

## When Ceasefires Fail

By James Ross | September 15, 2006

“The war has returned with a vengeance,” a Sri Lankan human rights activist sadly told me. After four years of a shaky ceasefire between the government and the armed secessionist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), better known as the Tamil Tigers, the ugliness that characterized the nearly two decades of fighting prior to 2002 is back.

Since major fighting resumed in April, killings of civilians have occurred both on and off the battlefield. Last month the Tamil Tigers assassinated a respected Tamil member of the government’s Peace Secretariat and dispatched a suicide bomber who killed seven people in the capital, Colombo. Government jetfighters indiscriminately bombed a building deep in LTTE-held territory, killing at least 19 young women and girls. The government-backed Karuna group, a breakaway faction of the LTTE, has abducted more than 100 children into its forces since June.

Both sides have blamed the other for the deteriorating situation and, in this respect, both are right. The Tamil Tigers used the relative calm of the ceasefire to target and kill more than 200 people, primarily Tamils they perceived to be opponents. They continue to abduct children into their forces. And in the past year, they have engaged in increasingly audacious attacks, including the assassination of Sri Lanka’s foreign minister, in an apparent effort to goad the government into atrocities of its own.

And that has apparently worked. Since the election of Mahinda Rajapakse as president last November with the support of Sinhalese ultra-nationalists, the Sri Lankan armed forces have committed a wave of abuses, almost always against Tamils. During an outburst of communal violence in April in Trincomalee, soldiers and police stood by for two hours while Sinhalese thugs torched Tamil businesses. Several cold-blooded massacres appear to have been carried out by government forces, most recently the execution-style slaying of 17 Sri Lankans working with the international relief organization Action Against Hunger following fighting in the eastern town of Muttur.

The renewal of major fighting has displaced more than 220,000 people from their homes throughout the north and east, and many more are in need of humanitarian assistance. Neither the government nor the LTTE has taken sufficient action to ensure that humanitarian assistance reaches these threatened populations. The Ministry of Defense has placed unnecessary obstacles in the way of humanitarian agencies, including new registration requirements that appear designed more to discourage humanitarian action than regulate it. Even after the end of major fighting in Jaffna, the government and the Tamil Tigers have hindered humanitarian assistance from reaching the peninsula.

Official mechanisms to address the longstanding problem of impunity in Sri Lanka have been ineffectual. The government consistently fails to prosecute those in the security forces responsible for killings. Colombo announces investigations that go nowhere, and the rare witness who is brave enough to come forward invariably faces death threats. The president has effectively dismantled the national Human Rights Commission, an important life preserver for civilians at risk.

The failing ceasefire from 2002 has been monitored by the Norwegian-led Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission, which has put Nordic observers on the ground in both government and LTTE-held areas. The monitoring mission’s basic flaw was to focus solely on violations of the ceasefire agreement rather than the much broader category of conflict-related abuses. As a result, the LTTE and the Karuna group committed many atrocities and abuses, which contributed to the recent breakdown of the truce. The lesson is that human rights violations cannot be detached from broader security considerations without serious consequences.



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Although historically the United States has taken little interest in Sri Lanka, the Bush administration for several years has been sharply critical of the Tamil Tigers. The United States therefore has important credibility with the Sri Lankan government. While Washington has urged a halt to the fighting, it should use its influence to press for a stronger international presence in the country. Along with the European Union, India, Norway, and Japan, the United States should promote the establishment of a UN human rights monitoring presence in Sri Lanka modeled on the current, very successful Nepal mission. Sri Lankan and international human rights organizations have urged governments to raise the issue at the upcoming session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva. Although the United States is not a member of the council, its support

would certainly give a boost to the European states that are already seriously considering the proposal.

A wave of depression has hit many Sri Lankans since the renewal of major combat operations in their country. Unless concerned governments step in, war will return with a vengeance, and then the international community will have to pick up the pieces.

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