





Sri Lanka Flash Point

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The coastal route to Galle is a picturesque one. In the 115 km trip south from the Sri Lankan capital, Colombo, the view of the sparkling, blue Indian Ocean is almost uninterrupted. Fishermen return with their day's catch; bustling, roadside markets line the verges; girls in crisp white uniforms, with black, plaited hair scurry off to school. Unsurprisingly, the resorts in and around the southern port town are some of the country's top tourist destinations, drawing visitors from around the world.

The scenes are relaxed, even idyllic. But on Boxing Day 2004, Galle was one of the towns that was ravaged by the tsunami that ripped through most of Sri Lanka's coastline, reducing entire villages to rubble and killing some 40,000 people. Sri Lankans like me, who saw the waves crash in, and lived through those terrible days, have them etched in our memories. The panic, the horror, the grief of the bereaved were also played and replayed on television stations across the world. Though less in the international limelight, many families remained displaced in camps as we set out to drive to Galle to report on the plight of the tsunami victims, two years after the disaster.

But, on approaching the town, Sri Lanka's recurring nightmare of the past 20 years was about to engulf us. Not a natural disaster, but a man-made one. A catastrophe that has ripped apart this pear-shaped island in the Indian Ocean and blighted the lives of successive generations of Sri Lankans.

The first sign is the panic. A mass frenzy of people, mobbing vehicles, blocking our way forward. A bamboo pole is hoisted across the road as a flimsy barrier. Young men surround us, banging windows telling us to go back. The driver nervously lowers the shutters.

Left: A soldier stands guard near the site of the suicide bomb attack in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in December 2006.

‘The Tigers are attacking Galle. There is firing all over. You’ll be killed,’ someone shouts through the window.

In the mêlée, we can barely comprehend the news. Everyone knew that Sri Lanka’s stuttering peace process between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was about to collapse. But, even in the worst of times during the two-decade war, the southern coast was rarely attacked. Galle, like most southern towns, remained largely unscathed through all the big battles, which were confined to the country’s north and east.

We draw into the side of the road, and wait nervously in the blazing sun. We turn on the radio. It tells of an audacious assault by the Tamil Tigers on the Galle port and adjoining naval base. Two rebel boats, carrying suicide bombers had launched an attack – prompting the navy to retaliate. Reports on the radio keep referring to the battle, just a few hundred metres away from where we are parked. Two people are reported killed.

We turn back and attempt another route. We make it to the nearby village of Katugoda, where dozens of children were orphaned, women widowed and livelihoods lost, when the tsunami struck. But now, to add to their misfortune, the war has arrived practically in their backyard.

‘We heard four loud bangs, and went running out,’ says Fauzun Nizam, a social worker who had been meeting with tsunami widows, when the Tigers’ attack happened. ‘Our hearts were pounding. I did not know what was happening. I thought “Oh God! Why?” First the tsunami and then this,’ she adds.

The attack sent jitters across Sri Lanka. It brought home the painful reality that, after four years of relative peace, the war had returned. The ceasefire agreement signed between the government of Sri Lanka and Tamil Tigers in 2002 was in tatters. At the time, the deal was hailed by the international community and embraced by the war-weary people. For the first time in decades, Sri Lankans from the south were able to travel to the north and east. Food and clothes started to flow to the war-torn areas, banks and businesses opened new branches. Property began to boom, mainly propelled by expatriate Sri Lankans most of whom had fled the country as refugees.

But the euphoria didn’t last long. Distrust between the government and Tamil Tigers, extremist stances

by both parties and the rebels’ lack of commitment to a negotiated settlement to the conflict, saw the peace process slowly crumble. The situation was further complicated by a historic split within the Tamil Tigers movement, which the Tigers’ leadership felt was being exploited by the government.

Muslim minorities under attack

The impact of the resurgent conflict is being felt all over Sri Lanka. Almost half-way between Galle and Colombo lies the town of Aluthgama. School-teacher Mehroonniza Careem and her family fled here after heavy fighting erupted in the war-torn north-eastern town of Muttur in July 2006. The Muttur battle is considered by many to be the moment that sealed the end of the ceasefire. Mrs Careem is the principal of a well-known Muslim girls’ school in the area. She is a dignified, strong-minded woman, but even she shudders as she recalls how the town came under attack by the Tigers and the government launched a fierce counter-offensive.

‘First we heard huge blasts through the night, none of us could sleep, we were terrified, we could hear the explosions just near our house.’

Mrs Careem sought refuge in her school only to find that thousands of others had done the same.

‘We were like matchsticks in a matchbox, each person stuck against the other, heads touching legs,’ she says.

But the civilians sheltering in the school were not spared. Mrs Careem says the Sri Lankan army attacked the buildings, claiming that the rebels had infiltrated the complex. ‘People fled, hoping to get to another town,’ she says. ‘We later heard some of them were killed by the Tigers.’

Mrs Careem did not just lose her home in the upsurge of violence – her beloved second son has gone too. Just days before the Muttur attack, he disappeared – allegedly kidnapped by the rebels – his whereabouts now unknown. When we meet, it is Ramadan, a holy month for Muslims. Mrs Careem is putting her faith in God, for the return of her 24-year-old son, Ramy. She cannot speak of her child, without breaking down. ‘My son is mentally unwell. He has to take medication every day, otherwise he becomes very sick. I am pleading with them to release him.’

The toll exacted by Sri Lanka’s decades’ long civil war has been immense. It has cost more than

60,000 lives and displaced hundreds of thousands of civilians. There have been multiple human rights violations, rapes, and thousands of people have 'disappeared'. The causes of the conflict are complex – but the war pits the Tamil Tigers against the Sinhalese-dominated government of Sri Lanka.

The Sinhalese Buddhists, who make up 70 per cent of Sri Lanka's population, control the state machinery – the military as well as the government. The Tamils – the majority of whom are Hindus – are ethnically distinct and speak their own language. The rebel movement, the Tamil Tigers, want to carve out a separate state for minority Tamils in the north and east of the country.

Minority suffering ignored

But trapped in the middle, often ignored in the reporting of the Sri Lankan conflict, are the other minority communities. After Tamils, Muslims are the second largest minority in Sri Lanka – numbering nearly a million. They have suffered tremendously in the conflict but they are often the 'forgotten minority' and their plight is rarely acknowledged.

Sri Lankan Muslims are scattered across the country, but a majority live in the coastal areas. Their presence is a throwback mainly to the Arab-Indian traders who married local women and settled in the island many centuries after the Sinhalese and Tamils. Their dominance in eastern Sri Lanka – in some small towns they form the majority – and their insistence on their separate and unique identity has brought them into conflict with the Tamil Tigers, who see the Muslim presence as a hindrance to their homeland claim.

One of the most horrific episodes occurred in October 1990, when the Tigers engaged in a campaign to 'ethnically cleanse' areas they controlled. Nearly 100,000 Muslims were given 24 hours to leave. Most fled, taking nothing with them, forced into flimsy boats in the monsoon deluge. Crowded and panicked, some families lost their infant babies, who fell into the sea. The purge ripped apart Tamil and Muslim communities, who had previously lived peacefully side by side.

'I remember how we left, our Tamil neighbours crying, helpless, seeing us leave,' says Juwairiya Uvais, who was a young girl at the time. 'Hundreds and hundreds of people were all walking from different villages towards the beach.'

Juwairiya, her family and many others escaped to



the north-western town of Puttalam – the closest point that offered relative safety.

Yet, 16 years on, families still live in what were intended to be temporary camps. Juwairiya – who now works for a local charity – showed me around some of them. It was a stormy day, and we struggled to enter homes through flooding muddy pathways. Half built with bricks, topped with thatched roofs, the families call these dwellings their homes. But not a single individual I spoke to could produce a legal document to claim ownership of the land.

In the backyards, little children in tattered clothes chased chickens, while water dripped through the dry coconut-palm leaf roofs. Poverty is entrenched. Many Muslims driven from their homes in 1990 were left penniless. Well-to-do businessmen were reduced to working as labourers at onion farms. During Ramadan, Juwairiya helps to coordinate large sums of money traditionally given as charity in this month by wealthy Muslims in Colombo. 'There was a time we used to give charity, now for the last so many years we are recipients,' she says.

The renewed conflict has also added to the uncertainty surrounding people's lives. In Puttalam, as elsewhere in the country, more military checkpoints have sprung up as the authorities seek to crack down on the rebels' activities. When we are stopped at one of them, Juwairiya struggles to explain who she is to the Sinhala-speaking soldiers. There are a few tense moments. Juwairiya is not carrying the proper identity papers and, as she comes from the north-east, she speaks Tamil. In the current jittery climate, these two factors might be

enough to get her arrested. Luckily, she is wearing a headscarf and, after a few moments discussion, the soldiers accept that she is Muslim, working with the displaced community, and wave her on.

It is not just Muslims who find themselves struggling to build new lives for themselves in Puttalam. Sinhalese Christians were also pushed out by the Tigers during the purge of the north-east. The Christians are Sri Lanka's smallest religious minority, found in both the ethnic Tamil and Sinhalese communities, and who mostly converted during the 400-year colonial occupation of the island by the Portuguese, Dutch and British.

Many of the displaced Christians in Puttalam live in one camp, close to the sea. The men eke out a living as fishermen, but, poor as they are, their futures are now even more precarious. The Galle attack was just one illustration of the rebels' capacity to launch sea-borne attacks. With the resumption of the war, the authorities have imposed harsh restrictions on sea travel. For fishermen, this means that they cannot set sail early in the morning.

'They tell us we can only go after 5:30 in the morning. There are no fish to catch at that time. We have to start much earlier,' says fisherman Herbert Jones.

Even if the rules were relaxed, Mr Jones believes that the fishermen living in the displaced people's camp, would still come off worse. 'The sea is supposed to belong to everyone but we don't belong to the village so we don't get to fish.'

Four hours' drive to the south, in the capital Colombo, at first glance, it seems as if it is a different world. Despite the renewed war, the city centre – as always – displays an amazing sense of resilience, ticking on despite the gloom. Hotels host parties most nights, restaurants are bursting with customers and the city bustles with an almost surreal sense of normalcy.

Behind the façade, however, you see a city under siege. Armed soldiers are everywhere, standing at temporary barricades with red Stop signs, flagging down vehicles to be checked for explosives. In 2006, Colombo has had more than five targeted bomb blasts, mainly aimed at opponents of the Tamil Tigers.

Traditionally, moderate Tamils have been singled out by the Tigers, who have a reputation for not tolerating political opposition from among their own ethnic community. In August 2005, Foreign

Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar, an ethnic Tamil, was shot dead by a sniper at his home. In August 2006, Kethesh Loganathan, also a Tamil and deputy head of the government's peace secretariat, was shot dead. No one was ever brought to justice for those murders – but they were widely assumed to have been carried out by the Tamil Tigers.

Tamils targeted by military

During the conflict, Tamil moderates have found themselves doubly victimized. Vulnerable to rebel reprisals, they are also attacked by government forces, who believe them to be rebels or supportive of the Tamil Tigers. Under the terrorism laws, the ill-treatment of Tamils, subjected to illegal detention and torture, is well-documented. Moreover, Tamils in lower-class groups face routine harassment – something that has become more pronounced over the past few months.

The story of Janaki Sinnaswami, who is 59, is all too common. A Tamil who makes a living as a domestic worker in the wealthy houses of Colombo, she and her family have borne the brunt of Sri Lanka's bitter ethnic conflict. Her first home was destroyed in the infamous 1983 riots, when Sinhala mobs, with political backing, went on a rampage destroying Tamil houses, shops and businesses in all the main cities, and attacking Tamil families, killing, raping and injuring.

It was the first time an entire minority community was targeted and attacked in such a brutal and widespread manner, and is widely seen as the precursor to all-out war between the Tamil Tigers and the government. For Janaki, the loss of her home was a setback from which the family never recovered. Her family moved back to the crowded parental home in the slums, where seven adults and six children were cooped up in one room. Her husband – unable to cope – became an alcoholic and died. With no money to educate her oldest son, he grew up illiterate. Incredibly, against all the odds, Janaki scraped together the money from her work as a maid and succeeded in educating her two youngest children.

But now, with the collapse of the peace process, things have again taken a turn for the worse. In the slums, the military are again raiding the houses of Tamils.

'They bang on our doors at midnight hours. Army men come with guns and they check our entire house, open everything, ask us who we are

Below: A woman who fled from the town of Muttur prepares to make morning tea near a tent at the Al Aysha refugee camp in Kantale in August 2006.

harbouring,' Janaki says. 'I have told my mistress I can't work late, I have to go home because I have a young daughter and they can do anything to her when I am not at home.'

But if the situation for Tamils in Colombo is bad, in the war-torn north, it is much worse. In 2006, the renewed fighting claimed 3,000 lives – the majority of them in the north and east. Over the years, these areas have been shattered by the conflict. They are heavily mined in places, with little paths wending across a dry, barren landscape; families have been forced to flee their homes time

and time again. In the recent fighting, the situation has bordered on catastrophic, with the north effectively cut off from the rest of the country – the main roads have been blocked. At least one UN convoy carrying humanitarian supplies into the north-east had to turn back because of heavy fighting, with officials warning that the situation in some places was 'desperate'.

'In some areas people are moving to starvation, but what is food compared to human dignity?' says Revd Dr Rayappu Joseph, the Bishop of Mannar, in the north-west. The bishop is a well-known – but controversial – human rights activist. He is often attacked in the nationalist press for his alleged links to the Tamil Tigers, an accusation he staunchly denies. Shuttling between government and Tamil-



controlled areas the bishop has first-hand information on the plight of the people. He tells stories of young men being shot down or kidnapped under suspicion of being involved with the Tigers. He claims the killings often occur close to military or police checkpoints. Other human rights activists in the area, who refused to be identified, fearing for their lives, corroborate the information.

In December 2006, the government gave the security forces sweeping powers to search, arrest and question suspects. The fear is that these draconian measures could result in even more people being arrested and held incommunicado. As the crisis deepens, Bishop Joseph says, 'We are helpless people. There is no one to help us, there is no one to save us.'

With the resurgence in the conflict, the ghosts of the past have returned to haunt Sri Lanka. White vans, the horrifying symbol attached to disappearances in the early 1980s, have come back. The vans appear at the doorstep of homes in broad daylight, hauling in men and young boys as petrified families look on.

The University Teachers for Human Rights (UTHR), one of Sri Lanka's best-known human rights groups, accused the Tamil Tigers in a report published in June 2006. 'Fathers are huddled in their homes with their children fearing to go out, lest they are dragged into a van by thugs and are not seen again,' the report says.

In previous reports, the UTHR pointed the finger at the government, reporting on incidents where the military, in collusion with renegade Tamil groups, have been involved in abductions and killings.

Statistics are hard to come by, but in the month of September alone, just in the northern town of Jaffna, Sri Lanka's Human Rights Commission received 41 complaints of abductions. The men who are kidnapped rarely return; what happens to them remains a mystery. Although often presumed dead, years may pass without any official or rebel acknowledgement of the killing. Bodies may never be returned to grieving families.

The boys who are abducted are forced to take up arms. Since May 2006 UNICEF has received 135 reports of children being abducted to fight for Tamil militants in the war. And there are accusations that the government is implicated in child kidnappings too. Although it denies involvement with the dissident Tamil armed groups, the credibility of those denials was dealt a blow in November 2006,

when the government's position was contradicted by a senior UN official.

Following a visit to Sri Lanka, Allan Rock, a special adviser to the UN representative for children and armed conflict, said he 'found strong and credible evidence that certain elements of the Government security forces are supporting and sometimes participating in the abductions and forced recruitment of children'. His findings were an embarrassment to the government, which had always claimed to hold the moral high ground over the Tamil Tigers by accusing them of using child soldiers. It was this fact, combined with other human rights violations, that resulted in a ban on the Tamil Tigers and their political and fundraising activities in most Western states.

For many Sri Lankans, the collapse of the peace process and resurgence of violence has marked a terrifying new chapter in Sri Lanka's conflict-ridden history. One of the biggest fears is that it is now impossible to say who is responsible for the killings and abductions. Is it the government, is it paramilitary groups, is it the Tamil Tigers, or is it renegade factions? In 2006, several Tamil journalists, academics and peace activists with different affiliations have randomly been gunned down in a sinister string of killings that point to numerous perpetrators. Even more worrying, no one has been tried or found guilty for these crimes.

'Today the alarm is sounding for Sri Lanka. It is on the brink of a crisis of major proportions,' said Phillip Alston, the UN Special Rapporteur on extra-judicial killings, to the UN General Assembly in October 2006. But many Sri Lankans feel that such appeals are falling on deaf ears – that the world is not interested in their plight. With no vast oil reserves, or strategic importance to world powers, Sri Lankans feel they are being left to face a bleak future by themselves. As Lalith Chandana, a Christian fisherman living in the Puttalam camp, puts it, 'Every day we hear about peace but ... we have no hope peace will come.'

Colombo, November 2006