

## **Sri Lanka: From Sinhalese Discrimination to Tamil Terror to Sinhalese Victory**

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**With an Interview of two Sinhalese women by Yael Stein**

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In Sri Lanka, a bloody civil war has ended with the Sinhalese military of the government reportedly killing between 20,000 to 80,000 Tamilese, brutally suppressing the Tamilese minority, and pushing the entire group into no-escape zones in the northeast and east corners of the island, where there already were some 200,000 or more refugees in the late summer and early autumn of 2009. The government has reportedly seized male children below 10 years old, and taken them away, and there is no information on their subsequent fate.<sup>1</sup> There is also evidence that the LTTE (Tamilese) themselves used terror against their own people, in order to recruit young combatants.<sup>2</sup>

More recently, the Sinhalese government forces released pregnant women from badly overcrowded refugee enclaves into surrounding areas where there were no potable water, food or shelter, and where they were left to fend for themselves.<sup>3</sup> Also, there are reported cases of forced disappearances of alleged members of LTTE, and reports of rape.

These reports suggest the possibility that there may have been intentions to destroy a population, in whole or in part, via conditions simulating a man-made disaster. During May–October 2009, there were reports of aerial and artillery bombardment of hospitals and schools with no reported military role, bombardment of zones declared safe zones by central government, indiscriminate shootings of prisoners of wars, and desecration of dead bodies.

The People's Tribunal on Sri Lanka, initiated by members of the Irish Forum for Peace in Sri Lanka (IFPSL), was conducted by the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal (PPT) group in Milan, following the methodology of the Bertrand Russell-Sartre Tribunal on Vietnam. The Tribunal, based on testimony from Tamilese survivors, has accused the Sri Lankan government of responsibility for crimes against humanity.<sup>4 5 6</sup>

Evidence collected by BBC Channel 4 News accuses the Sri Lankan Government of ordering the armed forces to "finish off" i.e., kill, all remaining LTTE combatants, including young boys. This may have included civilians too. According to photographed and recorded evidence in this report, the direct orders were acted upon, to the word.<sup>7 8</sup>

The government vigorously denies all charges.

The picture is unclear concerning the role of hate language and incitement by the Sinhalese government and the Tamil Tigers terror groups—the inventors of the suicide belt bomb—against civilians and military bases, actions which have had the result of diverting outside attention away from their oppressive mistreatment, and the social, cultural and economic discrimination against them.

There have been bitter accusations – and equally bitter denials of whether the Central Government's actions have been genocidal. One relief worker in the camps (name withheld), wrote to *GPN WGSR*:

“The Tamil Tigers Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are a terrorist group and never claimed to be anything else. The Sri Lankan government claim to be fair and humane, yet they have led a completely different story in reality and continuously committed gross human rights violations both against Sinhalese and Tamil people within Sri Lanka....and have broken many international human rights laws (i.e., abductions, kidnapping, disappearances). No consistent fair trial system is in place in the country - for anyone - let alone LTTE.”

Over the years, in Sri Lanka there has been intense controversy over the boundaries of journalistic freedom and speech. Information is not readily available. The role of incitement by both sides in promoting discrimination, terror, and the backlash to the terror can be inferred from the bloody events but is not concretely documented to the best of our current knowledge. Watchdog groups have accused the government of inciting to violence against journalists, and have catalogued a list of journalists who have been kidnapped, beaten and killed, despite laws in the books guaranteeing basic freedoms.<sup>9</sup>

[Please click here to view a Timeline which summarizes the evolution of the conflict since the 1970's](#)

**Tipping Points and What If:** There were, in the past, many missed tipping points, at which outside mediation, resting on addressing Tamil grievances and protecting the Tamil minority, might have stopped the conflict from spilling over into terror and the brutal military campaign to totally crush the LTTE. There is no doubt that political support and sympathy for the Tamil minority's grievances, both inside and outside Sri Lanka eroded once the LTTE embarked on its

campaign of terror. This campaign gave the Sinhalese ruling government the justification, or pretext, depending on one's point of view, to embark on a campaign of total war, inflicting enormous suffering on the Tamil population, with mass expulsions, confining at detention camps, and an estimated number of 80,000-100,000 deaths. (See Appendix 1)

**What now:** The war is over. The death toll and suffering have been horrendous. Both sides have much to answer for. In retrospect, the LTTE's campaign of terror brought death and destruction not only to its enemies, but for those whom it claimed to fight. There is evidence that the LTTE themselves repeatedly used terror against their own people in order to recruit young combatants.

Now there is much disarray inside of Sri Lanka. There is a victorious military government in charge, but it shows signs of moving towards a more authoritarian posture. Yet it appears to be sensitive to outside publicity and appears to be taking measures to restore the beginnings of some semblance of subsistence, repatriation, relocation and some reconstruction for the hundreds of thousands who were displaced. To ensure such a trend, there is a case for outside actors keeping a watchful eye, promoting some kind of truth and reconciliation campaign. The International Crisis Group has put forth an extremely comprehensive and balanced set of recommendations for bringing legal action against both the government and the LTTE accountable for crimes for which they have been accused.

During the war, outside interest has not been proportionate to the amount of killing. The future of Sri Lanka depends on the choices of the leaders of the victorious Sinhalese majority and defeated Tamil and, to a considerable degree, the degree to which there will be bystander scrutiny.

### **Questions regarding the People's Tribunal on Sri Lanka:**

- Has the People's Tribunal (PT) assembled a data base on evidence, sources, degree of accuracy, and has it constructed a timeline of all events going back, say 30 years tracking the signal events, tipping points and death tolls among Tamil and Sinhalese? The PT presents a one-sided timeline describing acts of violence committed against the Tamils. Why didn't the PT investigate/report/document Tamil Tiger terror directed against Sinhalese civilians as part of the timeline? The Tamils were genuinely oppressed and discriminated against. But they paid dearly in terms of international interest and support from the point when the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) began using suicide bomb tactics. (The LTTE were the inventors of the suicide belt)..... Are we not seeing their use of warfare producing disproportionate mass killing of civilians, expulsions and suffering, reportedly including rapes, summary executions?

Documentation here is essential/critical. What are PT's rules for collecting and cross-checking the charges.

- Is there any evidence of the use of hate language and incitement from leaders on both sides?
- Who are the complicit bystanders, enablers and protectors? In recent years, the President of Sri Lanka has been proclaiming his admiration for President Ahmadinejad, a documented inciter to genocide.

**Yael Stein of GPN WGSR conducted a short interview with two 36 yr-old Sinhalese women from Sri Lanka, currently living and working in Israel.**

L has been in Israel for 3 years, and I for 1 year. When living in Sri Lanka, both women did not personally witness any killing, but were well aware of the situation.

L - is from the capital city Colombo,

I - comes from a small town near the capital - Kullyepitiya.

***Q: In general, during the war, how did you feel about the situation in Sri Lanka?***

L: The situation was bad, the people kill; the Tiger people kill too much. Too many people have died.

I: The Tigers killed small children also. Many of the terrorists are children themselves, 10-12 year-olds walking around with guns.

L: When they are 18 they are going to die – they go out and get themselves killed.

***Q: What religions are there in Sri Lanka?***

I: We have Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Hindus -- everything... There are also Burghers, a type of Muslim [an ethnic group].

***Q: Are there places in Sri Lanka where Sinhalese and Tamils live side by side, or are they completely separated?***

L: Both groups live everywhere in Sri Lanka, you can't really tell the difference, but there are also many Tamils living in the Jaffna area, in the North. Jaffna area – is a good place in Sri Lanka, everything is there, there is a beach, and the first harbor (now there is one in Colombo too). Agriculture – a very fertile area.

***Q: Why did the war begin in the first place?***

I: The Tamil tigers told the Sinhalese president they wanted the Jaffna area for themselves, but the Sinhalese people didn't want to give up the area, don't want to divide Sri Lanka - it should stay one united country – so that's how the fighting began.

***Q: What is the most striking thing you remember about the war?***

I: The Tigers had bombs, and capsules.

L: Every Tiger had a poison capsule on a chain around his neck – a very powerful poison which would kill them immediately the moment they put it into their mouth, so every time a Tiger was captured by Sinhalese, they would always swallow the pill – prefer to be caught dead.

Both: Tigers were training 10-12 yr old children to be terrorists,

L: Children so small, they could not even carry the guns, but they were given training. Always carrying guns. Tigers would approach families to ask for their children to join the fighting. If people refused to allow their children to join the Tigers, the Tigers would kill the whole family.

Both: They killed a small child with a very big knife. They also start fires and do other things to the families. But we cannot blame only them --- the Sinhalese were very cruel to the Tamils too. The Tamils are not the only ones to blame.

L: This has been taking place for 35 years. Since I was 1 yr old.

***Q: What do you know about the Refugee camps? Are Sinhalese and Tamils in separate camps?***

I: No, Sinhalese and Tamils are together in the same camps.

L: There are tents and everyone is there. It is very difficult to live like that. They get food and medicine, but not enough.

***Q: How is the situation now?***

I: A year ago – the war was finished. The president we have now is very good, he's a very good man. He finished the war.

L: The Sinhalese are happy. And the Tamils – some of them don't like it, but some...

I: some, they like it, they don't want every time to be afraid, so much killing, they want to finish the war. We are here in Israel and we don't know exactly how it is now in Sri Lanka now, because we are here, but we know the war is over. The leader of the Tigers was killed – the Sinhalese army killed him. We don't know if someone new will come and start again, or not.

***Q: Do Sinhalese and Tamils hate each other?***

We are together most of the time. When there is a group of Tamils, they like to "show they are Tamils". Some of them don't like the Sinhalese, but others are really good people, they think we are all human, we are all the same.

***Q: Did you ever hear incitement? Do you remember any time when people were saying that Tamils or Sinhalese are "not human" or describing the other group using names?***

Both: No, in Sri Lanka there was no incitement or names which the groups called each other.



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*He has published and lectured on the use of public health models for the prediction and prevention of genocide.*



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**Yael Stein MD** was a researcher-team member of the World Genocide Situation Room, the website of the Institute on the Holocaust and Genocide in Jerusalem of GPN. She has experience in Occupational Medicine, Epidemiology and Hospital Administration and is currently studying towards a PhD degree in Public Health at the Hebrew University-Hadassah School of Public Health and Community Medicine. Yael

*describes herself as a "goal-oriented, idealistic entrepreneur, seeking spiritual and ethical fulfillment" in her work; "I focus on making a difference."*

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<sup>1</sup> *BBC News*. November 13, 2006. Sri Lanka youth seized to fight. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6144200.stm>

<sup>2</sup> Child Soldiers Global Report 2008. Sri Lanka. *Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers*. <http://www.childsoldiersglobalreport.org/content/sri-lanka>

<sup>3</sup> 'Dire conditions' at Sri Lanka camp. Tamils forced into Sri Lanka's government run camps say conditions are difficult with water shortages and high levels of sickness. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/em/fr/-/2/hi/africa/8295494.stm>

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<http://www.tamilsagainstgenocide.org/Docs/DublinTribunal/WhyATribunalOnSriLanka.pdf>

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[http://www.ptsrilanka.org/images/M\\_images/documents/peoples\\_tribunal\\_on\\_sri\\_lanka.pdf](http://www.ptsrilanka.org/images/M_images/documents/peoples_tribunal_on_sri_lanka.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/8273575.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8273575.stm)

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[http://www.channel4.com/news/articles/politics/international\\_politics/sri%20lanka%20option/3652687](http://www.channel4.com/news/articles/politics/international_politics/sri%20lanka%20option/3652687)

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.lemonde.fr/asi-pacifique/article/2009/05/28/sri-lanka-l-onu-a-cache-l-ampleur-des-massacres\\_1199091\\_3216.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/asi-pacifique/article/2009/05/28/sri-lanka-l-onu-a-cache-l-ampleur-des-massacres_1199091_3216.html)

<sup>9</sup> Sri Lankan Government Must End Incitement to Violence against Journalists: Stop the War on Journalists in Sri Lanka. Available at: <http://asiapacific.ifj.org/en/articles/sri-lankan-government-must-end-incitement-to-violence-against-journalists>

## **APPENDIX 1**

The Sri Lankan civil war reportedly had 80,000-100,000 dead

At least 10,000 of these may have been civilians, killed in the final stages of the civil war.

US State Department reports suggested that casualty figures were higher than the UN reports.

(May 20, 2009) Up to 100,000 killed in Sri Lanka's civil war: UN, ABC NEWS <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/2576543.htm>

(August 14, 2010) Buncombe, Andrew. Sri Lanka's Civil War Enquiry is Eyewash' says Tamil's. The Independent (London). <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/sri-lankas-civil-war-inquiry-is-eyewash-sau-tamils-2050138.html>

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2009 Report to Congress on Incidents During the Recent Conflicts in Sri Lanka;  
unclassified, US Department of State  
<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/131025.pdf>