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## Sri Lanka: In the Shadow of the Indian Elephant

*Barbara Crossette*

Before Osama bin Laden rewrote the script, American officials did not regard the vast Indian subcontinent, stretching east from Afghanistan to Burma and south from the Himalayas to the Indian Ocean, as strategically important to Washington. That meant no American troops, even during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The United States has now overthrown one government in Afghanistan and installed a caretaker of Washington's choosing in its place. It has revitalized a deep relationship with Pakistan. Inevitably, more effort will now go into the relationship with India, the regional power, which has not responded to all these recent events with equanimity. The United States would do well not to forget India's smaller neighbors as work on this relationship resumes.

Think of India as the regional meddler, just as the United States was—a generation or more ago—in the Caribbean and Central and South America. In South Asia, tensions are likely to continue until India is persuaded to adopt more generous, less destabilizing policies toward its own neighborhood and put more of its enormous power and energies into the urgent tasks of regional cooperation in social, economic, and political development. Perhaps no country—beyond Pakistan, India's prime obsession—understands this better than Sri Lanka, now daring to hope more than ever that a two-decade-long Tamil rebellion may be brought to an end, if India will stand back and let it happen.

Smaller South Asian nations all need both help and some breathing space to de-

velop. Whatever happens next in Afghanistan, which the industrial nations are now promising to rebuild, most South Asians—about 1.4 billion people—will remain trapped in poverty approaching the levels of sub-Saharan Africa, as annual United Nations Human Development Reports demonstrate. The region, with ample natural and human resources to draw on, could do much better. But ethnic tensions, cross-border terrorism, political paralysis, corrupt civil services, overworked and politically vulnerable justice and education systems, social inequities, vast environmental destruction, and economic stagnation still fuel separatism and corrode national life from the mountain foothills of Nepal—where a Maoist rebellion is wreaking havoc—to the jungles of Sri Lanka.

While many of these neighborhood problems are homegrown, India, a democracy with more than a billion people, a huge and expanding military, nuclear weapons, and overwhelming economic clout, could play a major role in lifting the fortunes of the whole region. Or it could keep every country in the neighborhood off balance. Indira Gandhi took the latter approach as her modus operandi from the late 1960s until her assassination in 1984. Her successors have been struggling with her legacy ever since.

Half a century after the withdrawal of the British, most nations in the region still have, or have subsequently chosen, some form of parliamentary democracy, even Nepal, which was never a British colony. But everywhere that parliamentary model is

under scrutiny if not outright attack, as dynastic politics, unstable coalition governments, and the collapse of the concept of a “loyal opposition” lead to destructive political infighting and the erosion of democratic institutions. Bangladesh, a multiparty state, can no longer conduct national elections with either of its two viscerally jealous major parties in power, and has to clear the deck for a national campaign by installing a neutral interim administration to provide something of a level playing field. Pakistan is under military rule again, mostly because its two leading parties both disgraced themselves in power and repeatedly abused the voters’ trust after democracy was restored in 1988, following an earlier army interregnum.

G. L. Peiris, a Sri Lankan legal scholar of international renown who is now a government minister charged with negotiating an end to Sri Lanka’s ethno-linguistic Tamil rebellion, offered a very gloomy summary in a 1999 speech after a suicide bomber killed the country’s leading human rights lawyer, Neelan Tiruchelvam. “The bane of our political culture is the unprecedented degree of confrontation and polarization that we see around us, not only in our own island home of Sri Lanka, but indeed throughout the subcontinent of South Asia,” he said. “There is an appalling degree of rancor, bitterness, acrimony, spite, and envy. We do not recognize anything valid in a competing point of view. There is no willingness to give and take. There is no desire to compromise. Bigotry has become the hallmark of our political culture.”<sup>1</sup>

Sri Lanka is working on its fourth constitution in 54 years, hoping to find a formula to ease ethnic hostilities that have propelled a once-promising country into civil war—at one point, two civil wars raged simultaneously—leaving tens of thousands of people dead and many others uprooted. Sri Lanka, sadly, is a small showcase of broader South Asian problems: ethnic hatreds, religious and linguistic nationalisms, a devas-

tating brain drain, a wounded economy—and a lurking wariness about India, whose initial backing for Tamil rebels intensified the fight against a Sinhala-dominated central government.

Tensions between Sinhalese and Tamils, both migrants from the Indian subcontinent centuries ago, go back into the island’s earliest recorded history, when rival kingdoms clashed and ancient cities were built and destroyed and built again. Nationalists on both sides, like nationalists everywhere, make the most of history and legend, though recent politics fanning old hostilities have been more to blame for the current conflict. The two sides are divided by language, Tamil and Sinhala, and often by religion. Most Tamils are Hindus and most Sinhalese Buddhists, but there are Christians on both sides. The majority of Sri Lanka’s Tamils, related to the Tamils across the Palk Straits in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, claim northern Sri Lanka as their historical homeland. They are often called “Jaffna Tamils.” Not all Tamils, however, are separatists. In the tea plantation country of central Sri Lanka, another group of Tamils, different in caste and history, were brought from India as laborers. In the current war, which began in the early 1980s, pogroms, massacres, and other atrocities were committed by both sides. The same could be said for Kashmir or Assam, where the brutality of both rebels and Indian troops does not set much of a positive model.

#### *A Poisoned Atmosphere*

In January, as hopes for peace began to rise after the election of a new government, I spent a month in Sri Lanka listening to people who have lived through this brutish civil war, written about it, or tried to find ways to end it. This essay is built on their comments, and other interviews with experts outside the region.

For a small nation, Sri Lanka has an abundance of think tanks and research organizations, most of them in Colombo, the

national capital. One of the best known is the International Center for Ethnic Studies. Tiruchelvam, the Tamil human rights lawyer who was murdered by Tamil separatists in 1999, was its director. His successor is Radhika Coomaraswamy, who is known internationally as the United Nations Human Rights Commission's rapporteur on violence against women, a volunteer job. In an interview in her Colombo office, down a shady lane near the stark stainless steel monument marking the spot where Tiruchelvam was killed, Coomaraswamy said that to end the Tamil-Sinhala conflict nothing less than a redefinition of the state is needed, "and that is what this fight is about."

To complicate matters, the last constitution in 1978 gave Sri Lanka both a parliamentary government, with the prime minister normally drawn from the largest voting bloc, and a separately elected executive president, a French-style system of cohabitation that is the legacy of the late president J. R. Jayawardene, a conservative who wanted more freedom to open the country's economy after a period of stultifying socialist experiment. At this critical moment, the president, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga of the People's Alliance (with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party at its core), and the prime minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe of the United National Party, are from different, bitterly competing camps. The People's Alliance is a left-of-center coalition; the United National Party is more right-wing, especially in its support of a free market economic policy. But as almost any Sri Lankan, and most diplomats, will tell a visitor, the rivalry between them has been very personal and very typical of struggles for power among the elite families of Sri Lanka that have dominated politics before and since independence from Britain in 1948.

To make matters worse, the fallout from postcolonial legislation promoting the Sinhalese and their language and discriminating against Tamil-speakers—the work of

President Kumaratunga's father, Prime Minister Solomon W. R. D. Bandaranaike—still poisons the atmosphere, not only among Tamils. A well-educated, English-speaking minority known as Burghers, descendants of the Dutch colonizers who preceded the British, have largely fled the country for Australia, Canada, or other more hospitable places, taking their talents and money with them. Moreover, current laws requiring all schools to teach in a national language, now either Sinhala or Tamil, may have given many young people outside the English-speaking elite greater educational opportunities, but they also created a situation where children grow up in segregated linguistic "streams" with little interaction in the classroom, making ethnic stereotyping easier, parents say.

"British colonialism had a certain model for the post-independence period, which was ethnic-blind," Coomaraswamy said. "In both India and Sri Lanka, they passed to us constitutions that really neither protected nor promoted nor denied minorities anything. So you have in Sri Lanka no bill of rights, just a general clause saying that minorities should be treated equally. At independence, there was not a recognition that ethnicity would be in any way a factor that would determine everything else. I don't think the British thought in those terms because of their own particular approach to things, and the nature of the colonial elite—the Nehrus and others. So the first assertion of ethnicity was Pakistan. Then Bangladesh, then much later Sri Lanka. Basically what you had was the liberal, secular, constitutional order envisioned by British colonialism being challenged and negotiated and fought over by ethnic needs and ethnic dimensions.

"When you have that kind of liberal order, especially with the supremacy of parliament, majorities rule strongly; they can rule without even consulting the minority," said Coomaraswamy, who is from one of Sri Lanka's most distinguished Tamil families. "So what you have then is, to some extent, ma-

ajoritarianism. What we are aiming at, in development jargon, is how to make democracy move from majoritarian democracy to inclusive democracy, to include all the ethnic groups and minorities and different types of people. That's the struggle at the moment."

In India, Ashis Nandy of the Center for the Study of Developing Societies, noted in a recent collection of essays, *Ethnic Futures: The State and Identity Politics in Asia*, that while the open Indian political system had shown the capability to contain cultural or ethnic tensions, Indians still operate on stereotypes about Muslims, seeing them as aggressive and prone to criminality, and therefore to be blamed for urban riots that are often fomented by Hindus. "Indian society has not been prepared for the vague consensus toward which American society has moved—namely that the blacks, although they usually start race riots and other forms of racial violence, are pushed to do so by an oppressive social situation."<sup>2</sup>

In Sri Lanka, Peiris, a former Rhodes scholar trained in law at Oxford, looks for more checks and balances to temper majoritarian instincts. "The idea of an omnicompetent legislature has not worked well in this part of the world at all," he told a Colombo think tank, the Marga Institute, in 1997. A former dean of the law school and then vice chancellor of Colombo University who left academic life in some frustration in the 1990s, Peiris was a minister in a People's Alliance government before joining the United National Party cabinet, and is seen as a potentially crucial reconciler as he tries to line up some solidarity behind peace moves with the Tamils.

In Sri Lanka, perhaps more than anywhere else in the region, the debate about the country's future has recently broadened markedly. Business, the professions, scientific and academic associations are stepping up pressure on politicians to stop the country bleeding to death. One example: "We, the scientists of Sri Lanka, view with grave concern, sorrow and consternation the serious

political, social and economic crisis facing Sri Lanka today," the Sri Lankan Association for the Advancement of Science said in a statement last August. "Peace and unity have taken a severe beating everywhere in the country."

Other groups echo the warning. Students have been badly served by politicians in recent decades, not only in Sri Lanka but also in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India, where they interfere with academic decision making and can bring chaos to campus life. In Karachi, I was once shown a computer laboratory shot up in a student gun battle between rival ethnic-political factions. In India, college and university branches of political parties vie for control of student life. A Sri Lankan, Indrakanthi Kotelawala, wrote a poem, included in the 2001 edition of *Channels*, an anthology published by the English Writers' Cooperative of Sri Lanka, about students who had become robots without intellectual commitment:

All are busy rushing  
Before the next revolution  
Shuts the campus gates.  
No one mourns  
The campus dead.

#### *Promise Unfulfilled*

India may have been the jewel in Britain's imperial crown, but Sri Lanka, at independence in 1948, was a country with greater immediate promise. Cosmopolitan, democratic, entrepreneurial, and relatively egalitarian, especially in its educational opportunities for women, Sri Lanka—Ceylon until 1972—seemed set for the kind of success Singapore would later enjoy. In fact, statistically speaking, Sri Lanka, a country roughly the size of Ireland, with about 19 million people, still leads the region in virtually every social indicator such as literacy, health and sanitation, shelter, and family size. But the missteps of shortsighted politicians undermined its future and the crude ethnic nationalisms they fostered ruptured not only

Sinhalese-Tamil harmony but also the peaceful coexistence of four religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. As the mix turned explosive, India stepped in to fan the flames—much as Pakistan would do later in the Kashmir Valley. India's involvement in Sri Lanka's Tamil rebellion grew in part from the popularity of the Tamil cause among important politicians in India's Tamil Nadu state and in part from the now acknowledged intention of Indira Gandhi to weaken Sri Lanka deliberately as it turned away from a protectionist state socialism like India's to a free market economy and improved ties with the West. India was then very much a friend of the Soviet Union.

J. N. Dixit, one of India's most experienced diplomats, told newspaper publishers from around the world at an International Press Institute conference in New Delhi in January 2001 that India had a "special responsibility" to the region because its neighbors were all fearful of its intentions. He should know. In his exceptional career, this perceptive and straight-talking envoy served not only as the country's foreign secretary but also as a diplomat in key neighboring countries, including as high commissioner in Pakistan and Sri Lanka. In the late 1980s, Dixit was the diplomatic manager of an Indian military intervention in Sri Lanka, an ultimately disastrous policy. It led directly to the assassination in 1991 of Rajiv Gandhi by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a brutal Sri Lankan Tamil army with which the Colombo government must now negotiate a peace in the country's northeast.

As prime minister of India in 1987, Gandhi sent an Indian peacekeeping force to Sri Lanka to disarm the Tigers—who had earlier been armed and trained by Indian intelligence agencies. Rajiv Gandhi, unlike his mother, was a modernizer who had little quarrel with Sri Lanka's economic opening to the West. That was a positive factor in his decision to act as peacemaker. However, India was also concerned that the Sri Lankan

army was gradually driving the Tamil rebels to defeat, and the Gandhi government was looking for a way to keep their cause alive politically. Again, this was partly because of sentiment in Tamil Nadu. Moreover, India, especially its intelligence agencies, also wanted to hang on to some influence in the island nation through Tamil surrogates it could help elect to governing bodies in Tamil areas. Indira Gandhi's legacy of regional meddling was still alive in some quarters.

India is now on the sidelines as the new Sri Lankan government under Prime Minister Wickremesinghe, elected in December 2001, is making a promising start at settling the rebellion, with Norway as mediator. A team of cease-fire monitors from the Nordic countries began to set up bases of operation in the north and east at the beginning of March. Officials are hopeful that real peace talks can begin in April or May. The Tigers are the last of more than half a dozen Tamil separatist groups still in the field after the Tigers' ruthless commander, Velupillai Prabhakaran, systematically annihilated all other potential rivals, among them less violent Tamil leaders. The assassination campaign began in 1975, with the killing of Alfred Duraiappah, the popular mayor of Jaffna, the center of Tamil culture.

The government could not have a less flexible or more duplicitous adversary. A former American ambassador to Sri Lanka, A. Peter Burleigh, says that there are very large questions over what settlement Prabhakaran would accept, and how democratic a role he would or could play. "The Tigers always worried that they would never win an election," he said. "If there were a free and open election among Tamils still resident in the north, they would not have a prayer." Few Sri Lankans expect the Tigers to embrace an open society, and assume they would continue to rule by terror—if they give up arms at all. In January and February this year, reports began to emerge across the

north and down the east coast of Tiger teams abducting teenagers to bolster their ranks.

Thanks to Prabakaran, Sri Lanka lost a generation of Tamil politicians willing to work within the democratic system in the 1980s and 1990s. All the while, the Sinhalese-dominated government was under international pressure to make concessions to the Tamils, who carried out one assassination after another, while also forcibly conscripting children, issuing them cyanide capsules and instilling the cult of martyrdom, practices still very much alive today. To many Sri Lankans, Tamils as well as Sinhalese, the advice from outsiders approached incomprehensible madness, and it left a residue of resentment, particularly toward international human rights groups, even though they have lately been far more critical of the rebels. The Tamil Tigers were skilled propagandists, while many Sri Lankan officials and diplomats were hopelessly inept in presenting the government's case. Only recently has that balance been reversed.

Over the last decade, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has been declared a terrorist organization by India, stung by the Gandhi assassination, as well as by the United States, Britain, Canada, and Australia, depriving it of fundraising bases. But Sri Lankan Tamils had known for years that the movement was terrifyingly totalitarian. Two powerful books written by Sri Lankan Tamils connected to the University Teachers for Human Rights in Jaffna, while harsh on the Sinhalese, also left no doubt about the character of the Tigers and Prabakaran, whose regime some Tamil intellectuals called fascist. *The Broken Palmyra*, published in 1990, was followed in 2001 by *Myths, Decadence and Murder: Sri Lanka, the Arrogance of Power*.

"The Tamil struggle has gone into steady retrogression, both internally and externally, from the time that the LTTE tried brutally to assert itself as the Tamils' sole le-

gitimate representative," Rajan Hoole, a Tamil academic, wrote in *Myths, Decadence and Murder*. "Experience has shown that it is incapable of observing any humanitarian constraint and has never been a credible party to negotiations. Most of this stemmed from the logic of dealing with rival groups and internal dissent through brute force. It resulted in draconian oppression within the Tamil community, total disillusionment among thinking adults and, by the end of 1986, a disastrous reduction in military capability."<sup>3</sup>

A year later, in 1987, India stepped in to save the Tigers from defeat by the Sri Lankan army on the Jaffna peninsula. Rajiv Gandhi concluded a pact with President Jayawardene, under which Indian peacekeepers would disarm the Tamils in return for considerable autonomy in the Sri Lankan northeast. Within a year, that arrangement fell apart and the Tigers turned on Indian troops. Astonishingly, President Ranasinghe Premadasa, Jayawardene's successor and a city political boss with a reputation for gangsterism, made common cause with the Tigers against India. Meanwhile, radical Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists in the south had launched a rebellion sparked by resistance to Indian troops in Sri Lanka. Such is the tangled undergrowth of this civil conflict. Premadasa was assassinated in 1993; Tamils were blamed, as they were for the murders of a nearly a generation of Sinhalese political leaders, most of them government ministers. President Kumaratunga, one of the Tigers' latest targets, survived an attack in December 1999.

The assassination in June that year of Neelan Tiruchelvam, the internationally recognized human rights lawyer (eulogized above by G. L. Peiris) who had devoted much of his life to trying to reconcile Tamil and Sinhalese communities and who was working on a power-sharing constitution at the time of his violent death, had a catalytic effect. Popular demands for an end to ethnic conflict increased. Public outrage was

spurred two years later by a Tiger attack on Sri Lanka's main air base and adjacent international airport, which destroyed or damaged half the national airline fleet as well as military aircraft. Tourism had been growing steadily, augmenting hard currency income from garments, tea, gemstones, coconut products, and rubber. Because of such shocks to an already war-weary and brutalized nation, Prime Minister Wickremesinghe probably will get wide political latitude in peace negotiations; alternatively, he would no doubt get strong support for renewed military action if the Tigers pull out of peace talks again, as they did in the mid-1990s.

### *India as Peacemaker?*

It is India, through whose territorial waters Tiger arms shipments continue to move largely unimpeded, that will have the power to insure the success of any peace. The signs so far are good. Sri Lankans seem more confident than they have ever been that India will not be tempted to aid the Tigers in any way, despite the political risks to New Delhi posed by pressure from nearly 60 million Tamils in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, some of whose leaders have supported the rebels actively in the past. In the decade following Rajiv Gandhi's assassination by the Tamil Tigers, diplomats and policy analysts in the region say, successive Indian governments, especially those led by opponents of the Gandhi-dominated Congress Party, began to contain the once free-wheeling intelligence agencies that drew India into Sri Lanka, though there is still a reluctance in New Delhi to share intelligence information that could be helpful to Colombo.

A few Indian political leaders have been particularly effective in building regional confidence. Inder Kumar Gujral, first as foreign minister when Indian troops were withdrawn from Sri Lanka in 1990, and later as prime minister, struck many officials in neighboring countries as an understanding and principled statesman. Pakistani offi-

cial also have, or had, trust in Atal Bihari Vajpayee, briefly foreign minister in the late 1970s under a non-Congress government and now prime minister. Although Vajpayee has close links to Hindu nationalists and has given some of them prominent roles in government, personally he is still seen as a potential partner by many Pakistanis, despite New Delhi's recent belligerence over Kashmir.

Rohan Gunaratna, a Sri Lankan-born fellow at the Center for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland and the author of *Indian Intervention in Sri Lanka: The Role of India's Intelligence Agencies*, said in an interview in February that although the signals were positive he still had not quite made up his mind about the Indian intentions in the current situation. "India's intelligence agencies are reformed to some extent," he said. "Or they have gone even more covert. We really do not know what they are doing."

But he points to the stark contrast with the 1983–87 period, which he has documented extensively in his book. "More than 20,000 Tamil militants were based in India during that time," he said. "The first and second batch of training was provided by the Indian Foreign Intelligence Agency, the Research and Analysis Wing, in Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh at two Indian military facilities. After that, with the expertise these groups gained, they set up their own training camps in South India." I found, as a correspondent based in Bangkok at that time and reporting on Sri Lanka, that I had to go to the Indian city of Madras if I wanted to meet Sri Lankan Tamil rebel leaders. Tamil rebels remained on the Indian payroll well into the 1990s.

In the light of these activities, there is irony in India's anger at Pakistani training of Kashmiris fighting for independence from India. "What is really important to understand is that in this region both India and Pakistan arm, train, and help these covert programs," Gunaratna said. "When I

went to Kashmir, I met a number of people who were being trained in Pakistan, and also Afghanistan. But I also met a number of Indian Muslims, Kashmiris, who had been trained by Indian agencies and sent across the border into Pakistan. We cannot exonerate either of these two countries.” It is a conclusion supported independently by several past and present American ambassadors in the region.

Sri Lanka and Pakistan have not been India’s only targets. In the Chittagong Hills of Bangladesh in the late 1980s, I met rebels who told me they had been instructed in both weaponry and “psy ops”—the term they used—by India, at a camp near Dehra Dun, in the Himalayan foothills. A decade and a half earlier, India was training and arming the Bengalis who would create Bangladesh from East Pakistan with the help of the Indian army, severing the country the British had so oddly constructed for Muslims at the time of Partition in 1947. In the mid-1970s, Indian intelligence agencies were busy undermining the Tibetan Buddhist kingdom of Sikkim, paving the way for Indira Gandhi’s use of an ethnic Nepali fifth column to overthrow the ruler, the Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal, and annex his realm. Sikkim is now an Indian state. Bhutan, the last Buddhist kingdom in the Himalayas after Sikkim fell, has never forgotten the lesson and is careful to follow India’s policy line.

In the late 1980s, landlocked Nepal, where Indian intelligence agents have always been active, was placed under a crippling embargo as a punishment for buying anti-aircraft guns from China. A Nepali official told me then that the foolhardy purchase was prompted by Indian Air Force supply drops to rebels in Sri Lanka. Nepal’s punishment ended when Gujral, as foreign minister under Prime Minister Vishwanath Pratap Singh from 1989 to 1991, reopened the borders with Nepal on generous terms. More recently in Bhutan, where an ethnic Nepali revolt simmers, India has shown no

intention of reviving the policy that destroyed Sikkim. Indian security forces have, instead, prevented ethnic Nepali militants in refugee camps in Nepal from marching into Bhutan through India.

South Asians are still waiting for India to allow and encourage more economic and social interaction among its neighbors. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), an organization grouping Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, never got much help from India as it tried to foster multilateral cooperation, following the model of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. An effective SAARC could help spur more regional trade, travel, and the exchange of people. But India, not unlike the United States in the Western Hemisphere, has always preferred to deal country-by-country from its enormous strength and on its own terms—for example, in trade agreements or over airline landing rights—and SAARC suffers. Sometimes India simply does not allow the group to meet.

### *Grasping at Peace*

Still, with the hope of a new environment created by an India no longer guided by the paranoia that led Indira Gandhi to see neighbors as potential offshore threats or bases for a Western “foreign hand,” Sri Lankans have certainly grasped the opportunity to give peace a chance. Chambers of commerce in the Sinhalese south are reaching out to their counterparts in the Tamil north as the government opens roads and reduces barriers to trade with rebel-dominated areas. The activism of business leaders is unprecedented. Renton de Alwis, the former chairman of Sri Lanka’s tourist board, said the reason is obvious. “Earlier, we all wanted peace, but we did nothing about it,” he said. “We left it to the politicians. That was a mistake.”

In Colombo, I went to see Lalith Kotelawala, chairman of Ceylinco Consolidated, a conglomerate of more than 100 companies

in the insurance and financial services sectors as well as other areas as diverse as property development and jewelry. Last year, he founded a peace group, the Society for Love and Understanding. He travels the country setting up interethnic village committees. On Friday evenings, he is host of a pro-peace talk show on local cable television. He has offered his services to the government as an intermediary with the Tigers, and is willing to go into Tiger territory and distribute relief supplies to demonstrate that the Sinhalese can be both generous and trustworthy. Why and how does he find the time for this?

"It's a matter of necessity," he said. "The war costs, I believe, 12 percent of GDP. Also, there is the destabilization of the attacks on the civilian population—the airport, the Central Bank. The business community realizes that unless this stops, tourists are not going to come to Sri Lanka. There are no investments. It is more than just the annual military expenditure. The cost to the business community and the economy is immense."

Kotelawala's story is a particularly interesting one. In January 1996, a Tamil suicide squad targeting the Central Bank also blew up Ceylinco's headquarters nearby, destroying the building and all the company's records. Kotelawala was found unconscious and bloodied by glass shards that appeared to have blinded him. He was flown to London for surgery at Moorfields Hospital, where one eye was saved, but operations and treatments took a year out of his life. He remembers how his family waited weeks to tell him how devastating the damage to Ceylinco had been.

"After they told me, they left me there in the hospital room, and I was alone," he said. "I had lost everything. I was in pain and I was angry." His first instinct was to hire a hit squad to kill Prabakharan, the Tiger leader. Instead, Kotelawala, a convert to Catholicism from Buddhism, turned to religion. "There was a statue of the Virgin

Mary at my bedside, so I knelt and prayed for guidance. The message was very clear. It said: Any fool can hate. If you want to follow my Son, you must learn to love. That was the last time I ever hated Prabakharan." Back at work a few years later he joined a group of business leaders exploring ways to aid the off-again, on-again peace process. That led to the formation of his own organization—now 10,000 strong, he says—which is open to all committed citizens, except politicians.

Significantly missing from the burgeoning peace movement, however, is strong and unequivocal leadership from the hierarchy of Sinhalese Buddhism, whose followers form 69 percent of the national population. Hindus, with a less hierarchical system than the Buddhist orders, are not at the forefront either, but many Hindus—about 15.5 percent of the total population, are in areas of the north and east controlled by the Tamil Tigers, who permit no opposition. Many Muslims, a moderate and often prosperous community in Sri Lanka, as in the neighboring Maldives, are caught in the middle, especially along the east coast, where Tamil rebels have co-opted or coerced them.

Many of Sri Lanka's Buddhist monks, or *bhikkus*, who belong to the Theravada school of Buddhism, also practiced in Thailand and Burma, are known for their aggressive Sinhalese nationalism, and many supported the violent Sinhalese rebellion prompted by the arrival of Indian troops in 1987. The rebel group, the People's Liberation Front, known by its Sinhala initials J.V.P., for Jathika Vimukthi Peramuna, was a leftist as well as nationalist movement. It has since joined the mainstream as a political party, and may use its pivotal votes to try to block any pact with Tamils that would appear to chauvinists to be giving away too much.

Militant Sinhala Buddhism is part of a regional political phenomenon. In South Asia, the political left, traditionally rooted in European communism or Fabian socialism, was largely an elitist movement at in-

dependence, and it found expression mostly (though not entirely) in political parties. Secular conservative political parties are rare in South Asia, and in their absence the political right has increasingly been taken over by religious fundamentalists and militants. Across the region, militant Muslims, Hindus, and now some Buddhists have been targeting Christians and attacking churches, especially in India and Pakistan.

Sri Lankan Tamils are both Hindu and Christian, but Christianity has never been an issue in the Sinhalese-Tamil conflict, and Indians have not supported Tamil rebels because of their religion. The vilification of Christianity does not bode well for the 7.6 percent of Sri Lanka's population who are Christians, some from families which converted with the arrival of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century. Nor does it help those, like Kotelawala, who use Christian language about love and compassion in overtures to the Tamil Tigers. When his Ceylinco employees came out on the street to "hold hands for peace" as part of a national demonstration last September, Sinhalese nationalists, including monks in robes, beat up the staff at one of the company's banks. The militants came from the Sihala Urumaya, or Sinhala Heritage organization, and as they marched, they chanted: "Kill Lalith Kotelawala."

Coomaraswamy of the International Center for Ethnic Studies sees a worrying trend, as some Sri Lankan Buddhist leaders, traditionally anti-Indian, are attracted to India's Hindu nationalists out of a sense of anti-Christian, anti-Western solidarity not unlike that of militant Muslims. "Our relationship with India is so confused," she said. "There's a whole school of thought that says, let's keep pushing India away. But there's a whole other group, in Sinhala nationalistic writing, saying we must now have India come in because Hindutva is in power, and the LTTE is a Christian movement—which it isn't. They say Hindutva and Buddhist Sri Lanka should unite against the Christian el-

ements. That's a whole new line of thinking among the radical nationalists. It's completely bizarre." This confusion, she thinks, may give New Delhi pause before involving itself in Sri Lanka again. "My sense is that it's too hot for India," she said. "They will just watch the Norwegians, and participate through them."

As this article was going to press, the Bush administration began taking some unexpectedly strong steps to show support for the Sri Lankan government at this very critical moment, perhaps the first sign that the United States is looking more broadly at the once-neglected region as it pursues its war on terrorism. India, preoccupied with renewed religious violence between Hindus and Muslims, has remained silent and has not, uncharacteristically, criticized some very high-profile recent American actions.

On March 11, the American embassy in Colombo, under Amb. Ashley Wills, an outspoken career diplomat with experience in India, warned the Tamil Tigers against "activities that could jeopardize the recent cease-fire," mentioning the recruitment of children and the kidnapping and extortion of Muslims in the northeast. In mid-March, Christina Rocca, assistant secretary of state for South Asia, spent three days in Sri Lanka on a trip to the region, during which she flew to the embattled Jaffna peninsula to stand beside Prime Minister Wickremesinghe, the first Sri Lankan prime minister to go to Jaffna in more than two decades.

Even more eye-catching for the Sri Lankan and Indian press was that Rocca flew to Jaffna in an American military plane and was accompanied by Brig. Gen. Timothy Ghormley of the U.S. Marine Corps as well as Ambassador Wills. General Ghormley will organize training for Sri Lankans in noncombatant operations, such as humanitarian relief in former war zones. Little more than a decade ago, India was unwilling to live with even a Voice of America relay tower in a Tamil area. Before leaving Colombo, Rocca said at a news conference that Sri

Lanka could now become a model for ending ethnic conflict in the region, and that the United States would be “watching closely” in the months ahead. “The relations between Sri Lanka and the United States are as broad and strong as they have ever been,” she said. No country in the region would miss that message. ●

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## Notes

1. Reproduced in *Towards Equity*, a collection of speeches by G. L. Peiris (Colombo: Unie Arts, 2000), p. 204.

2. Joanna Pfaff-Cznecka, Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, Ashis Nandy, and Edmund Terence Gomez, *Ethnic Futures: The State and Identity Politics in Asia* (London: Sage, 1999), p. 153.

3. Rajan Hoole, *Myths, Decadence and Murder: Sri Lanka, the Arrogance of Power* (Colombo: University Teachers for Human Rights [Jaffna], 2001), p. 215.

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For day-to-day news about the Sri Lanka peace process, a useful website is [www.theacademic.org](http://www.theacademic.org). Created by a group of scholars and writers, it is updated around the clock with news from the region and links to other relevant websites, including [www.tamilnet.com](http://www.tamilnet.com), the voice of the Tamil Tigers.