Ethnic Conflict and Sri Lanka-US Relations

Chandramani Pradhan

Sri Lanka, an island nation in the Indian Ocean, is a constitutional democracy with a relatively high level of development. Political, social, and economic development has, however, been seriously constrained by ethnic conflict between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamil ethnic groups. Since 1983, a separatist war costing at least 70,000 lives has been waged against government forces by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a rebel group that sought to establish a separate state or internal self-rule in the Tamil-dominated areas of the North and East.

The United States designated the LTTE as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in 1997. Open fighting in this conflict came to a close with the defeat of LTTE field forces and the combat death of their leader Velupillai Prabhakaran in May 2009. The government now faces the challenges of consolidating peace with the Tamil community now that LTTE forces have been defeated. Sri Lanka also suffered a huge natural disaster in December 2004. A massive tidal wave killed up to 35,000 citizens in Sri Lanka's worst-ever natural disaster.

The ethnic violence of mid-2006 was followed by a major government military offensive in 2007 and Colombo's formal withdrawal from the ceasefire agreement in January 2008, which culminated in the military defeat of the LTTE in May 2009. U.S. policy supports peaceful efforts to reform Sri Lanka's democratic political system in a way that provides for full political participation of all communities; it does not endorse the establishment of another independent state on the island. Since Sri Lankan independence in 1948, the United States has provided more than $3.6 billion in assistance funds, about two-thirds of this in the form of food aid. Direct nonfood aid for FY2007 is estimated at $9.4 million. Serious human rights problems in Sri Lanka are blamed on all major parties to the ethnic conflict and have led to some limited U.S. and international aid sanctions.

Most Recent Developments

A "growing and grave humanitarian crisis" developed during the last phase of the civil war between Sri Lankan government forces and the LTTE (Susan Rice, 2009). Large numbers of civilians became trapped with the remnants of the LTTE forces in a shrinking pocket that ended along a coastal strip of land in northeastern Sri Lanka. President Obama pointed out on May 13, 2009, that these people have "little access to food, water, shelter and medicine. This has led to widespread suffering and the loss of hundreds if not thousands of lives (President's statement,

2009). These civilians were finally freed when LTTE resistance collapsed in May 2009. Government forces reportedly shelled the LTTE position on April 21, 2009, leading to the mass exodus of some 100,000 civilians that had reportedly been forced to remain as "human shields" with the LTTE forces. Reports suggest that 6,500 to 7,000 died from January to May 2009, but the government barred journalists and aid workers from the area, so estimates are difficult to confirm (Krishnan Francis, 2009). Renewed shelling of the LTTE-held position on May 9 and 10 killed hundreds to over a thousand civilians, including many children, and wounded over one thousand civilians. There was little medical attention available for those wounded in the rebel-held area. On May 12 it was reported that the only medical facility available in the LTTE enclave was shelled, killing 49 and wounding over 50 people (Ravi Nessman, 2009). Continued shelling on May 12 and 13 prevented a Red Cross ferry from delivering food and evacuating the wounded (Associated Press, 2009). The military denied that it was shelling the LTTE position despite credible reports that it was responsible. The government and the LTTE both accused each other of being responsible for the shelling (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2009).

How the government of Sri Lanka handles the post-conflict humanitarian crisis with the Tamil minority that constitute 12.6% of Sri Lanka's population will likely have a great impact on its ability to heal the wounds caused by the civil war and bring the Tamil and Sinhalese communities together. United Nations (U.N.) Chief Ban Ki-moon reportedly believes that a full and fair integration of the Tamil minority into Sri Lanka is key to a process of national reconciliation. Should the government fail to convince Sri Lankan Tamils that it is making a sincere effort to aid the estimated 300,000 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), many of whom are in need of food, water, and sanitation, it will likely find it harder to truly bring peace to the nation(Gerard Aziakou, 2009).

The United States and Sri Lanka

In the lead up to the defeat of the LTTE, U.S. policy called for an end to hostilities and a pause to the fighting on humanitarian grounds. It had also sought to urge the Government of Sri Lanka to allow international observers into the area of conflict (US Department of State, 2009). In addition, the United States supported the U.N. Secretary General's call for U.N. staff to be allowed into the conflict zone and to allow the United Nations and International Committee of the Red Cross staff to access sites where IDPs were being processed and where they were coming across the front lines of the fighting (US Fed News, 2009). It was reported in February that the Tokyo Co-Chairs (a donor group consisting of Norway, Japan, the United States, and the European Union) jointly expressed their concern over the plight of civilians caught in the conflict (US Embassy Colombo, 2009). The United States had urged the LTTE, which is listed by the United States as a terrorist group, to surrender to a third party and has stated that "the international community should be prepared to play a role to end the fighting"(Voice of America, 2009). It was reported that the U.S. sought to delay a $1.9 billion International Monetary Fund loan to Sri Lanka to apply pressure on Colombo to increase aid to civilians caught in the conflict. It was also reported that the U.S. Embassy in Colombo rejected such assertions (Agence France Presse, 2009). The United States also believes that "addressing good governance, decentralization, and poverty in the south, as well as key democratic and economic opportunities for Tamils and Muslims, especially in the east, is necessary to solidify support for peace and

eliminate the rhetoric of extreme elements"(State Department,2008).

Recent Congressional Interest

In March 2009, several Members of Congress wrote a letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to express their concern over the situation in Sri Lanka. The group "strongly encourages active U.S. leadership to bring about a long-delayed political settlement to the conflict that will guarantee Tamils full political rights and participation in their governance, and an end to the longstanding ethnic discrimination.... Until the ethnic conflict is substantively addressed, there will not be an enduring end to the conflict" (Hons James Moran, 2009). Other Members were reportedly more supportive of the Sri Lankan government's position that the war against the LTTE should be brought to a conclusion reportedly out of concern that the LTTE could regroup and/or escape if pressure on it was lifted (Colombo Times, 2009). On May 19, 2009, several Senators joined Senators John Kerry and Richard Lugar in stating that the government of Sri Lanka "has a chance to forge a long-term political solution, one that acknowledges the legitimate aspirations of all Sri Lankans, including Sinhalese, Tamils, and other groups. This means taking steps towards reconciliation and justice, including the devolution of power to Local Bodies as provided for by the constitution of Sri Lanka" (Kerry et al, 2009).

Ethnic Conflict and Civil War

A combination of communal politics (as practiced by both Sinhalese and Tamil political leaders) and deteriorating economic conditions created deep schisms in Sri Lankan society through the early decades of independence. By the 1970s, the government was facing Tamil unrest in the North and East, while the Sinhalese Marxist JVP waged a terrorist campaign against Tamils in the central and southern regions. Periodic rioting against Tamils in the late 1970s and early 1980s, culminating in the devastating communal riots of 1983, spawned the creation of several militant Tamil groups that sought to establish by force a Tamil homeland to include the Northern and Eastern provinces. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, led by its charismatic founder and chief strategist Velupillai Prabhakaran, was established in 1976 and emerged as the strongest and best organized of these groups. A full-scale separatist war broke out in the North following July 1983 riots in which several thousand Tamils were killed in retaliation for the slaying of 13 Sinhalese soldiers by separatist Tamil militants. More than two decades of ensuing war have claimed some 70,000 lives and displaced hundreds of thousands of people. Each of four major attempts at a peaceful settlement ended in failure and further violence. A ceasefire agreement (CFA) brokered by the Norwegian government in February 2002 was formally abrogated by the Colombo government in January 2008. The government then sought a military solution that proved successful with the defeat of LTTE forces in May 2009.

Current Challenges and Imperatives

With the field forces of the LTTE defeated, the government of Sri Lanka faces the immediate challenges of rounding up remaining LTTE cadres and dealing with the humanitarian situation concerning the plight of the internally displaced persons in the area of conflict. It also faces a longer-term challenge that may hold the key to resolving tensions between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamil communities. This challenge is how to address Tamil concerns and achieve the effective reintegration of the Tamil people into the Sri Lankan nation. To achieve this, Sri Lanka will reportedly focus on relief, rehabilitation,

resettlement, and reconciliation (States News Service, 2009).

IDPs

A key concern for the international community in the closing phase of the war and in the immediate post conflict phase has been how to obtain unfettered access to provide assistance to the estimated 300,000 IDPs in government run camps in war torn Tamil areas. The government of Sri Lanka allowed Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and a number of journalists some access during the Secretary's visit in May 2009. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon called on the international community to fund the Common Humanitarian Action Plan which will seek to address the needs of those affected by the war. Providing adequate care for these IDPs and effectively returning them to their home areas is a key concern.

Reintegration

The issue of whether or not alleged war crimes will be pursued is a potential area of friction between the government of Sri Lanka and elements in the international community. The Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, called for a war crimes inquiry in Sri Lanka. Many in the international community were appalled by reports of both the use of civilians as human shields by the LTTE and the indiscriminate shelling of civilians in LTTE held areas by government forces in the closing phase of the war. Ms. Pillay stated "independent and credible international investigation into recent events should be dispatched to ascertain the occurrence, nature and scale of violations of international human rights and international humanitarian law" (States News Service, 2009). The U.N Human Rights Council passed a resolution on May 27 that was in the view of Human Rights Watch "deeply flawed" because it ignored calls for an international inquiry into alleged abuses of human rights. Human Rights Watch Advocacy Director Juliette de Rivero stated "The Human Rights Council did not even express its concern for the hundreds of thousands of people facing indefinite detention in government camps" (Human Rights Watch, 2009).

Economic Issues

The civil war in Sri Lanka has hindered Sri Lanka's economic as well as its political development. Real GDP growth is expected to decline to 2.5% in 2009. Projections are predicting increased growth in 2010 of up to 5.7%. Much of this increase is expected to come from an improved security situation (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2009). Inflation fell to a five-year low in April 2009. Sri Lanka has a significant fiscal deficit which is thought to be more than 8% of GDP in 2008. Balance of payments is under stress and the country had, as of May 2009, foreign exchange reserves of approximately six weeks of imports. The government has been in negotiations with the IMF for an emergency loan of $1.9 billion to avert default on debt service obligations (Claire Innes, 2009). It is reported that Sri Lanka's debt service will total $900 million in 2009(Ibid). Sri Lanka's poor economic situation may give the international donor community some leverage over Sri Lankan post-conflict policies towards the Tamil minority. This leverage is in the view of some offset to a large extent by the popularity of the Rajapaksa government's persecution of the war against the LTTE within the Sinhalese community and by support from other segments of the international community. The Sri Lankan shares market rose 2.54% on May 28, 2009, to reach its highest close since September 2008 on the news that U.N. Human Rights Council passed a resolution which was viewed as marking international acceptance

of Sri Lanka's war against the LTTE (Reuters, 2009). Formerly a colonial economy based on plantation crops (tea, rubber, coconut, sugar, and rice), modern Sri Lanka's manufactured products now account for about four-fifths of the country's exports, including garments, textiles, gems, as well as agricultural goods. Tourism and repatriated earnings of Sri Lankans employed abroad are important foreign exchange earners. The first country in South Asia to liberalize its economy, Sri Lanka began an ongoing process of market reform and privatization of state-owned industries in 1977. Many observers attribute the ability of the national economy to thrive even in the midst of civil war to these successful reforms. Privatization efforts have slowed in recent years, however. Since 2001, both tourism and investor confidence, previously on the rebound, were negatively affected by major LTTE terrorist attacks and renewed political instability. Sri Lanka's entire economy has also suffered as a result of a recent prolonged drought (the worst in two decades), related hydroelectric power shortages, and the worldwide economic downturn around the turn of the century. In November 2006, the Colombo government issued a discussion draft of its 10-year development framework, *Mahinda Chintana [Mahinda's Thoughts]: Vision for a New Sri Lanka*. According to a January 2007 World Bank report, The vision sets out ambitious growth targets (over 8% by 2010) aimed at reducing poverty incidence to 12% of the population by 2015 (from 23% in 2002). The rapid growth scenario assumes the continuation of a favorable external environment and implies improved security conditions. A key target is to raise total investment from 28-30% of GDP in 2006 to 34% in 2010, with the largest contribution coming from the public sector. Public sector savings (currently negative) are expected to contribute 5 percentage points of GDP to gross domestic savings by 2010. FDI is projected at around 2% of GDP (compared to less than1% in the past decade).

The war negatively impacted the economy, especially by reducing investor confidence and by damaging the vital tourism sector. The civil war placed a heavy burden on the country's economy, as well as hindering its future potential. Defense expenditures as a percentage of GDP have doubled since 1980. Aside from defense spending, other costs of the war include damage to infrastructure and expenditures for humanitarian relief. Several analyses have asserted that annual growth rates over the past 24 years could have been 2-3 percentage points higher in the absence of protracted ethnic conflict. International donors say the Mahinda plan for poverty reduction is dependent upon peace (Global Insight, 2003). With its location on major sea-lanes, excellent harbors, and high educational standards, Sri Lanka has long been viewed as a potential regional center for financial and export-oriented services. For decades, Sri Lanka has invested heavily in education, health, and social welfare, maintaining high living standards compared to much of South Asia. The U.N. Development Program ranked Sri Lanka 99th out of 177 countries on its 2007/ 2008 human development index (between Azerbaijan and Maldives), down from 93rd the previous year, but still higher than any other South Asian country.

U.S. Relations and Policy Concerns

The White House issued a statement on April 24, 2009, that expressed "deep concern" for the plight of civilians caught in the final stages of the conflict between the LTTE and Sri Lankan military forces. The statement also called on the government of Sri Lanka to stop shelling civilians in the "safe zone" and to allow international aid

workers and the media access to civilians that had escaped the area of fighting. The statement further made the observation that "it would compound the current tragedy if the military end of the conflict only breeds further enmity and ends hopes for reconciliation"(Press Secretary, US,2009). American policy toward Sri Lanka has focused on U.N. and international efforts to address humanitarian needs, has urged the government of Sri Lanka to allow access to both the ICRC and U.N. representatives to the former conflict area, and has observed that the end of the conflict represents an opportunity to seek reconciliation and build a democratic and tolerant Sri Lanka (State Department, 2009). According to the U.S. State Department, a history of cordial U.S.-Sri Lanka relations has been based in large part on shared democratic traditions. U.S. policy supports efforts to reform Sri Lanka's democratic political system in a way that provides for full political participation of all communities; it does not endorse the establishment of another independent state on the island. The United States and Sri Lanka signed a new Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) in 2002. However, the political instability of subsequent years set back the time frame for any possible Free Trade Agreement (FTA), and relevant negotiations were put on hold pending positive developments in peace negotiations. The United States also maintains a limited military to- military relationship with the Sri Lanka defense establishment. During a May 2007 visit to Colombo, the lead U.S. diplomat for the region, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Richard Boucher, outlined key U.S. concerns about "the way things have been heading" in Sri Lanka. First among these was the negative impact that armed ethnic conflict was having on the people, both directly through terrorism and human rights abuses, and indirectly by harming the country's economy. In the area of human rights, Secretary Boucher placed special emphasis on the increased incidence of abductions and unlawful killings, as well as on widespread reports of government attempts to intimidate the Press. He acknowledged that the government of President Rajapaksa had voiced a commitment to upholding human rights, but said "a lot more needs to be done" both in dealing with the behavior of government security forces and in controlling "paramilitaries" (often a euphemism for the Karuna faction, which broke away from the LTTE in 2004). He conveyed to Sri Lankan political leaders of all stripes the U.S. position that consensus through the All Parties Representative Committee—"a consensus that identifies for the Tamil community their role in the island, their place, their control over various levels of government and their own lives"—represented the best basis for future progress toward conflict resolution. In August 2007 testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, a State Department official offered that Sri Lanka's long-standing ethnic conflict, fragile peace process, and deteriorating human rights conditions continue to cause concern for the United States and the international community.... Our top policy priorities for Sri Lanka remain restoration of good governance and respect for human rights leading to an eventual negotiated settlement. We believe that finalizing a credible devolution of power proposal, together with ending human rights violations and improving government accountability, are essential steps toward a lasting peace (Steven Mann, 2007).

He went on to review the ways in which the United States is supporting peace efforts, including through the four-member Tokyo Conference mechanism, through USAID projects to promote inter-ethnic dialogue, and by helping to fund humanitarian relief programs overseen by

Save the Children, the U.N. Children's Fund, the World Food Program, and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Trade, Investment and Aid

U.S. Trade and Investment

The United States is by far Sri Lanka's most important trade partner, accounting for more than one-quarter of the country's total exports. During Prime Minister Wickremasinghe's 2002 visit to Washington, the United States and Sri Lanka signed a new Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) to establish "a forum for Sri Lanka and the United States to examine ways to expand bilateral trade and investment." The agreement creates a Joint Council to enable officials to consider a wide range of commercial issues, and sets out basic principles underlying the two nations' trade and investments relationship." The Council also will "establish a permanent dialogue with the expectation of expanding trade and investment between the United States and Sri Lanka. The U.S. government continues to urge Colombo to curb its large budget deficit, simplify the tax code, and expand the tax base. It further urges the removal of non-tariff barriers and restrictive, even discriminatory, import fees and levies to facilitate greater trade (Richard Boucher, 2006). The violent ethno-national conflict has precluded most major U.S.-Sri Lanka economic initiatives since 2006.

U.S. Assistance

The State Department's FY2009 request for Sri Lanka included $6.5 million in Development Assistance, $4 million for the Economic Support Fund, $900,000 for Foreign Military Financing, $600,000 for International Military Education and Training, $350,000 for International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement, and $650,000 for Nonproliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining and Related Programs(State Department,2008). U.S. assistance to Sri Lanka is currently focused on providing emergency relief assistance and assisting the potential return of IDPs to their homes. As of April 10, 2009, USAID and State Humanitarian Assistance, including the Bureau of Population, Migration and Refugees, had provided a total of $58 million in assistance in FY2008 and FY2009 for the complex emergency in Sri Lanka. These programs were focused on humanitarian access and protection, health, shelter, water-sanitation-hygiene, food assistance, and emergency relief commodities (OFDA, 2009). There will likely be a need for demining assistance in areas that have witnessed fighting in addition to the need to provide shelter for IDPs and assist in their return home (Colombo Times, 2009). Direct U.S. non-food aid included more than $14.5 million for FY2006 and an estimated $9.4 million in FY2007. About half of this was aimed at supporting the peace process through democracy and governance programs. When funding for disaster relief, Food for Peace, and U.S. disbursements to the International Committee of the Red Cross and the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees are included, total U.S. humanitarian assistance to Sri Lanka exceeded $26 million in FY2007. Other U.S. aid to Sri Lanka has focused on increasing the country's economic competitiveness; creating and enhancing economic and social opportunities for disadvantaged groups; promoting human rights awareness and enforcement; providing psychological counseling to communities in the conflict zones; tsunami recovery efforts, and demining (the FY2006 total included a significantly boosted demining fund). From 2003 to 2005, USAID ran a two-year program intended to generate greater support for a negotiated peace settlement to end the long-

standing ethnic conflict. About three-quarters of the FY2007 aid was to be used to support democracy, economic growth, and humanitarian assistance in Sri Lanka. USAID works to "foster political reconciliation" and participates in "joint reconstruction programs [with the Colombo government] that foster economic reintegration as well as social reconciliation"(http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/60655.pdf). The administration's FY2008 request also included a modest, but unprecedented INCLE program that would use $350,000 in U.S. aid to support law enforcement reforms in Sri Lanka.

Security Relations

The United States and Sri Lanka have maintained friendly military-to-military and defense relations. According to the U.S. State Department, senior Sri Lankan military officers continue to strongly support U.S. strategic goals and programs, and Sri Lanka continues to grant blanket over flight and landing clearance to U.S. military aircraft, and routinely grants access to ports by U.S. vessels. Modestly funded U.S. military training and defense assistance programs have in recent years assisted in professionalizing the Sri Lankan military and provided the country with basic infantry supplies such as boots, helmets, radios, flack vests, and night vision goggles, along with maritime surveillance and interdiction equipment for the navy and communications and mobility equipment to improve the army's humanitarian and U.N. peacekeeping missions. The United States and Sri Lanka inked an Acquisition and Cross-Services Agreement in March 2007. The pact, which creates a framework for increased military interoperability, allows for the transfer and exchange of numerous logistics, support, and re-fueling services during joint operations or exercises. A U.S. official visiting Sri Lanka during that month called it a "very routine" and "fairly modest" barter arrangement that the United States has with 89 other countries, and he emphasized that it has no wider applications beyond logistics (US Embassy Colombo Press Release). In November 2007, the United States provided Sri Lanka with a radar-based maritime surveillance system and several advanced inflatable boats under Section 1206 of the National Defense Authorization. The Commander of the U.S. Pacific Command, Adm. Robert Willard, visited Sri Lanka in mid-January to meet with his naval counterparts there and review ongoing maritime cooperation. Adm. Willard noted for Sri Lankan officials that improvements in human rights protection could lead to enhanced U.S.-Sri Lanka cooperation.

Geopolitical Context

Some see the West's ability to pressure the Sri Lankan government as limited due to China's growing involvement in the country (Sujan Dutta, 2009). It has been reported that China's aid to Sri Lanka has increased dramatically since 2005. In the view of some analysts and observers, China is seeking to gain influence with the Sri Lankan government as part of a "string of pearls" naval strategy to develop port access in the northern reaches of the Indian Ocean (Michael Richardson, 2009). Indian defense planners are reportedly particularly concerned with Chinese efforts to develop ports in the region. India is home to some 60 million Tamil people and it has raised concerns over the treatment of Tamils in Sri Lanka. China is reportedly investing significantly in the development of a port in Hambantota, Sri Lanka on the country's southeastern coast. China is also reportedly helping to develop port facilities in Gwadar, Pakistan; Chittagong, Bangladesh; and Sittwe, Burma Asian News International, 2009). Colombo was also reportedly upset with

Western calls for a truce in the lead up to their defeat of the LTTE in May 2009. Rajapaksa stated "They are trying to preach to us about civilians. I tell them to go and see what they are doing in Iraq and Afghanistan" (Nicolas Revise, 2009).

Human Rights Concerns

Internally Displaced Persons

Large numbers of people were displaced, and many of them were wounded, during the closing phase of the civil war in 2009. These people were added to others who were already displaced from their homes as a result of previous fighting. Providing these people with basic needs until they can be returned to their homes will likely be a large challenge for the government and one with which the international community could help. As fighting in the Sri Lanka's East and North intensified in 2006 and throughout 2007, several hundred thousand civilians were displaced from their homes. The great majority of these are Tamils and Muslims. One report had intense March 2007 battles in Batticaloa creating about 95,000 new internally displaced persons (IDPs) in just one week. Another report had fighting between government forces and the rebels forcing more than 20,000 Sri Lankans to flee their homes in the latter months of 2007 (BBC News, 2007). International human rights groups urged all parties to the conflict to protect civilians and allow access by humanitarian aid agencies, which are often blocked from entering conflict zones (Amnesty International Press Release, 2007). The United Nations counts more than 300,000 people as having remained in a state of "protracted displacement" for two decades (UNHCR). Human rights abuses in Sri Lanka largely have been associated with ethnic conflict and civil war. In the summer of 2007, tens of thousands of Sri Lankans took to the streets of Colombo in antigovernment protests organized by the opposition UNP. The demonstrators called for new national elections, an end to rife corruption, and swift action against human rights violators Associated Press, 2007). Some analysts see occasional large-scale and apparently arbitrary Sri Lankan government detentions— including a December 2007 sweep in and near the capital during which more than 2,500 Tamils were rounded up and questioned for links to the LTTE—doing great damage to its credibility (B.Muralidhar Reddy, 2008). Non-governmental Sri Lankan organizations regularly document the scope of the country's humanitarian crisis (Center for Policy Alternatives, 2007).

International human rights groups have issued numerous reports echoing these concerns. On the issue of religious freedom in Sri Lanka, the State Department reported in September 2007 that, the constitution accords Buddhism the "foremost place," but Buddhism is not recognized as the state religion. The constitution also provides for the right of members of other faiths to freely practice their religion. While the Government publicly endorses this right, in practice there were problems in some areas. Such perceived problems included proposed anti-conversion laws, and legal restrictions and sporadic attacks on Christian churches. The U.S. government found no change in the status of respect for religious freedom in Sri Lanka in 2007. With regard to human trafficking, the State Department's latest annual report (issued in June 2007) determined that Colombo "does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking; however, it is making significant efforts to do so," and it placed Sri Lanka on the "Tier 2 Watch List" for its "failure to provide evidence of increasing efforts to address trafficking over the previous year, especially in its efforts to punish trafficking for involuntary servitude." During his August 2007

visit to Sri Lanka, a top U.N. humanitarian official noted that dozens of aid agency staff had been reportedly killed on the island since January 2006, and he identified Sri Lanka as one of the most dangerous countries in the world for humanitarian workers. Colombo condemned the remarks, calling them a contribution to forces devoted to discrediting the Sri Lankan government (BBC News, 2007). The worst such attack in recent years involved the August 2006 murder of 17 local aid workers employed by a French non-governmental organization operating near Trincomalee. Colombo vowed to pursue a full investigation of the massacre, but much suspicion fell upon government security forces themselves as being complicit, given that such an attack was seen to serve no tactical purpose for the Tigers. One year later, with no arrests made in the case and rights groups demanding swifter government action, a top Colombo official appeared to lay blame on the French NGO, itself, for sending its employees into a known combat zone (Janes Terrorism and Security Monitor, 2007). In August 2007, New York-based Human Rights Watch issued a sharp critique of Sri Lanka's worsening human rights situation, focusing particular attention on a "dramatic increase" in abuses by government forces since 2006 and on Colombo's alleged responsibility for "unlawful killings, enforced disappearances, and other serious human rights violations," most of them affecting members of the country's Tamil and Muslim minorities. The Sri Lankan government rejected most of the allegations as baseless and unsubstantiated, saying that its largely successful efforts to resolve issues such as disappearances and internal displacement had been ignored (Human Rights Watch, 2007). London based Amnesty International has called on the U.N. Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to address a growing number of reported human rights violations by all parties to the conflict, including failures to protect civilians, attacks on journalists, and a "persistent climate of impunity" that it said required systematic monitoring and urgent investigations (Amnesty International, 2007).

Child Abductions

Over the course of Sri Lanka's decades-long civil war, thousands of children have been abducted and forcefully recruited as soldiers. The U.N. Children's Fund had confirmed more than 6,400 child abductions in Sri Lanka's North and East provinces as of early 2007, the great majority of these perpetrated by the LTTE. The Karuna faction has come under especially harsh criticism for involvement in child abductions and forced recruitments. Elements of Sri Lankan military and police forces are accused of assisting in such abductions. Colombo has responded to criticisms from international human rights groups by flatly denying any government complicity or "willful blindness" toward forced recruitments (Human Rights Watch, 2007).

"Disappeared" Persons

As in many ethnic conflicts, Sri Lanka's civil war has led to the "disappearance" of many thousands of people. According to one report, more than 1,000 people are believed to have been "disappeared" during the year ending June 2007(Amnesty International, 2007).

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