

# Tamil Eelam

## Principal protagonists



Sinhalese community; Government of Sri Lanka.



Tamil community; Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (Tamil Tigers, LTTE).



Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) 1987-90.

## Nature of conflict

Long-standing secessionist war. Linguistic and other Tamil civil rights are the underpinning issues.

Widespread human rights abuses by both sides reported.

88,000.

1 million IDPs at peak.

## Population/ethnic composition

Sri Lanka total: 20.2m. Sinhalese 73.8%, Sri Lankan Moors 7.2%, Indian Tamil 4.6%, Sri Lankan Tamil 3.9%.

## Territorial extent

Sri Lanka total: 65,610 km<sup>2</sup>.  
19,509 km<sup>2</sup> claimed as Tamil Eelam.

## Timeline

16 Feb 1796: Ceylon (Sri Lanka) comes under the control of the British East India Company.

4 Feb 1948: Sri Lanka independent from Britain.

1972: Tamil New Tigers founded.

1976: Independent Tamil Eelam proposed by Tamil political groups.

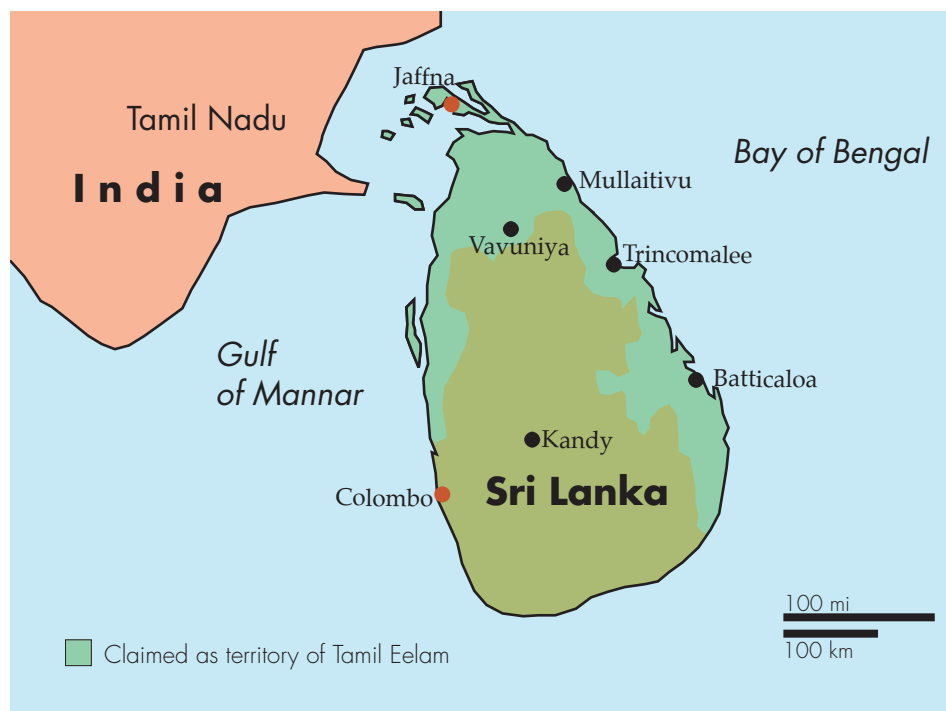
5 May 1976: TNT renamed Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

23 Jul 1983: 'Black July'. Outbreak of full-scale war.

18 May 2009: Tamil Tigers concede defeat at hands of Sri Lankan military.

## Current status

Resolved through military victory of Sri Lankan forces.



Ceylon – modern day Sri Lanka – has been the scene of conflict between the majority Sinhalese population (who are mostly Buddhist) and the mainly Hindu or Catholic Tamil minority since at least the 1920s. From 1983 until 2009 the island was witness to a vicious secessionist war between the Sri Lankan government and Tamils fighting for an independent homeland, Tamil Eelam, in the north and north-east of the island.

Both the Sinhalese and Tamil communities claim to have been the original settlers of the island. The basis of Tamil nationalist claims is the assertion that the British colonial authorities recognized the existence of more than one state on the island when they assumed control at the end of the 18th century. Since independence from Britain in 1948, Tamils have complained of discrimination in language use, educational opportunities and access to land. The Sinhalese-dominated government counters by arguing that it is redressing the alleged favouritism shown towards the Tamils by the British colonial government.

Although there is no state religion, the law in practice accords Buddhism a favoured position. It is, however, in the promotion of Sinhala as an official language that the main basis of Tamil discontent is to be found. The tipping point in the decline in the post-independence relationship between the Tamils and the Sinhalese was the passing of the 1956 Sinhala Only Act. This

replaced English as the country's official language with Sinhala. This had the effect not only of excluding many Tamil speakers from official positions, but also limited their educational opportunities, since many Tamils – having English as a second language – had benefited from English-language higher education. In 1970, the government banned the importation of Tamil language media and placed further practical restrictions on Tamils seeking education in India and Britain. In the same year, the official name of the country was changed from Ceylon to Sri Lanka – a Sinhalese name.

Sri Lankan Tamils have ethnic and kinship ties to Tamils on mainland India, notably in the Tamil Nadu region. In addition to Sri Lankan Tamils, there is a sizeable community of Tamils of Indian origin, the so-called Hill or Tea Tamils, who migrated to the island in the 19th century in order to work the plantations. In 1949, these 'Indian' Tamils were stripped of their Ceylonese citizenship, significantly reduc-

ing the electoral strength of the overall Tamil population. In 1962, with the agreement of India, the mass expulsion of some 600,000 of the Indian Tamil community was proposed. Around half this number were in the event deported, but the balance continued to be denied Sri Lankan citizenship until 2003. The expulsions of the Indian Tamil community, together with immigration by Sinhalese, meant that Tamils become a minority in many areas they considered part of their traditional homeland.

Tamil opposition initially focused on political means, the concept of an independent Tamil Eelam being first proposed by the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), a coalition of Tamil political parties, in 1976. Tamil nationalism developed a militant edge with the formation of Tamil New Tigers by Velupillai Prabhakaran in 1972; in 1976 his group was renamed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE, or Tamil Tigers).

From 31 May to 2 June 1981 anti-Tamil rioting in Jaffna saw the destruction of many Tamil properties as well as 95,000 mostly Tamil language volumes in the Jaffna Public Library. From this point onwards, the descent into sustained conflict was seen by many as inevitable. In July 1983 the LTTE launched its first major attack in the north of the country, killing 13 soldiers and triggering severe rioting in Colombo. Now called 'Black July' this month is generally regarded as marking the start of full-scale war. In a tactic that was to become their hallmark, the LTTE also launched their first suicide attack, killing 40 soldiers – the LTTE has, in fact launched more suicide attacks than any other insurgent group worldwide. Fighting rapidly spread to other parts of the country.

At their peak, the Tigers had effective control of up to half of the claimed territory of Tamil Eelam, mostly in the north, and including, for many years, the city of Jaffna. In the areas they controlled the LTTE established a number of civil structures, including police and courts.

Tamil politics were subject to splits and internecine conflict between the LTTE and other groups. In 2004 the LTTE suffered a major blow when the Tigers in the east of the island broke away under the leadership of Karuna Amman. The LTTE accused the Karuna faction of fighting with the government, while there are human rights accusations that Colombo turned a blind eye to Karuna faction abuses, including the recruitment of child soldiers. The LTTE itself was been accused of numerous excesses, including use of forced and child labour, use of anti-personal mines, kidnappings and hijackings, and the expropriation of food resources. Similarly well founded accusations of brutality were made against government forces.

India became increasingly involved in the conflict in the late 1980s, although its partiality (with an eye on potential Tamil discontent in India itself) was ambiguous. On 29 July 1987, under Indian auspices, a peace agreement was signed between the LTTE (and other groups) and the Sri

Lankan government. The deal included provision for the merger of mainly Tamil provinces into a single administration and for the deployment of an Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF). The initial results were encouraging, but clashes soon broke out between the LTTE and the IPKF, whose withdrawal on 24 March 1990 marked the end of the peace process, with the LTTE largely occupying those districts of the country vacated by the departing Indian troops. Indian opposition to the LTTE further hardened after a female LTTE suicide bomber assassinated former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991. Fighting continued throughout 1992 and 1993, in which year another suicide bomber killed Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa. Not until 1995 was the government able to retake the initiative, re-capturing Jaffna (after ten years of LTTE control) on 5 December 1995. Government offensives and LTTE counter-offences continued throughout the remainder of the 1990s. Towards the end of 2001, with both sides largely exhausted, substantive peace talks resumed (under Norwegian auspices) and a 'Permanent Ceasefire Agreement' was signed on 22 February 2002. This, however, proved to be neither a ceasefire nor permanent, and full-scale hostilities resumed in 2005. Intense fighting took place in the eastern Batticaloa region and the northern Vavuniya district in November 2006. A focus of the fighting was the town of Vaharai near Trincomalee, a key LTTE base since 1995, which fell in January 2007. In a further major offensive, government forces moved into LTTE controlled areas of north-west Sri Lanka.

Despite LTTE air and naval attacks, as well as fierce resistance on the ground (including the use of suicide attacks) government forces had broken the main Tamil lines by the end of 2007. In January 2008 the government formally pulled out of the now meaningless ceasefire agreement. Further advances took place throughout 2008, and by January 2009 the LTTE had abandoned its remaining positions on the Jaffna peninsula in order to make a last stand in the jungle around the town of Mullaitivu, which fell at the end of the month. Humanitarian concerns began to be voiced internationally for the civilians caught up in the fighting, including the 200,000 trapped on a stretch of coast in Vanni district, in the north-east of the island, that the government had declared a 'no-fire zone'. The LTTE fought to the bitter end, being forced into the no-fire zone in April as the government over-ran their last remaining positions. As the last LTTE resistance crumbled, a number of LTTE commanders attempted to fight their way out of Sri Lankan encirclement, including LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran, who was killed, while others committed suicide. On 17 May, with only a few square yards of territory remaining to them, the LTTE surrendered.