

Introduction

Throughout history, Sri Lanka has been called the pearl of the Indian Ocean. But after two decades of civil war the pearl-shaped island is now known as a blood drop. Over 65,000 people have died, millions of dollars worth of property has been destroyed, the country's economy has suffered, and over 200,000 Tamils have fled their homeland. The 2002 ceasefire is now under threat from the dissolution of parliament, upcoming elections, opposition to the peace talks and growing religious tensions. The elections this month will be critical for the country's future.

New Zealand has shared a Commonwealth history with Sri Lanka and numbers of Sri Lankans now live in New Zealand. It is important for us to have an understanding of the conflict. Further, the Churches in Sri Lanka are asking for support from Christians around the world.



rebels (LTTE) without holding the defence portfolio.

It was in February 2002 that the Wickramasinghe government signed a ceasefire agreement with the LTTE to stop the civil war and seek a negotiated settlement to the ethnic conflict, under the scrutiny of Norwegian monitors. The ceasefire holds to this day. However, with parliament dissolved, the

Wickramasinghe government is effectively no longer in power and the Tamil forces say this undermines the ceasefire, as it does not know with whom to negotiate.

Some political parties (so-called patriotic parties) have opted for an extreme position of defeating the LTTE militarily, being opposed to any negotiated settlement and against the ceasefire. So the question now is whether a lasting solution can be found, or whether the wish of the Sinhala-Buddhist patriotic

movements (who claim that Sri Lanka is the only Buddhist country for the Sinhala speaking people) will plunge the country into war again.

New Zealand's Position

Bilateral relations between New Zealand and Sri Lanka are friendly, with contact occurring on a regular basis in Commonwealth and UN meetings. The 6000-strong Sri Lankan community here comprises both Tamils and Sinhalese.

Our exports to Sri Lanka have done well, with the trade balance continuing to be in New Zealand's favour. Exports, largely dairy products, such as milk powder, have increased spectacularly from NZ\$4.5 million in 1980 to NZ\$156 million in the year to June 2002. In 1983, the New Zealand Dairy Board established a joint venture company in Sri Lanka, New Zealand Milk Products Lanka. The Dairy Board (now Fonterra) has accounted for over 90 per cent of exports to Sri Lanka since the 1980s.

Religious Tensions – The Role of the Churches

From November 2003, extremists within the Sinhala-Buddhist movement began to attack the Christian churches in Sri Lanka. They argue that the churches, particularly independent Pentecostal movements, are converting Buddhists unethically by providing financial and other material benefits. They also accuse the churches of being the agents of foreign invasion and sympathisers of the LTTE.

While a few local and international Christian organisations offering social services are converting poor Buddhists and Hindus to Christianity this way, there has been no documentation of cases to show how widespread the problem is. It is felt that the Sinhala-Buddhist patriotic movements are attempting to sidetrack the attention of the country from a peaceful settlement of the ethnic conflict by creating a religious conflict.

In fact the churches have constantly called for the government and the LTTE to stop the war and enter into negotiations to settle the conflict. As the situation in the country has become critical, the churches, particularly the National Christian Council of Sri Lanka (NCC-SL), have appealed to their partner organisations like the World Council of Churches, Christian Conference of Asia, Christian World Service and other such organisations for help. Apart from some advocacy to bring the conflict to an end, they support the NCC-SL and various Non-Governmental Organisations with aid to assist the victims of war. With its member churches, NCC-SL does this through the 'Operation Good Samaritan' programme. (Continued overleaf)

Current Issues - Political Instability

The President of Sri Lanka, Chandrika Kumaratunga, has been in a power struggle with Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe, since his party took control of parliament in December 2001. (The two positions are elected separately). Mrs Kumaratunga dissolved Parliament on 7 February 2004 and called for a general election on 2 April 2004. It is the third election campaign in 4 years. The new elections give her party an opportunity to win back power, but many fear the destructive rivalry will continue if Mr Wickramasinghe's party maintains its parliamentary majority. The two leaders have been divided over who should control the crucial defence ministry, which the President took away from the Prime Minister last November when she declared a state of emergency - even though her party is in opposition. Mr Wickramasinghe has argued he cannot run the peace process with the Tamil Tiger

Sri Lanka - History

Sri Lanka was formerly known as Ceylon and was ruled by Monarchs until the time of British colonization in the early 19th century. Prior to the British, the Portuguese were the first European colonizers to capture the coastal belt in 1505; the Dutch arrived in 1645 and had control of the coastal land for 150 years. The British colonized the island from 1798 and in 1815 defeated the last kingdom, bringing the whole country under one administration.

Under British rule the minority Tamils were favoured. Apart from those who were known as Ceylon Tamils, Indian Tamils were brought to the island by the British to work in their plantations. After one-and-a-half centuries of British rule, the country was given independence in 1948. Since then the Sinhala majority have dominated the country under a Westminster-style parliamentary system. The minority Tamils have faced discrimination, especially since, in 1956, the Sinhala language was declared the state language. Tamils felt rejected and began to agitate for their rights, continuing through subsequent governments.

In 1972 Ceylon became a republic and the name of the country was changed to Sri Lanka, going back to its original name *Lanka*. The new constitution of 1972 declared Buddhism as the state religion and the responsibility for nurturing and safeguarding it was vested in the government. There was no provision for the Tamil language to be used as an official language. Apart from these changes, the government introduced a process for selecting students for the universities according to ethnic and district proportions. Many qualified Tamil youth, who believed education to be their most important asset, were thus deprived of a tertiary education, while less qualified Sinhala youth had the privilege of continuing to university.

The Tamils who lived in the Jaffna peninsula continued to raise their voice against the majority governments. Their democratic demonstrations were suppressed by the state through the police and armed forces.

It was in the mid-seventies that Tamil youth, who had lost faith in the democratic system, opted for an armed struggle to win rights for their people. According to Rohan Gunaratne's 'The Lost Revolution,' the Tamil youth were taken by the Indian intelligence wing and trained in guerrilla warfare to fight the Sri Lankan government. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was formed in 1976 and began the struggle as a hit-and-run operation, which developed into a full-scale civil war after 1983.

This was a crucial year when Tamil people living outside the northern and eastern provinces came under mob attack, led by Sinhala majority extremists. Similar attacks on Tamils had occurred in 1958 and in 1977, but in 1983 they were on a large, well-organised scale. This violence against the Tamils is recorded in history as Black July. As a result, the struggle became an international issue when Tamil people began to flow into Europe, Canada and Australia as refugees. After settling down in their countries of domicile, they began supporting the LTTE to continue the civil war, with the aim of establishing a separate land for Tamils known as Tamil Eelam.

The civil war continued for nearly two decades, during which time an Indian peace keeping force got involved. It was in 1987 President J.R. Jayawardene, in an attempt to resolve the ethnic conflict, arranged an Indo-Sri Lanka peace accord with the then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. The accord provided Indian forces as peacekeepers in Sri Lanka's north and east, but within a few months they were involved in a war with the LTTE. The force left in 1990 after heavy losses on its part, at the request of President Premadasa. Subsequently there was a short-lived truce between the LTTE and the Premadasa Government, but the LTTE went back to war in June that year.

-See the story of Malanee who lost her soldier husband in fighting against Tamil forces - a story looking at grassroots peace-building efforts – in the April 2004 CWS Update

Role of the Churches, cont.

The National Christian Council of Sri Lanka has issued a statement against religious violence and proposed legislation restricting religious freedoms.

"We are mindful that all Sri Lankans of goodwill wish to see this country as a place where people of different ethnicities, languages, religions and ideologies are respected and treated equally, feel safe and live together with mutual tolerance. We are also concerned that Sri Lanka must remain the country reputed for religious tolerance and diversity. The State and Police in particular, have a primary role to play in this regard. Any further delay in doing so could communicate a serious bias against a minority religion." (For a full copy of the statement see www.cws.org.nz/international/Sri Lanka.)

The Sri Lankan churches, being small in number, have a limited ability to effectively influence the government or the LTTE. These are the conditions under which the churches find themselves as they continue their ministry, but the question is, can they be content with their Operation Good Samaritan? As long as the causes of the conflict remain unresolved, the victimisation will continue. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, caring for the victim is only one part of dealing with the immediate need. As long as the robbers rob the travellers, the problem will remain. How many Good Samaritans will assist how many of the victims? Churches need to be more active, with their worldwide partners, to deal with the causes of conflict and injustice.