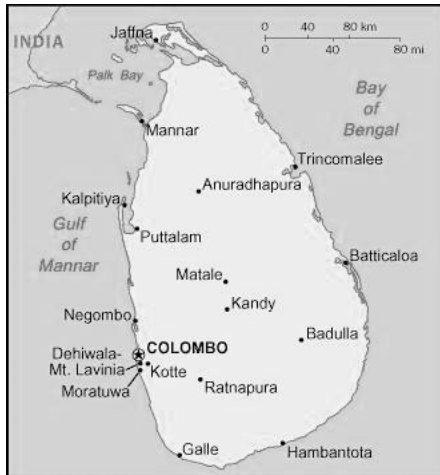


ACCORD: ENGAGING ARMED GROUPS IN PEACE PROCESSES

Sri Lanka Primer

This document is intended as a simple overview produced for the Accord Programme workshop on 'Engaging armed groups in peace processes', London, July 2004. As such, it does not seek to represent the full complexity or the contested nature of the situation described.

Basics



Population: circa 20 million

Ethnicity: Sinhalese 74%, Tamil 18%, Moor 7%, Burgher, Malay, and Vedda 1%

Religion: Buddhist 70%, Hindu 15%, Christian 8%, Muslim 7%

Economy: GDP per capita \$3,700 (ppp 2003). Main exports are textiles and apparel, tea, diamonds, coconut products, petroleum products.

Government: Republic. President is head of state and Prime Minister head of government.

Historical Background

The history of the arrival of Sinhalese and Tamil people in Sri Lanka is a contested subject. Occupied by the Portuguese in the 16th century and by the Dutch in the 17th century, the island was united as a crown colony called Ceylon under British rule by 1815.

Ceylon became independent in 1948; its name was changed to Sri Lanka in 1972. Between these dates, a political struggle over national identity had emerged. Solomon Bandaranaike was elected in 1956 on wave of Sinhalese nationalism. Sinhala was made the sole official language and other measures were introduced to bolster Sinhalese and Buddhist identity. Bandaranaike was assassinated by a Buddhist monk in 1959, and succeeded by his widow, Srimavo Bandaranaike.

In 1971 a Sinhalese Marxist uprising (largely against the lack of opportunities for educated Sinhala youth) led by students and activists was quashed. As the country was renamed Sri Lanka the following year, Buddhism was given a primary place as country's religion, further antagonizing the Tamil minority that was concentrated in the north and east of the country.

The conflict

The **Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)** was formed in 1976 as tensions increased in Tamil-dominated areas. They eventually developed land and sea warfare capability and a unit of suicide bombers.

In 1977 the **Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF)**, the traditionally moderate constitutional party of the Tamils, adopted a resolution espousing self-determination. In the 1979 election they won all parliamentary seats in Tamil areas, and for the first time Sri Lankan politics had a Tamil opposition. Tensions between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil separatists erupted in violence in the mid-1980s. In 1983, 13 soldiers were killed in a LTTE ambush, sparking anti-Tamil riots leading to the deaths of an estimated several hundred Tamils. In the same year, the sixth amendment to the Constitution required the TULF to take an oath of allegiance to a united Sri Lanka to keep their parliamentary seats. Having been elected on a platform of self determination they were unable to do this and therefore excluded from parliament.

Violent conflict developed in the north of the island between the army and LTTE. India engaged in intense diplomatic activity between 1983 and 1985 to end the conflict (while at the same time training Tamil guerrillas in India). In 1985 the Thimpu talks between the government and a front representing the TULF and all the Tamil militant groups failed. In 1987, the government signed the Indo-Lanka accord with India. Under this accord, new councils were created for Tamil areas in the north and east, and stipulations made for the deployment of an Indian peacekeeping force. Under Indian pressure the Tamil parties agreed to the accord, but the LTTE broke away and fierce fighting between the LTTE and Indian peacekeeping force broke out. From this point on the LTTE were the sole Tamil party fighting the government.

The Left wing and nationalist Sinhalese *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (People's Liberation Front) (JVP) mounted an insurrection against the Indo-Lanka accord in 1988. The government response was swift and violent and in 1988 Sri Lanka led the world in disappearances. The LTTE and President Premadasa, with a shared interest in Indian troops leaving, began a peace process in 1989, which broke June 1990. Indian troops left after getting bogged down in fighting, and violence escalated. The LTTE was responsible for the assassination of Indian leader Rajiv Gandhi the following year.

President Premadasa was killed in 1993 in bomb attack allegedly carried out by the LTTE. President Kumaratunga came to power the next year pledging to end war, and peace talks opened. Extensive correspondence took place between the sides 1994-95, with the International Committee of the Red Cross acting as intermediary, but the process collapsed and the LTTE resumed its military campaign.

The rest of the 1990s saw an escalation in the conflict. In December 1999 it became publicly known that Norway would act as intermediary in a push for peace, having been approached by the LTTE and President Kumaratunga. A change in government in 2001 led to renewed peace efforts. A cabinet led by new Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe was sworn-in in December 2001 after the opposition United National Party narrowly won the parliamentary election.

Wickramasinghe had promised an end to conflict. His keenness to make peace gave Norwegian mediators a huge boost.

A ceasefire with the LTTE began with Norway brokering peace negotiations, and Wickramasinghe and LTTE leader Velupillai Pirabhakaran signed a permanent ceasefire agreement in February 2002, paving the way for talks to end the long-running conflict.

Explaining the deal, observers say battle fatigue had set in on both sides, and it was becoming increasingly difficult for the army and the rebels to find new recruits to fight a war that looked more and more un-winnable. In September 2002, the Government lifted the ban on the LTTE, and the first round of talks began in Thailand. Both sides exchanged prisoners of war for first time, and subsequently the LTTE indicated it would discuss federal structures, thus suggesting it might settle for regional autonomy.

Further peace talks got under way in Berlin February 2003, continuing in Japan in March.¹ The talks had set out to consolidate the February 2002 ceasefire, make arrangements for a provisional administration, and discuss a final political settlement. The talks started with high hopes. Trust had been established between the sides prior to the new government's election victory. But throughout the peace talks that trust slowly evaporated. External and internal factors combined to thwart the process. Externally, concerns grew among the international community (especially India) that the LTTE could be gaining too much power. Donor countries were interested in using development money as leverage. All knew that the LTTE going to the Washington donor meeting was not possible because of its 'terrorist' status, but whether they would go to the second donor meeting in Japan was the big question. The LTTE ultimately snubbed the possible opportunity. Internally, implementation on security and development issues was the key problem, partly because of a power vacuum. While the government was nominally in control of the island, the LTTE had *de facto* control over large areas – but giving them the necessary resources for implementation was not considered feasible. In April the Tamil Tigers suspended their participation in peace talks, saying they were being marginalized, and the talks remain suspended to this day.

On 5 November 2003, President Kumaratunga declared emergency in the country in a constitutional coup, suspending parliament. Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe was away on a visit to the United States. Kumaratunga had been at odds with government over the peace process. Many Sinhalese politicians in Sri Lanka, including the President, oppose major concessions to the Tamil Tigers and say Wickramasinghe had given too much away. The sides were arguably at more at odds over power rather than the peace process, which has long been a 'political football' for southern elites. Parliament reopened after two weeks but negotiations with the LTTE were put on hold. The situation was settled with early general elections in April 2004. The party of President Kumaratunga won 105 of 225 parliamentary seats, falling short of overall majority. Mahinda Rajapakse was sworn in as prime minister.

Throughout all of this the ceasefire has held, even when a split emerged in the LTTE when Colonel Karuna, a rebel commander in the east, broke ranks with the northern leadership under

¹ Earlier rounds, brokered by Norway, were held in Sattahip naval base, Thailand, October 2002; Nakhon Pathom, Thailand, October-November 2002; Oslo, Norway, December 2002; Nakhon Pathom, Thailand, January 2003.

Velupillai Prabhakaran in early 2004. Norway has been exploring possibility of new talks. In addition, the LTTE have published proposals on an Interim Self Government Authority – the first time it has committed in writing to any structure. But its new vulnerability from its split combined with lack of faith in the face of the southern elite's power struggle has led them to take an intransigent position on the proposals hampering talks.

Further reading

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