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## Sri Lanka (1983 - )

The conflict between Tamil militants and government forces in Sri Lanka has resulted in the deaths of an estimated 75,000 people since 1983. Many more have been displaced from their homes. The violence has diminished since the government and the largest guerrilla force, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), signed a ceasefire in 2002. Both sides in the conflict used assassinations and targeted civilians.

Sinhalese Buddhists make up about 75% of the Sri Lankan population. Tamils, most of whom are Hindu but include a Muslim minority, live mainly in the north and on the east coast.

Sri Lanka gained independence from Great Britain in 1948. The new government was dominated by the elite that had been nurtured under British rule. In the first few years of independence, the government passed voting laws that effectively disenfranchised substantial parts of the Tamil community. Elections brought Sinhalese nationalists to power who privileged Buddhism and the Sinhala language. Tamil politicians demanded constitutional reforms to guarantee minority rights, Tamil language rights, non-discriminatory citizenship laws, and the cessation of government settlement of Sinhalese farmers on historically Tamil land. In 1972, Tamil politicians created the Tamil United Front party, later the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), which advocated Tamil autonomy or separation.

Conditions for Tamils in the north and east worsened in the 1970s, and Tamil youth who were dissatisfied with the TULF formed guerrilla movements. By the late 1970s, six different Tamil groups were skirmishing with the police and each other. The fighting escalated in 1983, after riots in the south in which several hundred Tamils were killed and thousands of Tamil-owned homes and shops were destroyed. The government neither stopped the riots nor called for an inquiry afterwards. These events radicalized the general Tamil population, and after the TULF was expelled from parliament a month later for refusing to swear allegiance to a unified Sri Lanka, the armed groups gained increasing popular support.

In 1987, the governments of India and Sri Lanka signed an agreement to bring in Indian peacekeepers. The Indian troops were targeted by the LTTE, however, and they proved unable to disarm the rebels or quell the violence. In 1990 they withdrew. Negotiations between the LTTE and the government began soon after the peacekeepers arrived, but the 1990s saw no abatement in the violence.

In 2002, LTTE and the government signed a ceasefire agreement, opening the way for negotiations mediated by the Norwegian government. The LTTE dropped its demand for independence, and the government agreed to autonomy for the north and east. In the wake of the December 2004 tsunami, the two sides negotiated on arrangements for the provision of emergency aid. Following the November 2005 elections, however, in which Mahinda Rajapakse won the presidency having campaigned on a platform that ruled out Tamil autonomy, there have been renewed outbreaks of widespread violence.

### *Print Resources*

Bush, Kenneth D (2003) *The Intra-Group Dimensions of Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: Learning to Read Between the Lines*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ghosh, Partha S. (2003) *Ethnicity Versus Nationalism: The Devolution of Discourse in Sri Lanka*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Herath, R.B. (2002) *Sri Lankan Ethnic Crisis: Towards a Resolution*. Victoria, BC: Trafford Publishing.

#### *Online Resources*

BBC News. *Q&A: Sri Lanka Crisis*.

BBC News. *Country Profile: Sri Lanka*.

UNIFEM. *Sri Lanka Country Page*.

Human Rights Watch. *Sri Lanka*.

Jonathan Goodhand, Bert Klem, et al. (2006) *Aid, Conflict, and Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka, 2000-2005*. Colombo: Asia Foundation.

#### *Timeline*

1972 - new Sri Lankan Constitution withdraws minority protections; TUF formed

1976 - LTTE formed; TUF changes name to TULF

1978 - TULF wins elections in north; riots kill estimated 300 Tamils; new Constitution grants Tamil language rights, citizenship for all Tamils

1983 - attack on 13 soldiers in north sparks riots in south killing several hundred Tamils; TULF expelled from Parliament

1985 - first negotiations between government and LTTE fail

1987 - Indo-Sri Lanka Pact brings Indian peacekeepers to the north; Sinhalese opposition violently opposes the agreement

1990 - Indian peacekeepers withdraw

1991 - Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi assassinated, LTTE implicated

1993 - Sri Lankan President Premadasa assassinated by LTTE

1999 - Sri Lankan President Kumaratunga injured in LTTE bomb blasts

2000 - Norway pledges to mediate negotiations

2002 - LTTE and government sign a permanent ceasefire agreement

2003 - LTTE pulls out of talks but pledges to maintain ceasefire

2006 - government and LTTE return to talks; violence escalates