

SRI LANKA, 1983-2009



During a twenty-five year civil war between the government and an insurgency group, gross human rights violations occurred on both sides and more than 70,000 were killed.

Where?

The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka is an island in the Indian Ocean located south-east of India. Roughly the size of West Virginia, the population is 20 million.

When?

In 1956, the Official Language Act mandated Sinhala as the sole official language of Sri Lanka, spoken by the Sinhalese people and by over 70 percent of Sri Lanka's population. This was a statement of independence from Britain and a clear sign of Sinhalese superiority over the Tamil. Many Tamil civil service workers were forced to resign because they could not meet the language requirement. Some Tamil desired a separate nation-state for themselves.

Ethnic tension exploded in July 1983, beginning a civil war between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a separatist group. Thirteen Sri Lankan soldiers were killed driving over a landmine, sparking riots across the country where Sinhalese crowds burned and destroyed Tamil property and attacked Tamils.

By the late 1990s, the LTTE occupied 70 percent of northern and eastern Tamil areas. By 2009, the LTTE was near defeat and fighting had shrunk to three-square miles of LTTE-controlled land. In May, the government formally declared an end to the decades-long civil war after the LTTE leader was killed.

How?

Two decades of fighting left hundreds of thousands of Tamils in internally displaced persons camps. There, they faced inadequate access to health care, education, and appropriate nutrition. The Sinhalese government militarized these civilian camps, failed to allow freedom of movement, limited the access of reporters and aid workers, and expelled many humanitarian aid agencies. Gender-based violence became epidemic, and thousands of undetonated land mines remain.

Although fighting has ceased, more than 70,000 people have died and hundreds of thousands are left internally displaced. Thousands more have the country.



The Aftermath

The economy suffered from the dual impact of the civil war and the subsequent cut in aid from foreign donors in their efforts to pressure the Sri Lankan government to address the humanitarian crisis. Both the government and LTTE are accused of human rights violations including abduction, conscription and use of child soldiers, indiscriminate shelling of civilian villages, the use of human shields, torture, and gender-based violence. With the end of the war, the government of Sri Lanka called for redevelopment of the nation. The final stages of the war left at least 300,000 people displaced. In 2010, nearly 215,000 Internally Displaced Persons had returned to their places of origin.

The United States was never a major player in the Sri Lankan civil war. The United States suspended military aid to the country in December 2007 due to Sri Lanka's human rights violations. The United States government also labeled the LTTE as a terrorist organization.