

# Eelam War IV: Finishing the work of the tsunami

Friday 22 May 2009, by [PODUR Justin](#) (Date first published: 17 May 2009).

**[UPDATE MAY 17/09: The Tigers seem to be trying to surrender, or at least concede defeat and pursue a ceasefire, although the government seems to be continuing to pursue (and announce) a military victory.]**

The Sri Lankan military now (May 16/09) controls virtually all of the territory that was once controlled by the Tamil Tiger (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or LTTE) insurgents. The Tigers have suffered military defeat after military defeat over the past few years. Their leaders and remaining soldiers - along with 50-100,000 Tamil civilians - are confined to a small strip of territory called a "no-fire zone" in the North-East of the country, surrounded by several divisions of the Sri Lankan army. Thousands of other Tamil civilians have been evacuated to Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps that are under total control of the Army. The surrounded pocket where the remaining Tigers are trapped is itself under artillery and other attack by the Army, whose operations have killed thousands of civilians in the past few weeks and months. On May 11, the United Nations Secretary General condemned the Sri Lankan Army for using heavy weapons in the zone and the LTTE for "reckless disrespect for the safety of civilians", which "has led to thousands of people remaining trapped in the area". The UN suggests the following way forward: The LTTE is to allow civilians to leave the area, and the Sri Lankan government is to "explore all possible options to bring the conflict to an end without further bloodshed and to make public the terms under which that can be achieved without further loss of civilian life, and for the LTTE to give sober and positive consideration of those terms."

The UN call to the Sri Lankan government is an admission that the Government of Sri Lanka has not offered terms of negotiation nor even terms for the LTTE's surrender. The government's intentions, instead, are advertised more clearly on the Sri Lankan Army's website. On May 5, the military spokesman announced "The 58, 53 and 59 Divisions of the Army were advancing from three different directions and moving towards the area where some of the key LTTE members and Tiger leader Prabhakaran were hiding." The Army's site is rich with details of ever more captures of LTTE arms caches, captures and killings of LTTE "suspects". The site is steeped in counterinsurgency language: LTTE are referred to everywhere as "terrorists". Deaths in the No-Fire Zone are always attributed to the LTTE firing on civilians. Any killings by the Army are of "terrorists". As a last resort, the government can blame collateral damage on the LTTE's "blending" with civilians (which, according to many reports, is occurring, with LTTE fighters preventing civilians from leaving the zone and shooting at them).

Tragically, the UN's call is likely to fail on both sides. The LTTE, whose forces had included naval and even some air force capacity, has been destroyed as a conventional force. Its cadres can only hope to survive if they are allowed to leave their surrounded No-Fire Zone with the civilians in a ceasefire arrangement. From their perspective, to allow the civilians to leave would be to guarantee their own deaths. The government, meanwhile, is being carried forward on the momentum of its own military success. Seeking a military solution rather than a political solution to the conflict and seeing the prospect of a total military victory, the government is trying to persist until the LTTE leaders are captured or killed, and have shown a willingness to kill thousands of civilians to reach this goal. By

keeping journalists and humanitarian workers out of the war zone, attacking the accounts of Tamils whose stories get out, and amplifying stories of LTTE abuses, the Sri Lankan government has bought time to pursue the military option, time purchased in international indifference and civilian blood.

There are both recent proposals and social movement precedents for political solutions to the Sri Lankan conflict, that feature federalism and autonomy in the Tamil-majority areas of the North and Northeast. The problem is that neither the Sri Lankan state, nor the regional powers involved (India, Pakistan, China), nor the US, has any interest in such solutions. They point to abuses by the LTTE and to its refusals of negotiations, in 1994 and 2002. The LTTE have made errors and committed abuses. But they are slated for destruction not for these, but because their presence in the North and Northeast prevents access to territories coveted by multinationals and the state for tourism and agribusiness megaprojects. The devastating 2004 tsunami had the effect of clearing territories under government control, destroying thousands of fishing communities on coveted coastal real estate. In the areas controlled by the government, these territories were rebuilt for corporations (Naomi Klein's "Shock Doctrine" has a chapter on this). As the Sri Lankan army moves north, it is finishing the work of the tsunami: moving whole Tamil communities into internment camps, destroying organizations of resistance, and asserting territorial control.

When wars against civilians close political options, the voices and ideas of peoples are silenced. They become victims while the world watches armed actors fight it out over their bones. Despite their slim chance of success, the main elements of the call by the UN and humanitarian organizations: for a ceasefire, for the government allow journalists and humanitarian organizations in, and for a political solution to the conflict, are correct. To understand the forces against such a solution, some background is necessary. Although the brief account below omits very important details, it provides some background that is crucial for understanding today's fighting and in considering future options for peace.

Sri Lanka is a country of about 21 million people, about 74% of whom are Sinhalese. Some 3 million are Tamils and another 1 million are "Indian Tamils" or "Up Country Tamils", who have a different history on the island. In precolonial times, there were separate Tamil and Sinhalese kingdoms with little interaction or armed conflict. British colonialism turned this complex society into an imperial plantation. It subordinated Sinhalese Sri Lankans to plantation labour and moved populations, importing a large number of Tamils from India to work in plantations in the central hills of the country (these are now the "Tamils of Indian Origin"). After independence in 1948, Sri Lankans, like other South Asians, struggled to forge independent nations out of economies and polities restructured for colonialism. While many Sinhalese and Tamils struggled together for agrarian and political rights, ethnic-based mobilization also occurred. As in other South Asian countries, this "communalism" caused tremendous damage. Disputes centered on competition for civil service jobs. In 1956, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), which mobilized on a Sinhalese communalist platform, made Sinhala the official language and imposed quotas in government jobs. The Sinhalese-dominated army was sent to the northern provinces in the early 1960s for the first time, and abuses committed then caused resentment and eventually helped fuel guerrilla movements.

1977 is a key year for three reasons. First, in 1977, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) ran in elections on a platform of independence for a new Tamil Eelam state in the Northeast, receiving overwhelming support in the northern and eastern provinces and declaring autonomy from the government in Colombo. Second, the LTTE appeared on the scene in this year as well.

Third, and most important, 1977 was the year IMF structural adjustment came to Sri Lanka, exacerbating the conflict dramatically. From independence until 1977, Sri Lanka had been viewed, like the Indian state of Kerala, as an imperfect but interesting model for social progress in spite of relative economic backwardness. Much of this progress was lost after the restructuring. For example, land reforms enacted in the 1950s gave farmers a degree of protection from creditors.

These were lost in the IMF structural adjustment program.

In addition to opening financial, trade, service, and construction sectors to privatization, the government participated in a megaproject, the Mahavali Scheme, to divert the largest river for irrigation and power-generation. Lands “opened up” by this scheme were given to Sinhalese (themselves peasants who were displaced by the IMF restructuring), even though these lands were opened in the Tamil east. Settling some 80,000 Sinhalese in the east, where Tamils were some 40% of the population (they are 86% of the population in the north), was viewed as colonizing Tamil lands and referred to as a “West Bank solution”.

From 1977 to 1983, the economic situation continued to deteriorate under the IMF-WB regime. Price controls and subsidies were eliminated, communal problems worsened, and the government gave itself new powers to crack down on “terrorism” as well as protests and riots. 1983 is typically dated as the start of the civil war. That year saw abuses by the Sri Lankan army, ambushes by the LTTE, and horrific communal riots against Tamils that killed thousands and included an element of government complicity. Many Tamils left the southern provinces for the north.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, a Sinhalese insurgency was taking place by the Janatha Vimukthi Perumana, ‘People’s Liberation Front’, or JVP (now a major political party). Made up mostly of Sinhalese youth, the JVP rose in rebellion several times (in 1971 and again 1987-9) and assassinated some major political figures. They were crushed, with some 10,000 killed in 1971 and 40,000 or more killed in 1987-9. India assisted Sri Lanka in crushing the JVP rebellions. The JVP rebellions suggest two things. First, that the structural violence and impoverishment that gave rise to the LTTE are also operative in the majority Sinhalese community, and that such violence is not solely an ethnic problem. Second, that the state’s model for dealing with such problems is not to address them, but to physically destroy the activists and attempt to co-opt the leadership.

Since 1983, the civil war against the LTTE has been divided into four periods. During Eelam War I, 1983-1987, India supported the LTTE and which ended with an Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) in the Tamil areas. The 1987-1990 was the period of the IPKF debacle, which ended with the IPKF fighting the LTTE and being told to leave by the Sri Lankan government. In 1991, the LTTE assassinated Rajiv Gandhi in Tamil Nadu. From 1990-1992, the LTTE expelled most of the Muslim population from the North through massacre, with about 150,000 Muslims fleeing the North by the end of the period. Eelam War II (1990-1995) ended with a ceasefire and attempted peace talks. Eelam War III (1995-2002) was the period of the LTTE’s greatest military success and ended with an internationally monitored ceasefire agreement. The current round, Eelam War IV, which began in 2006, during which the Sri Lankan Army has imposed a near complete defeat on the LTTE.

Several factors explain the success of the Sri Lankan Army in this round, success that had eluded it for decades. First, the most important single factor is the banning of the LTTE and its classification as a ‘terrorist organization’ since the War on Terror. This classification has denied the LTTE its main sources of finance and supply. The Sri Lankan government has been able to destroy LTTE sea supply lines and sink many supply ships. Second, in March 2004, the eastern commander of the LTTE, Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan (Colonel Karuna) broke from LTTE leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran’s main group. In mid-April, Prabhakaran’s forces attacked Karuna’s group, which fled with his veterans and was placed under government protection. Karuna organized the Tamil Eelam People’s Liberation Tigers (TEPLT), a defection that cost the LTTE 5-6000 soldiers and, ultimately, the eastern province. Third, other regional actors (India, China, Pakistan), are more closely aligned with the government than they had been [1]. Fourth, as a part of the “War on Terror”, Sri Lanka’s war has received US support as well. The extent of US assistance to Sri Lanka in this operation is unknown, but the US did state that they had an assessment team of the Marines in Sri Lanka for months before the operation began. Speaking in India on May 14, US Pacific Command Chief

Admiral Timothy J Keating told reporters:

*"We had sent a military assessment team about two to three months ago under a Brigadier General of the United States Marine Corps to Sri Lanka to work with our embassy there and abide by the situation. We prepared a range of military options that were and remain available (for the crisis)."*

Fifth, the devastation of the 2004 Tsunami and the politicized reconstruction processes may have disadvantaged the LTTE. 30,000 people were killed, half a million to a million made homeless, and two-thirds of the fishery was wiped out. The highest percentages of affected people were Tamils and Muslims. One of the hardest hit districts was Mullaitivu, one of the sites of recent fighting. US and Indian troops were involved in emergency response to the Tsunami in the Northern region, and the LTTE complained that these foreign forces provided intelligence to the government.

In addition to the abuses they have committed, the LTTE also made three strategic mistakes that exacerbated each of the above problems. First, they denied pluralism in Tamil politics, claiming for themselves, sometimes through violence against rivals, the role of sole representative of Sri Lankan Tamils. Second, they increasingly favoured the military over the political, which gradually cut them off from their base and alienated the people. Third, they did not make links to related struggles against the common sources of oppression or coalitions with other oppressed peoples, Sinhalese or, especially, Muslim: the expulsion of the Muslims from the North in the 1990s was perhaps the worst example of this. Their mistakes and abuses are themselves products of the violent context, but they isolated the Tigers and made them politically more vulnerable to destruction.

Communalism, like insurgency, feeds on the memory of atrocities like the one that is unfolding today. All of the elements exist for the current round of fighting to end in a tragedy still more horrible than the thousands killed (UN estimates are 6,500 killed) and tens of thousands displaced. Whether LTTE leaders are captured alive (an unlikely proposition given the organization's practice of carrying cyanide capsules around the neck rather than being captured and tortured by the Army) and treated to "victor's justice" without parallel war crimes trials for the government's crimes or slaughtered wholesale along with thousands more civilians, the horrors of the No-Fire Zone will not be easily forgotten. The Tamil population, especially those in the IDP camps and the No-Fire Zone, is in a more precarious situation than ever before, and dangers to them will only increase without a political solution. A ceasefire and political solution could give decent forces in the country a chance to begin to address the structural violence that victimizes all Sri Lankans, and Tamils especially. The bloody massacre being prepared is an attempt to finish the work of the tsunami, clearing lands, locking down peoples, and handing the country over for plunder.

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**P.S.**

\* From <http://www.killingtrain.com/node/699>

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## Footnotes

[1] Ssee for example this 2006 assessment by Indian writer Sudha Ramachandran: [The Pakistani muscle behind Colombo](#)