



## Sri Lanka's Long War

By Miriam Young, Asia Pacific Center for Justice and Peace

The conflict in Sri Lanka has been raging in varying degrees of intensity since 1983, and it has become one of the more intractable wars in the post-colonial era. Termed the "No Mercy War" by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), it has caused at least 65,000 deaths, displaced up to one million people, resulted in severe human rights abuses, and slowed Sri

Lanka's once-promising development. Although the war has received little attention outside the region, since April this year, as the conflict has intensified on the battlefield, it has taken on an international dimension that involves the U.S., Norway, and India.

An island nation off the southeastern tip of India, Sri Lanka received independence from Britain in 1948. Its population is composed of Sinhalese (74%), Tamils (18.1%), and Muslims (7.1%). The Sinhalese are mainly Buddhist, the Tamils are Hindu, and segments of both groups make up

the small population of Christians. Although religion plays a role in the conflict, most Sri Lankans view its origins more in ethnic rather than religious terms.

Sri Lanka, though a poor, developing country, had previously achieved impressive social indicators, such as a high literacy rate and life expectancy, and low rates of infant and maternal mortality. During the past two decades, however, these indicators have slipped. The overall figures mask wide disparities within ethnic and regional groups and conceal the devastating impact of the war on demography, health, education, and housing.

Sri Lanka's troubles are rooted primarily in the practices of its former colonial power and in unaddressed political and economic grievances following independence. Since independence, Sinhalese majority governments have attempted to reverse what they viewed as British favoritism of Tamils in education and government positions. Successive governments instituted policies that discriminated against Tamils in language and education and gave Buddhism pride of place in the constitution. The unwillingness of these governments to address Tamil grievances escalated a political conflict into a violent and multidimensional one.

Feeling increasingly marginalized, some Tamils gave up trying to secure their rights within the Sri Lankan state

and organized armed groups to fight the government. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which emerged as the most militarily efficient and ruthless group, is locked in battle against the Sri Lankan government. The LTTE is fighting for Tamil Eelam, a separate Tamil state that would comprise the north and east of the island. Despite being vastly outnumbered by government troops, the LTTE combines guerrilla tactics and conventional warfare to engage the government in a protracted war that most observers believe cannot be won on the battlefield.

Although the government of Sri Lanka is a party to the Geneva Conventions and the LTTE has expressed its commitment to respect them, both sides are guilty of torture, illegal detention, disappearances, and extrajudicial executions. Provision of food and medicine to both displaced and resident civilians in areas controlled by the LTTE is a volatile issue. Aid agencies walk a tight line between voicing protest over restrictions on their efforts and risking denial of permission to work at all.

Several obstacles have prevented a peaceful settlement of the conflict: the intense rivalry between the two main Sinhalese political parties, the Peoples Assembly (PA) and the United National Party (UNP); the fierce opposition of the Buddhist clergy to any accommodation of Tamil grievances, which they view as threatening to Sinhalese Buddhism; government reluctance to accept outside, third-party assistance; and the apparent unwillingness of the LTTE to entertain any settlement short of a separate state. Following the presidential elections in December 1999, it seemed that the UNP was going to support the ruling PA's proposals for constitutional changes that, by devolving power to the provinces, would address some Tamil grievances. However, the UNP withdrew its support when the reforms were introduced into parliament in August 2000, and the PA then withdrew its proposals.

The Sri Lankan government has traditionally opposed any form of third-party involvement in negotiating a settlement of the conflict, while the LTTE has consistently asked for international mediation. In early 2000, Norway confirmed that it had begun talks with both sides.

Events took a sudden turn at the end of April, when the LTTE captured an army base at the foot of the northern peninsula of Jaffna. It appeared set to take back the peninsula—the heart of the Tamil traditional homeland—which it had lost to the army in 1995. Offers of a cease-fire have been rejected by both sides, and Norway's peace initiative has been overshadowed as the focus has returned to the battlefield.

### Key Points

- Sri Lanka's troubles are rooted in the practices of its former colonial power and in unaddressed political and economic grievances following independence.
- This is a war that takes few prisoners; both parties practice blatant disregard for international humanitarian law, causing ongoing civilian suffering and massive internal displacement.
- The war has eroded Sri Lanka's social achievements in health and education.

## Problems with Current U.S. Policy

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Until the recent escalation of the conflict, Sri Lanka's war has played mostly off to the side of the world stage, with little interest from the international community, including the United States. It has appeared to hold no strategic value for the U.S., other than as a potential gateway to trade on the subcontinent, despite occasional claims of U.S. military interest in the eastern port of Trincomalee.

Successive Colombo governments have succeeded in portraying a country mainly unaffected by the war, except for a terrorist problem in the north and east. It is a democratic republic with a multiparty system. From the late 1970s, the socialist-oriented policies of earlier governments were left behind to embrace a market economy and to fall in line with IMF and World Bank structural adjustment policies. All of these factors have earned the government U.S. support, and however flawed its democracy might be in practice, the Sri Lankan government enjoys a kind of automatic benefit of the doubt both when it comes to the conduct of the war and regarding a range of human rights abuses.

The Clinton administration has traditionally restricted its role regarding the conflict to expressing support for a negotiated political settlement that protects the rights of minorities and guarantees equal rights for all of Sri Lanka's citizens. It has strongly supported the current government's proposed constitutional changes—known as the devolution, or peace package—even after their usefulness was called into question due to process concerns and a progressive weakening of the document. In 1999 the State Department expressed its willingness to serve as a facilitator for talks if requested by the Sri Lankan government, an indication of increasing potential U.S. involvement, though the same offer has been made by a number of other governments.

A Sri Lanka caucus was formed in the House of Representatives in 1998. The caucus seems to be a cheerleader for the Sri Lankan government, and it periodically issues statements praising the government and condemning the LTTE. These statements, which often bear little resemblance to reality in the country, appear in the headlines of Colombo's newspapers the next day.

Washington has been willing to be critical of the Sri Lankan government on certain human rights issues, but it usually stops short of voicing its displeasure publicly, as illustrated by the U.S. unwillingness to sponsor a resolution at the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva. U.S. officials have attempted to make use of the recent Leahy Law (which prohibits training of any foreign military personnel known to have committed human rights abuses), however, to screen Sri Lankan military officers for U.S. training.

Previously, the U.S. was fairly receptive to both the concerns expressed by the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, but this changed in 1997 when the LTTE was formally designated by the U.S. government as a terror-

ist organization. This label has had the unfortunate consequence of removing channels of communication between the U.S. and the LTTE and has reduced Washington's potential influence with the rebels. The U.S. has admitted that the terrorist designation has had no effect on the behavior of the LTTE, and there is no evidence that alternative initiatives have been tried.

In a visit to Colombo in June, Under Secretary of State Thomas Pickering—while urging the parties to the conflict to begin talks immediately, if possible—emphasized U.S. support for the territorial integrity of the country, and said that Washington would not recognize a unilateral declaration of independence by the LTTE. Such statements are unlikely to encourage the LTTE to come to the negotiating table, though one day it must, if there is ever to be a resolution of the conflict.

U.S. military cooperation with Sri Lanka includes the training of Sri Lankan security forces by the Green Berets and Navy SEALs in such areas as long-range patrolling, tactical reconnaissance, and rapid-reaction air and sea attacks. The U.S. must also approve the sale of U.S.-made military equipment used in foreign-built weaponry. Sri Lankan purchases of Kfir jets from Israel—secured after Sri Lanka and Israel reestablished severed diplomatic ties in the space of 24 hours—required U.S. approval because of the U.S.-made engines in the jets. Early this year, U.S. officials in Sri Lanka downplayed media reports that some major U.S. weapons purchases by the Sri Lankan government indicated an increase in U.S. military assistance.

The crisis in Jaffna has brought India back onto the scene for the first time since the late 1980s, when it unsuccessfully attempted to make peace in Sri Lanka through the Indo/Lanka Accords. Events in Sri Lanka, particularly the outcome of the conflict, will have an impact on India's complex domestic scene. Although the LTTE has the sympathy of many of India's Tamils in the state of Tamil Nadu, the LTTE's leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, stands accused of the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi. India faces a number of its own separatist movements and would view a newly formed Tamil state to its south as a threat to its territorial integrity.

Given the growing U.S. relationship with India and its secondary interest in Sri Lanka, Washington has had no problem deferring to India as the regional power. The escalation on the battlefield and Sri Lanka's turn to India for help has tended to shift the attention away from Norway's peace initiative to power politics and has set up a Norway-India-U.S. triangle.

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### Key Problems

- The U.S. has not given Sri Lanka's conflict the attention it deserves.
  - The designation of the LTTE as a terrorist organization has contributed to marginalizing the group and has not resulted in changes in behavior.
  - U.S. military assistance may undermine efforts to achieve a peaceful settlement.
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# Toward a New Foreign Policy

Given the intensification of the war on the battlefield and the often conflicting statements issuing from the government and the LTTE, most Sri Lanka observers see little hope on the horizon for an early resolution to the conflict. However, there are a number of ways in which the U.S. can and should play a constructive role in long-term efforts to bring about a resolution.

Washington can effectively use its influence to increase pressure on Colombo regarding issues of governance and human rights. Human rights and democracy activists have enumerated several problems: a steady erosion of democratic norms and practices over the course

of the war, increasing levels of violence in society, a lack of prosecutions for serious human rights abuses, crackdowns on freedom of expression, and fraudulent election practices. U.S. criticism of the draconian security measures during Pickering's recent visit surely had a role in the subsequent easing of censorship on foreign media and the lifting of a ban on public gatherings. The U.S. could also financially support local and international election monitoring in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

willingness of many countries to concur with the Sri Lankan government's demonization of the LTTE will not lead to an environment conducive to negotiations, and Washington should avoid such a one-sided approach.

For the success of any negotiation, both the process and the degree of preparedness of the negotiators are important factors. Do the parties have the necessary negotiation skills in order for talks to have a chance of success? Neither the government nor the LTTE have exhibited such skills in the past, and there is no indication that either of them has paid much attention to preparation for talks. The U.S. and other governments should not lose sight of this in a sudden effort to hasten negotiations. The international community needs to urge both parties to prepare carefully by getting training in negotiation skills and by pursuing a step-by-step approach to the talks.

Civil society organizations in Sri Lanka opposed to a military solution are working both to create a momentum for peace and to find ways to counter the increasing level of violence within society as a result of the war. Surveys of the population indicate that a significant percentage of the Sinhalese people do not believe the war can be won on the battlefield. Increasingly they are in favor of resolving the conflict through peaceful negotiations, and there have been several impressive demonstrations for peace that have brought together thousands of Sri Lankans from all ethnic groups. However, the space for such groups to work has narrowed, and their voices are increasingly being drowned out by extreme elements of Sinhalese society. The U.S. needs to encourage these civil society groups and assist them in being heard. U.S. military assistance has no place in a war that requires a political, not a military, solution.

Sri Lanka's troubles will only be solved through a political settlement guaranteeing the fundamental freedom and human dignity of all Sri Lanka's citizens, regardless of their ethnic or religious identity. The U.S. needs to make stronger efforts to encourage the government in that direction, while discouraging the military option.

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## Key Recommendations

- Washington should increase pressure on Colombo regarding issues of governance and human rights and should support civil society groups working for peace.
- The U.S. should continue to support Norway's role in moving the parties toward negotiations.
- All parties should be encouraged to gain the required skills and knowledge necessary for the negotiation process.

While recognizing some improvements in the human rights record of the Sri Lankan government, the U.S. must continue to raise the issues of impunity, torture, freedom of expression, and provision of food and medical care to the displaced Tamils. It can, for example, encourage the Sri Lankan government to host a visit from UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson as well as the UN special rapporteur on freedom of expression.

Unless consistent pressure is brought to bear on both the LTTE and the government, they are unlikely to make serious efforts to change. Although the parties cannot be forced to the negotiating table, points of leverage need to be considered. One point of leverage is aid, an option donor countries have been unwilling to use in the past but which bears another look, given that the Sri Lankan government is now channeling a much higher proportion of its resources into the war. At the same time, it would be helpful for the U.S. to find a way to open a channel of communication with the LTTE, as it has done with other guerrilla groups in the past. The

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Website: [http://www.oneworld.org/euconflict/guides/orgs/as\\_aus/278.htm](http://www.oneworld.org/euconflict/guides/orgs/as_aus/278.htm)

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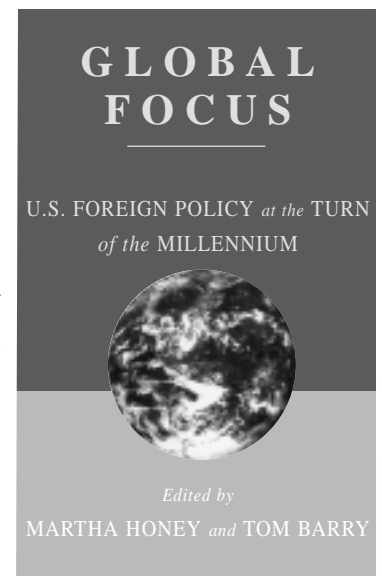
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