

Sri Lankan civil war nears end, conditions worsen for civilians

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One of Asia's longest running armed conflicts could soon become a guerilla campaign by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), as government forces close in on the Tiger's remaining strongholds in northern Sri Lanka.

While political and ethnic tensions still exist between Sri Lanka's majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils, civilian populations seem desperate for an end to the violence, which has spread into government-designated safe-zones leaving hundreds of thousands trapped.

"The UN calls on both sides to find an orderly and humane solution so that civilians – and children in particular – can be spared further bloodshed and loss of life due to disease and the fighting," said a UN statement, according to The Times of India.

The LTTE has countered UN and government accusations that they are preventing civilians from leaving and even firing upon those attempting to do so, stating that both parties have neglected their responsibilities in protecting the Sri Lankan people.

"We have clear indications that the LTTE has intensified forcible recruitment of civilians and that children as young as 14 years old are now being targeted," said United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) Chief Philippe Duamelle in a BBC News report.

Tamil accusations came via a pro-LTTE website.

"The UN's inability to fulfill its obligations to civilians is explicit. Yet they don't say who is preventing them from their responsibilities," said the Tamil Rehabilitation Organization (TRO) on TamilNet, according to BBC News.

Independent media sources have been denied access into the conflict zone, preventing the verification of claims by either side.

The culmination of a 25-year civil war, the recent government offensive cornered Tiger forces in a small section of the country's northeastern jungle after taking control of



Sri Lankan troops took control of Elephant Pass, Killinochchi and Mullaitivu during recent fighting.

three major cities formerly controlled by the LTTE.

Also taken over was the Sea Tigers division of the LTTE. Credited for destroying 35-50 percent of Sri Lankan Navy's coastal crafts, the Sea Tigers saw all of their ports destroyed and most high-ranking officers killed in Sri Lanka's latest offensive.

Despite success in cornering the LTTE and effectively eliminating their navy force, Sri Lankan troops have been unsuccessful in locating LTTE's air unit.

The Air Tigers give LTTE the distinction of being the only widely recognized terrorist group with an air force. Operating with five light aircraft, the Air Tigers first attacked a Sri Lankan Air Force base in 2007 and have carried out four subsequent attacks, most recently targeting oil tanks in north-western Sri Lanka during October, 2008.

Considered a terrorist organization by 32 countries, including the US, UK, European Union and India, for their use of child soldiers and suicide bombings, the LTTE has waged their civil war since 1983 and refuses

to lay down their arms until they have the "guarantee of living with freedom, dignity and sovereignty," according to BBC News.

The Black Tigers, created in 1987, are the LTTE's suicide squad and are credited as the first modern group to use suicide bombings as a tactic. Following their first attack on a Sri Lankan army base that killed 40, the Black Tigers have killed hundreds, including former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi.

While the violent tactics of the LTTE represent only a minority of young, disenfranchised Tamils, their struggle for an independent Tamil state has been shared by all Tamils since Sri Lanka gained independence from Britain in 1948. Since independence, the Tamils have struggled against political and ethnic oppression, being denied equal representation in the country's president-parliament system.

At their peak, the LTTE organization included a police force and supreme court, a human rights organization (Northeast Secretariat on Human Rights) and a needs assessment body (Planning and Development Secretariat), radio and TV stations, a boarder

patrol and a national bank.

The LTTE's Tsunami Task Force was credited for providing efficient and effective humanitarian support after a 2004 tsunami rocked the country. With an all female fighting force, the LTTE advocates equality for women against both male and social repression.

Founded in 1976 by Velupillai Prabhakaram, the LTTE originally worked in conjunction with other Tamil organizations as a part of the Eelam National Liberation Front (ENLF).

A rift between the LTTE and the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO) began during peace talks with India and the Sri Lankan government in the 1980's, after fighting between the ENLF and government troops forced waves of Tamil civilians to emigrate to India.

Despite not being included in the talks, the ENLF took India's view on the conflict and the LTTE broke away from the group. Shortly after, the LTTE wiped out the entire TELO and demanded that all other Tamil factions join their ranks.

An Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) was sent into Sri Lanka and the LTTE was soon fighting both the Indian and Sri Lankan governments. Afraid that their large Indian Tamil population would side with Sri Lankan Tamils, India refused to grant the group autonomy.

Sri Lankan Tamils descend from the Jaffna Kingdom, today the country's Jaffna peninsula and northeastern regions, and are believed to be inhabitants of the island since the 2nd Century BCE.

While international support for the Tamil's struggle for independence exists, cries for the LTTE to end the violence and help Tamil civilians have rang the loudest.

"(LTTE would) best serve the interest of the Tamils by immediately releasing all civilians (under its control) and laying down arms," said Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee to India Today, adding that the LTTE "has done much damage to the Tamil community."

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