peace. First, realizing that the LTTE might become the *de facto* ruler of the northeastern province, the SLMC struck a deal with the Tamil Tigers. The Muslims accepted the *de facto* authority of the LTTE in the northeast; in return, the LTTE pledged that it would immediately stop the harassment of and extortions from Muslims and return paddy fields taken forcibly from Muslim farmers. The two sides also agreed to appoint a joint committee to facilitate the return of 100,000 displaced Muslims who were expelled from Jaffna and the northern mainland by the LTTE almost twelve years prior. The LTTE also accepted the SLMC as the sole representative of the Muslims in the northeastern province and agreed on its participation in the talks about the interim administration to be held in Thailand.<sup>72</sup> Second, the leader of the Indian Tamils, Armugam Thondaman, pledged to support the LTTE in its quest for self-determination. Thondaman was a senior cabinet minister and leader of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC). He had met Prabhakaran after the LTTE leader’s infamous press conference, and in that meeting, the CWC and the LTTE had agreed to “work together for the resolution of the Tamil national question.”<sup>73</sup>

The peace talks in Thailand were delayed, however, because several snags developed. Like President Kumaratunga, the Wickremesinghe government seemed to have suddenly developed apprehensions about the proposed ISGA in the northeastern province. In a speech to the European Parliament in 2002, Prime Minister Wickremesinghe stressed that the unity of Sri Lanka was nonnegotiable and remarked that, while the LTTE wanted priority to be given to the setting up of an interim administration in the northeast, his government believed that the issue of the ISGA should be linked to core political issues. President Kumaratunga held almost identical views based on her apprehension that the formation of an LTTE-controlled interim administration in the northeast would, over time, become automatically entrenched as the final solution and a precursor to a *de facto* separate Tamil state; she shared her apprehensions with the visiting Norwegian deputy foreign minister and made it clear that she expected the ISGA to be linked to a final political solution to the conflict.<sup>74</sup> Prime Minister Wickremesinghe also categorically denied that his government had given any blanket assurance to the LTTE that an interim administration under the Tamil Tigers’ sole control would soon be established in the northeastern province. He further rejected the concept of a Tamil homeland within the country; instead, he reiterated the concept of a single Sri Lankan homeland incorporating all communities.<sup>75</sup> He even indicated that his government had no plans to repeal the Prevention of Terrorism Act, which gave sweeping detention powers to the police and armed forces against the Tamil insurgents, and expected the LTTE to respect human rights and democratic norms.<sup>76</sup>

Sensing that the earlier optimism about the peace talks was fast eroding, Norwegian facilitators went into overdrive to try and convince the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government to open face-to-face talks. The Norwegian initiatives finally

succeeded, and a first round of face-to-face peace talks between representatives of the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government was held in Sattahip, Thailand, in September 2002. At the end of the three-day talks, the chief negotiator and political strategist of the LTTE, Balasingham, clarified that the LTTE was ready to accept “autonomy and self-governance” in northeastern Sri Lanka, the details of which could be worked out if both parties first agreed to a particular political system for the whole country. On his part, the head of the government delegation, Gamini Lakshman Peiris, stressed that the LTTE’s political aspirations could be fulfilled “within one country.”<sup>77</sup> The two sides agreed to meet again shortly for further talks and decided to set up a joint task force for humanitarian reconstructive activities.

Another round of talks between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE was held in Oslo in December 2002. The most crucial outcome of this round of negotiations was the agreement in principle by both sides to develop a federal political system in Sri Lanka that would give the Sri Lankan Tamils “internal self-determination” in the Tamil-dominated areas of the northeast. Norway’s special envoy to Sri Lanka’s peace process termed this agreement as a “major step” but warned that a long and bumpy road must be traveled before a final solution could be agreed upon: “They have decided what sort of house they want to build. They want to build a house with a federal structure within a united Sri Lanka. The decision to raise this house takes a long time.”<sup>78</sup> The end of the Oslo round of talks further provided an opportunity as well as a stiff challenge to the peace negotiators to come up with a viable method of political power sharing that could be discussed at future meetings. G. L. Peiris, head of the Sri Lankan government delegation, cautioned that the Oslo decision to explore a “federal model” was just the outer perimeter of a complex conflict resolution model and that the more contentious issues of “division of power” and “human rights” would be taken up for discussion at the next round.<sup>79</sup>

### **Suspension of Peace Talks**

Between December 2002 and April 2003, representatives of the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government held several rounds of Norway-facilitated peace talks aimed at resolving the decades-old ethnic conflict. However, the slowness of the complex negotiations, coupled with contradictory signals emanating from both sides, subjected the peace process to severe strain by mid-2003. Throughout the peace talks, the LTTE had continued to rebuild its military strength and war preparedness, and for this purpose it (especially the Sea Tigers) often violated the terms of the ceasefire agreement.<sup>80</sup> It had also started recruiting heavily, and its cadre strength was reported to have shot up to around 16,000 during the peace talks. The LTTE steadfastly refused to reduce its military strength until a final political settlement was reached, continued to commit atrocities against other minorities and anyone who dared to oppose it, and refused to categorically rule out the option of territorial secession and the creation of a sovereign and independent Tamil state. The Sri Lankan military also took this time to conduct a massive recruitment drive to replace a large number of deserters and soldiers killed in the battlefield. The military drew up plans for large-scale modernization of the armed forces and for building a well-trained and technologically savvy fighting force. Toward this end, Colombo requested that New Delhi provide weapons and training to its military forces.<sup>81</sup>

President Kumaratunga had also developed apprehensions regarding the nature of the concessions made to the LTTE by the UNF government and felt that, by

utilizing the ceasefire agreement and the subsequent peace talks, the LTTE had already set up a *de facto* independent Tamil state in the northeastern province of Sri Lanka.<sup>82</sup> Her concern was shared by her party, the SLFP, and allies such as the JVP, which strongly criticized any concession made to the LTTE by the Sri Lankan government. In addition, there were significant levels of opposition to the peace talks from Sinhalese ultranationalists and religious leaders. From the very beginning of the peace process, the Sinhalese-Buddhist clergy had vehemently opposed the concessions being granted to the Tamils and argued that the peace process would undermine Sri Lanka's status as an exclusive state-protected and state-promoted Buddhist state.

Finally, key foreign governments as well as major donors had developed serious reservations about the behavior of the LTTE and the overall direction of the peace process. For instance, the National Democratic Alliance government in India, led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee, made it clear that any solution to Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict must ensure principles of democracy, pluralism, and human rights. India voiced its concern for the way the LTTE treated other Tamil political parties, members of minority and majority communities in Sri Lanka, and captive government soldiers. Another serious issue was the extradition of the LTTE chief, Prabhakaran, a key figure implicated in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case.<sup>83</sup> Some of India's concerns were shared by the United States.<sup>84</sup> Sri Lanka's main donors and aid providers also developed skepticism about the peace process and stressed that only rapid progress in the peace talks would give the two sides a significant advantage at the June 2003 donor conference in Tokyo.<sup>85</sup>

In April 2003, the LTTE abruptly suspended the peace talks on the grounds that the resettlement of displaced people would not be possible until the Sri Lankan army relocated from the high-security zones in Jaffna City. Regaining Jaffna City, either by force or through negotiations, had been high on the LTTE's agenda since it lost control of that area in December 1995. In April 2000, when it recaptured the Elephant Pass, it had come close, but it could not take Jaffna City mainly because its military resources had been stretched thin. Some observers believed that the LTTE's decision to suspend peace talks was also a tactical ploy to win major concessions from the government, such as recognition of the Sea Tigers as a *de facto* naval unit.

Intense diplomatic efforts were once again undertaken by the Norwegian deputy foreign minister, Vidar HelgesenTokyo's special envoy, Yassushi Akashi and Oslo's special envoy, Erik Solheim, to bring the Tamil Tigers back on board the peace process and to convince them to attend the donors' conference in Tokyo. But on May 1, 2003, the Tamil Tigers escalated their brinkmanship by rejecting the government's offer to deescalate the crisis and by relocating Sri Lankan soldiers guarding Jaffna City to its outskirts. The government was unwilling to concede any more because it feared that any further relocation of the soldiers would mean the loss of state control over Jaffna City, which the LTTE wanted to retake desperately. The impasse thus continued, which raised fears of a return to the days of full-scale war.<sup>86</sup>

### **Political Turmoil and Its Impact on Peace Talks**

Although the Norwegian facilitators prevailed upon the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government not to return to the days of war, from late 2003 to early 2004, serious doubts developed regarding the continued viability and relevance of the peace process. Frustrated and angered by what she perceived as the appeasement of the

LTTE and the de facto partitioning of the country by the Wickremesinghe government's peace concessions, President Kumaratunga evoked the executive presidency's enormous powers to declare a state of emergency in the country in November 2003, under which she suspended the parliament and took over control of the ministries of defense, the interior, and the media from the government.<sup>87</sup> She also directed her party, the SLFP, to explore the possibility of forming an electoral and political alliance with the JVP, thereby fuelling speculation that she intended to shortly call for fresh parliamentary elections. The SLFP–JVP alliance was formed in January 2004, with the two parties agreeing to form a combined front, the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA). In early 2004, President Kumaratunga dissolved parliament and called fresh elections.

The dismissal of the UNF government and the formation of the UPFA was an ominous development for the peace process mainly because the UPFA's position regarding the peace process differed significantly from that of the Wickremesinghe government's. For instance, unlike the UNF, the UPFA publicly declared that it did not recognize the LTTE as the sole representative of the Tamil people and hence preferred to hold discussions with all stakeholders, including relevant Tamil political parties and civil society groups, to find an acceptable solution to the country's ethnic conflict. The UPFA also criticized the Norway-facilitated peace process for "taking an undesirable turn" and for setting out a path for a separate state. Rejecting the federal model favored by the LTTE and the UNF, the UPFA made it clear that it preferred a peace process aimed toward decentralization and devolution of power within a unitary structure.<sup>88</sup> The UPFA further blamed the LTTE for its repeated and provocative violations of the ceasefire agreement and for not negotiating in good faith by continuing to recruit soldiers and stockpile weapons. Finally, the inauguration of the Tamil Eelam police headquarters in Kilinochchi by LTTE chief Prabhakaran in 2003, was a clear indication to the UPFA that, regardless of what it had said earlier, the LTTE was gradually trying to put in place all the trappings of a quasi-state in the northeastern province.<sup>89</sup> The JVP's propaganda secretary even went so far as to suggest that, with the collapse of the UNF government, the ceasefire agreement was no longer in effect and warned that "the people must not be afraid that the war is coming back."<sup>90</sup> In addition to these pronouncements, the UPFA declared that, if it came to power after the parliamentary elections, it would abolish the executive presidency and reconvert Sri Lanka into a full parliamentary democracy.<sup>91</sup> Not surprisingly, the LTTE categorically refused to participate in any peace talks with the UPFA; Balasingham noted in an interview: "Our organization will not enter into negotiations with anyone who does not recognize the LTTE as the sole and authentic representative of the Tamil people."<sup>92</sup> He further warned that the formation of the UPFA signaled the coming together of Sinhala chauvinistic forces that reject the Tamils' legitimate territorial rights in the northeast and have no intention of sharing power with the Tamils; hence, dangerous consequences would arise if the UPFA were voted into power.

Close on the heels of the formation of the UPFA, reports circulated of a split between the LTTE's main organization, led by Prabhakaran and based in Kilinochchi in the northern Wannu region, and its eastern unit, led by Muralitharan, alias **Colonel Karuna**, and based in the eastern Batticaloa-Amparai district. The reasons for the north–east split within the LTTE are still shrouded in mystery, although many have speculated about its causes. For instance, some in the media suggested that the split was triggered by a demand from the LTTE's

northern leaders that Karuna send 1,000 of his combat troops to the Wannu, which Karuna refused on the grounds that redeployment of his forces would weaken the LTTE in the vulnerable eastern districts. It was also reported that the eastern wing of the LTTE had been harboring a grievance that leaders from the north, particularly from Jaffna, were monopolizing the leadership positions within the organization, while the bulk of the actual fighting with the Sri Lankan forces was conducted by soldiers from the east. Karuna was further reported to be upset at the condescending treatment of the eastern Tamils by the LTTE's northern leadership. He was said to have complained that funds collected by the LTTE abroad had almost entirely been spent in the Wannu and Jaffna, and none had reached the Batticaloa-Amparai area; moreover, not one out of the thirty-odd divisions of the LTTE's administrative setup was headed by someone from Batticaloa-Amparai. Another area of disagreement between the northern and eastern leadership was alleged to be the overtures that the LTTE made toward the Muslims in eastern Sri Lanka. The LTTE's eastern leadership was reportedly upset by Prabhakaran's soft line toward the SLMC at a time when clashes between members of the two communities were a regular feature in the eastern region, and Muslim youth were said to be forming anti-LTTE "Osama suicide squads" to hit back.<sup>93</sup> A final theory suspected Indian and U.S. complicity behind the split within the LTTE.<sup>94</sup>

Regardless of its causes, the split introduced uncertainty into the peace process by undermining the LTTE's political standing and bargaining power at the negotiating table. For instance, the LTTE's claim to being the sole representative of Sri Lankan Tamils was badly dented by Karuna's revolt. Karuna's claim that the LTTE represented North Eelam while he and his forces (numbering around 6,000) represented South Eelam largely negated the LTTE's long-standing position that the northeastern province formed the historic homeland of the Sri Lankan Tamil people. Additionally, Karuna's attempts to obtain official recognition of his unit from the Sri Lankan government and the Norwegian facilitators did not bode well for the LTTE.

In an exercise in damage control, Prabhakaran expelled Karuna from the organization and ordered a large number of his forces to quietly move into the eastern region from their positions in the north. Given the LTTE's past history in dealing with insubordination within its ranks, it was predictable that Prabhakaran would attempt to crush Karuna's revolt. And although Prabhakaran's forces surprisingly met with little resistance (most of Karuna's fighters meekly surrendered, and Karuna himself fled the region), the potential for Karuna to play the role of a spoiler in any future peace negotiation remained strong, provided he retained his popularity among the Tamil population of eastern Sri Lanka and received political and military support from the Sri Lankan government willing to use him as a counterweight to the LTTE.<sup>95</sup>

## **TSUNAMI DISASTER AND THE DISPUTE OVER RELIEF AND RECONSTRUCTION**

The 2004 parliamentary elections drastically altered the political landscape in Sri Lanka again. The UPFA emerged as the single largest party (105 seats) in a parliament with a total strength of 225 and formed the new government under Mahinda

Rajapakse. The election results indicated a strong ethnic polarization in Sri Lanka, which cast a shadow over the peace process. The UPFA government was critical of Norway's mediation, refused to recognize the LTTE as the sole representative of the Tamil people, and rejected the "federal model" that had been agreed to in principle earlier.<sup>96</sup>

In December 2004, Sri Lanka suffered a major tragedy when a giant tsunami, which also devastated northern Indonesia, southern Thailand, and parts of south-eastern India, hit the northern and eastern parts of the island and caused massive destruction and loss of life. As international humanitarian and relief aid poured in, a tussle developed between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE over aid allocation and distribution. The LTTE accused the government of being less than generous to the Tamil-speaking areas of the northeast, which made reconstruction work difficult. On its part, the Sri Lankan government refused to form a joint LTTE–government mechanism (as suggested by the LTTE and facilitator Norway) for reconstruction work as long as LTTE paramilitaries continued to operate in the northeast. Both sides refused to budge from their respective positions and preferred to take their case to the international community.<sup>97</sup>

The bad blood that developed between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government over tsunami aid distribution and reconstruction work eventually took its toll on the Norway-facilitated peace process. The first sign of trouble came when the Sri Lankan foreign minister, Lakshman Kadirgamar, was assassinated in 2005 by an unidentified sniper.<sup>98</sup> Although the LTTE denied any role in the assassination, Sinhalese-Buddhist opinion was vehemently critical of the organization and put enormous pressure on the government to pull out of the peace process. In this tense climate, Sri Lanka held a fresh presidential election, which was won by the UPFA's candidate, the hard-liner Mahinda Rajapakse. In his election manifesto, Rajapakse had made it clear that he supported a unitary rather than a federal polity in Sri Lanka.<sup>99</sup> Rajapakse had also been a strong critic of the Norway-facilitated peace process and in the past had advocated a "military solution" to Sri Lanka's decades-old ethnic conflict.<sup>100</sup>

## ENDGAME: BACK TO WAR AND THE LTTE'S DESTRUCTION

As expected, the inauguration of Mahinda Rajapakse as Sri Lankan president drove the final nail in the coffin of peace negotiations and signaled a return to full-scale civil war in the north and east. Ironically, however, given what was to come, it was the LTTE that landed the first major blow. In a spectacular land-mine attack in the northern Jaffna Peninsula in late 2005, the LTTE executed eleven government soldiers and a policeman—this was the biggest Tiger attack since the signing of the CFA in 2002.<sup>101</sup> The government's military response was swift and harsh, and over the next few months massacres were committed by both sides. As the death toll climbed and thousands of civilians started fleeing the combat zones, international condemnation of the LTTE spread. The U.S. government, for example, called the LTTE a "reprehensible terrorist group" and mainly blamed it for the resumption of civil war in Sri Lanka.<sup>102</sup> Canada also labeled the LTTE a "terrorist group."<sup>103</sup>

From the beginning of 2006, major confrontations between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan military became a daily occurrence. A series of major sea battles took place between the Sea Tigers and the Sri Lankan navy; in support of its naval forces,

the Sri Lankan air force also resorted to aerial bombardment of Tamil areas.<sup>104</sup> In retaliation, the LTTE carried out suicide terrorist attacks against the Sri Lankan army headquarters in Colombo, killing several people and seriously wounding the head of the army.<sup>105</sup> Violence also broke out between the LTTE and the Karuna faction, which was being used by the Sri Lankan military against the Tigers. Communal violence between Tamils and Sinhalese/Muslims was also reported from the east. Violence was also directed at the international truce monitors belonging to the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM).<sup>106</sup> In this climate of spiraling violence, human rights abuses were committed by all sides. For example, while the LTTE was accused of intimidating and targeting foreign truce monitors, especially those who were European Union (EU) nationals, the Sri Lankan armed forces were criticized by human rights groups such as Amnesty International for killing unarmed Tamil civilians, including children, in the Jaffna Peninsula and seventeen aid workers in the eastern town of Muttur.<sup>107</sup>

In 2006, major clashes flared up in the Jaffna Peninsula in the north, in Batticaloa in the east, and around the Trincomalee port in the northeast.<sup>108</sup> A major confrontation between the Sri Lankan navy and the Sea Tigers took place near Trincomalee Harbor.<sup>109</sup> By the end of the year, the Sri Lankan military, with unofficial help from Colonel Karuna's fighters, was able to retake control over almost the entire eastern province from the LTTE.

In early 2007, the Tigers avenged the military setbacks they had suffered by carrying out a series of daring air strikes on Sri Lankan air force bases and on two oil-storage facilities located in the Colombo airport. The advent of the Air Tigers (albeit consisting of only a few light aircrafts) once again demonstrated the Tigers' resourcefulness. It also added a new dynamic to the conflict, that is, the LTTE's acquired capacity to expand the conflict out of the northeast by striking deep within Sinhalese-controlled areas.

The increased threat perception from the LTTE played into the hands of the Sri Lankan government. Although President Rajapakse continued to pay lip service to the importance of holding peace talks, in diplomatic circles the Sri Lankan government made the case that only a "decisive war" with the LTTE would open up the possibility of a final resolution of Sri Lanka's decades-old ethnic conflict. Having joined the American-led global "war on terror" and having received international sympathy and support, Colombo felt emboldened that, it could win a decisive military victory over the LTTE and once and for all smash the power and influence of the organization, which would then allow it to negotiate the terms of peace with more moderate Sri Lankan Tamil political parties and groups (see Box 7.1).

With tacit support from the Indian National Congress (I)-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government in India, Sri Lanka launched a full-scale military offensive to retake the northern province and the entire Jaffna Peninsula from the LTTE. A series of intense battles took place between the Sri Lankan military and the LTTE in 2007 and 2008 in which the LTTE suffered serious losses. By December 2008, the Sri Lankan military had fought its way up to the doorsteps of Kilinochchi, the northern town in the Wanni region that served as the LTTE's main administrative center and capital of the quasi-Ealam state that the LTTE had set up.

In early January 2009, after a series of fierce battles with the LTTE fighters involving helicopter gunships, jet fighters and intense hand-to-hand combat, the



**BOX 7.1****Theorizing the Linkage Between the Tamil–Sinhalese Conflict in Sri Lanka and Its International Dimension*****Complementary Perspectives from Comparative Politics and International Relations*****1. Domestic factors**

Primordial racial, religious, and ethnic cleavages and ancient hatred

British colonial policy and interethnic competition and conflict

Postindependence internal colonialism and discrimination against ethnic minorities

Demonstration effect of the liberation of Bangladesh

**2. International factors**

Initial covert partisan involvement of regional powers (India and other foreign states)

Role of diaspora behind armed conflict

Strong impact of national self-determination principles on secessionist struggle

Globalization and its impact on operational aspects of armed conflict

Generation of refugees, internally displaced persons, and child soldiers

Guns-for-drugs syndrome

**3. Conflict resolution**

Coercive diplomacy, signing of peace accord, and the limitations of mediation

Appeal of military solution to both parties at different stages of the conflict

Tilt in military balance of power to government side

Tilt in international diplomatic support to government side

Sri Lankan military was able to recapture the towns of Kilinochchi and Paranthan.<sup>110</sup> The Sri Lankan military followed up with a major ground, air, and sea assault on the strategic Elephant Pass, the gateway to the Jaffna Peninsula.<sup>111</sup> After regaining control of Kilinochchi in the Wannu region and the Jaffna Peninsula, the Sri Lankan military turned its attention to Mullaitivu, the last remaining LTTE stronghold on the east coast, which served as the Tigers' military headquarters.<sup>112</sup>

Over the next few months, the Sri Lankan government pressed on with its military campaign against the LTTE. Fierce fighting was reported around the Mullaitivu area. The Sri Lankan military resorted to intense shelling and aerial bombardment of the area under the LTTE's control. The LTTE tried to break the stranglehold by launching repeated suicide attacks against the advancing army columns. Caught in this intense crossfire were around 200,000 Tamil civilians. Some reports suggested that the Tamil civilian population was being used by the LTTE as a "human shield" against the advancing Sri Lankan forces, and that LTTE soldiers were under orders to shoot any civilians who tried to escape.<sup>113</sup> Human rights groups, the UN, and several Western states also accused the Sri Lankan military of causing mass civilian

fatalities through indiscriminate and intense shelling and aerial bombardment of LTTE-controlled areas.<sup>114</sup>

By the beginning of May 2009, the Sri Lankan forces had managed to corner the last remaining soldiers and the top leaders of the LTTE to a small strip of land in the northeast corner of Sri Lanka and cut-off their main escape routes through land and sea. A fierce final battle now ensued and lasted for about two weeks. The battle eventually ended with the complete massacre of most of the remaining LTTE soldiers and the group's top leadership, including Prabhakaran and his entire family.<sup>115</sup> With the death of Prabhakaran and his top aides and the complete destruction of the LTTE fighting machine, one of the world's longest running ethnic dirty war has finally come to an end.

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## Conclusion

The LTTE's military defeat raises two important questions: why did the LTTE lose and what impact would the LTTE's defeat have on the Tamil–Sinhalese ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka? Regarding the first question, five factors may have been particularly important. First, it is quite clear that Prabhakaran made a series of tactical blunders (e.g., attacking the IPKF, assassinating Rajiv Gandhi and several top Sri Lankan and Tamil politicians, using child soldiers, etc.) that left the LTTE short of friends and sympathy internationally. Second, by making unreasonable demands of the Wickremesinghe government and by taking advantage of peace negotiations to put in place the trappings of a quasi–Tamil state, the LTTE showed clearly that it was not really interested in accepting anything short of a sovereign Tamil state; this, in turn, allowed a hardline and ultranationalist Sri Lankan government under Rajapakse, fully committed to a decisive military showdown with the LTTE, to take power in Colombo. Third, Karuna's defection was a body blow to the LTTE and greatly reduced its fighting capacity in the East, which allowed the Sri Lankan military to concentrate its entire resources to the North. Fourth, in a post-9/11 world, the LTTE's capacity to raise funds and procure weapons was drastically reduced, which adversely affected its fighting capability. By contrast, the Sri Lankan government was able to carry out a major modernization of its armed forces with support from China, India, Israel, US, UK and the European Union.<sup>116</sup> Finally, the LTTE's popularity among the Tamil masses in Sri Lanka had gradually declined over the years. This could have adversely affected the LTTE's ability to recruit new soldiers from among the Sri Lankan Tamil population.

The second question concerns the eventual resolution of Tamil–Sinhalese ethnic conflict in a post-LTTE era. In this regard, the UPA government in India has made it clear to Colombo that it considers the destruction of the LTTE as a separate issue from the plight of the Sri Lankan Tamils in Sri Lanka. Hence, while Colombo can expect New Delhi's support and cooperation on the first issue, in a post-LTTE environment it has to ensure that Tamils in Sri Lanka would be treated justly and without any discrimination and intimidation.<sup>117</sup> Other prominent international actors such as the United States, European Union, United Kingdom, Germany, Russia, China, Japan, and the UN are also likely to take an approach similar to India's regarding Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict. The post-LTTE environment in Sri Lankan politics is therefore likely to remain dogged by challenges of nation-building, reconstruction and reconciliation.

## Discussion Questions

1. What are the main characteristics of a dirty war? Are they more prone to becoming internationalized? What impact do they have on international security?
2. For many years, Sri Lanka was considered to be a model of stable multiethnic democracy. Why and how did it emerge as an example of a brutal and protracted ethnic war?
3. Discuss the reasons for the failure of India's conflict resolution attempts in Sri Lanka. What lessons can be learned about ethnic conflict resolution from India's failed attempt?
4. Explain the reasons for the turbulent nature of the peace process initiated in Oslo in 2002. How have electoral politics in Sri Lanka affected the process? How have divisions within the Tamil leadership affected the process?
5. Why did the Norway-facilitated peace process fail in Sri Lanka? Which side is most responsible for the collapse of the peace talks?
6. Why did the Sri Lankan government under President Rajapakse decide to seek a military solution to Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict? Will the Tamil–Sinhalese conflict be resolved following the military defeat of the LTTE?

## Key Terms

all-party conference  
*bhikkhus*

Burghers

Colonel Karuna

counterinsurgency  
operations

dirty wars

50:50 formula

Indian Doctrine of

Regional Security

Indian Peace Keeping  
Force (IPKF)

Indian Tamils

Indo–Sri Lankan Accord

interim self-governing  
authority (ISGA)

Liberation Tigers of Tamil  
Eelam (LTTE)

Malays

Moors

Operation Jayasikuru

Operation Riviresa

Parthasarathy Formula

Research and Analysis  
Wing (RAW)

Sinhalese

Soulbury Commission

Sri Lankan Tamils

*Swabasha* movement

Tamil Eelam

Veddhas

## Notes

1. The Moors are descendents of the ancient Arab traders that used to visit Sri Lanka before the advent of the Europeans. They practice Islam, speak mostly Tamil, and are concentrated in the major trading centers such as Colombo and in the east of the island. The Moors living in the trading centers are usually

wealthy and literate, whereas those living in the east are economically backward with a low literacy level. The Burghers are of mixed European and Sri Lankan descent. They are mostly Christians and speak English. They are mainly concentrated in Colombo and are economically prosperous. The

- Malays are descended from the Malay traders and guards brought to the island during the colonial periods. The Veddhas are the descendants of the aboriginal tribes of ancient Sri Lanka and their numbers have been greatly reduced over the years because many of them have been absorbed into the Sinhalese race. The remaining Veddhas continue to rely on hunting for their food and live under extreme primitive conditions in the forests of eastern Sri Lanka.
2. Ministry of Finance and Planning, *Statistical Pocketbook of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka—1998* (Colombo: Department of Census and Statistics, 1998), pp. 9–26.
  3. K. de Silva, *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Conflict, Management and Resolution* (Kandy: International Center for Ethnic Studies, 1996), p. 4.
  4. Bruce Matthews, “The Situation in Jaffna—And How It Came About,” *The Round Table*, 290, April 1984, pp. 188–204.
  5. Shelton U. Kodikara, “Communalism and Political Modernization in Ceylon,” *Modern Ceylon Studies*, 4, no. 3, January 1970, pp. 94–114.
  6. Chelvadurai Manogaran, *Ethnic Conflict and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), p. 24.
  7. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
  8. Robert Kearney, *Communalism and Language in the Politics of Ceylon* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1967), p. 16.
  9. For details of the British colonial government’s education policy in Sri Lanka, see H. A. Wyndham, *Native Education* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933).
  10. Kearney, *Communalism and Language in the Politics of Ceylon*, p. 56–57.
  11. The 1953 census revealed that while the Sri Lankan Tamils constituted only 12.8 percent of the total population (compared with the Sinhalese, at 79.2 percent), they dominated various government jobs and professions in the following manner: 30 percent—Ceylon administrative service, 50 percent—clerical services (including postal, railway, hospitals, and customs), 60 percent—professions (engineers, doctors, lecturers), 40 percent—armed forces, and 40 percent—labor forces. 1953 Census data obtained from Rajesh Kadian, *India’s Sri Lanka Fiasco: Peacekeepers at War* (New Delhi: Vision Books, 1990), p. 57.
  12. This was done because the Sri Lankan Tamils and the Sinhalese were alike in rejecting plantation labor as a way of life. The Sinhalese peasants, in particular, were reluctant to give up their casual schedule of rice cultivation for the low-paid and strictly regulated work on the plantations. The Sri Lankan Tamils, on their part, utilized their proficiency in the English language and sought jobs in the public service and the professions.
  13. Kearney, *Communalism and Language in the Politics of Ceylon*, p. 59.
  14. Kearney, *Communalism and Language in the Politics of Ceylon*, p. 16.
  15. *Ibid.*
  16. S. Arasaratnam, “Nationalism in Sri Lanka and the Tamils,” in Michael Roberts, ed., *Collective Identities, Nationalism, and Protest in Modern Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Marga Institute, 1979), p. 502.
  17. Manogaran, *Ethnic Conflict and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka*, p. 32.
  18. This constitution remained in force until 1972, when the United Front coalition government of Shirimavo

Bandaranaike introduced a new constitution that replaced the post of governor general with a president. The name of the country was also changed from Ceylon to Sri Lanka. In 1978, the UNP government led by Jayewardene introduced another constitution that created a presidential form of government with Prime Minister Jayewardene becoming the first executive president of Sri Lanka for a six-year term.

19. Under the Citizenship Act of 1948, Indian Tamils could no longer become citizens of Sri Lanka by virtue of their birth on the island and had to prove three or more generations of paternal ancestry to become citizens by descent. It was almost impossible for most Indian Tamils to provide such proof. As a result, they were made stateless. Similarly, the Indian and Pakistani Residents (Citizenship) Act of 1949 and the Ceylon Parliamentary Elections Amendment Act of 1949 also disenfranchised most of the Indian Tamils who had participated in the country's general elections since 1931. The total outcome of all three acts was that about 975,000 Indian Tamils were rendered stateless.
20. In the initial years after independence, the Sri Lankan government recognized both Sinhalese and Tamil as official languages of Sri Lanka. In 1956, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)-led government under SWRD. Bandaranaike passed the Official Language Act, which made Sinhalese the sole official language of Sri Lanka. The act granted no concessions to the Sri Lankan Tamils, the national minority, with regard to the use of the Tamil language for education, employment, and administrative purposes. Faced with a massive Tamil protest and mounting ethnic tension, the government passed the Tamil Language Act of 1958 to provide for the "reasonable use" of Tamil in education, administration, and public service examinations in the northern and eastern provinces. The implementation of the act was, however, minimal.
21. Under this plan, for admission purposes in higher educational institutions, the marks obtained by Tamil students were weighted downward against marks obtained by Sinhalese students.
22. Because the Tamils have always claimed the northern and eastern provinces to be their traditional homeland based on the fact that they constitute a numerical majority in these areas, the Sinhalese-dominated governments of independent Sri Lanka started the deliberate colonization of these provinces by resettling large numbers of Sinhalese families from the south and west. The purpose behind this policy was twofold. First, by changing the population ratio between Tamils and Sinhalese, the Sri Lankan government sought to eliminate any Tamil territorial claims over the northern and eastern provinces; and second, because election results reflected a clear polarization of politics (Sinhalese parties and Tamil parties won clear victories in their respective areas), a changed population ratio was sure to provide Sinhalese political parties a greater degree of control over traditional Tamil areas.
23. Brian Senewiratne, "The Problems of Sri Lanka," in Kalim Bahabur, ed., *South Asia in Transition: Conflicts and Tensions* (New Delhi: Patriot Publishers, 1986), p. 237.
24. Robert N. Kearney, "Ethnic Conflict and the Tamil Separatist Movement

- in Sri Lanka," *Asian Survey*, 25, no. 9, September 1985, p. 902.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 903.
  26. Senewiratne, "The Problems of Sri Lanka," p. 237.
  27. Kearney, "Ethnic Conflict and the Tamil Separatist Movement in Sri Lanka," p. 905.
  28. Under the 1978 constitution, the president was to be elected by direct popular vote. Therefore, a candidate sympathetic to the minorities could hope to win by combining minority votes with a large minority of Sinhalese votes. Parliament was to be elected by proportional representation. Hence, Sinhalese parties now needed to form alliances with minority parties in order to form governments.
  29. James Manor, "Sri Lanka: Explaining the Disaster," *The World Today*, November 1983, p. 452.
  30. For an excellent account of the 1983 anti-Tamil riots in Sri Lanka and the role played by government agencies and personnel, see Manor, "Sri Lanka: Explaining the Disaster," pp. 450–459.
  31. Kearney, "Ethnic Conflict and the Tamil Separatist Movement in Sri Lanka," p. 906.
  32. Karthigesu Sivathamby, "The Sri Lankan Tamil Question: Socio-Economic and Ideological Issues," *Bulletin of Peace Proposals*, 18, no. 4, 1987, p. 634.
  33. Urmila Phadnis and Rajat Ganguly, *Ethnicity and Nation-building in South Asia*, rev. ed. (New Delhi; London; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2001), pp. 326–333.
  34. P. Venkateshwar Rao, "Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: India's Role and Perception," *Asian Survey*, 28, no. 4, April 1988, p. 425.
  35. *Ibid.*
  36. *Ibid.*
  37. Kadian, *India's Sri Lanka Fiasco*, p. 67.
  38. Victor Ostrovsky and Claire Hoy, *By Way of Deception* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), pp. 67–69 and 127–131; and P. Senewiratne, "The Mossad Factor in Government Repression," in Kalim Bahadur, ed., *South Asia in Transition: Conflicts and Tensions* (New Delhi: Patriot Publishers, 1986), pp. 288–294.
  39. Kadian, *India's Sri Lanka Fiasco*, pp. 98–109.
  40. *The Hindustan Times*, July 24, 1983.
  41. For details, see *India Today*, August 31, 1983, pp. 14–15.
  42. Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr., *India Under Pressure: Prospects for Political Stability* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1984), p. 167.
  43. Kadian, *India's Sri Lanka Fiasco*, p. 92.
  44. *Ibid.*, pp. 93–94.
  45. Shelton U. Kodikara, "International Dimensions of Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: Involvement of India and Non-State Actors," *Bulletin of Peace Proposals*, 18, no. 4, 1987, p. 647.
  46. *Ibid.*
  47. Ralph R. Premdas and S. W. R. de A. Samarasinghe, "Sri Lanka's Ethnic Conflict: The Indo-Lanka Peace Accord," *Asian Survey*, 28, no. 6, June 1988, p. 678.
  48. Kumar Rupesinghe, "Ethnic Conflicts in South Asia: The Case of Sri Lanka and the Indian Peace-keeping Force (IPKF)," *Journal of Peace Research*, 25, no. 4, 1988, p. 346.
  49. *Ibid.*
  50. At the time of induction, the IPKF comprised only 8,000 men; in the next two years, its strength was increased to more than 100,000 men, but even this number proved to be inadequate.
  51. Shelton U. Kodikara, "The Continuing Crisis in Sri Lanka: The

- JVP, the Indian Troops, and Tamil Politics," *Asian Survey*, 29, no. 7, July 1989, p. 717.
52. Manik de Silva, "Communal Bloodbath," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 30, 1990, p. 19.
  53. O. N. Mehrotra, "Ethnic Strife in Sri Lanka," *Strategic Analysis*, 21, no. 10, January 1998, p. 1519.
  54. Peter Chalk, "The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam Insurgency in Sri Lanka," in Rajat Ganguly and Ian Macduff, eds., *Ethnic Conflict and Secessionism in South and Southeast Asia: Causes, Dynamics, Solutions* (New Delhi; London; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2003), pp. 133–156.
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# Weak States and Ethnic Conflict: State Collapse and Reconstruction in Africa

## INTRODUCTION

Much of today's ethnic conflict can be found in the developing world, particularly on the vast continents of Africa and Asia. The large number of communal groups living here, combined with the artificial nature of state borders drawn by European colonial powers, has furnished hothouse conditions for ethnic competition. Within the developing world, Africa accounts for a large proportion of conflicts based on ethnicity, kinship, religion, and other identity markers.

Studying cases from Africa is important for several reasons. The continent is rich in terms of ethnic diversity, but it also has many weak central governments. In addition, state boundaries are arbitrary and, more than in the rest of the world, are not congruent with patterns of ethnic settlement. Ian Lustick observed that “[a]fter more than thirty years of independence . . . the hegemonic status of the belief that African borders are immutable, and thereby excluded from calculations about how Africans can respond to the exigencies of their existence, appears to be breaking down.” As a result, “Africa faces, among its other woes, the possibility of cascading patterns of fragmentation and attachment.”<sup>1</sup>

Examining what happens when states fragment can help us understand the role played by ethnicity in this process as well as the part played by international actors. As we have seen time and again, international actors are reluctant to recognize the validity of ethno-secessionists' arguments and prefer status-quo arrangements. The statist bias of the international system allows for no exceptions even when (1) the states that are fragmenting are insignificant, located on the periphery of the global economy and the state system; and (2) the movements attacking the state often have justifiable historical grievances, land claims, victimization histories, and other moral claims.