



## **Genocide Watch: Sri Lanka** **27 March 2012**

Ceylon gained independence on February 4, 1948. When a new constitution was adopted in 1972, the country changed its name to the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka. The majority of the Sri Lankan population belongs to the Sinhalese ethnicity, which is largely Buddhist, while Tamils, who are Hindus, represent the largest minority. In the 1980s ethnic tensions between Sinhalese and Tamils arose, because of Sinhalese discrimination against Tamils regarding jobs, education and politics. This discrimination resulted in disparities in income and development. Before independence, Tamils had received preferential treatment from colonial jobs, resulting in resentment by Sinhalese.

In 1983 the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE, better known as Tamil Tigers) attacked government troops for the first time. It marked the beginning of an enduring violent insurgency. The goal of the Tamil Tigers was establishment of an independent Tamil state in the northern and eastern region of Sri Lanka (see map). The Sri Lankan armed forces were supported by an Indian peacekeeping operation. In 2002 both sides agreed to a cease-fire, but the peace did not last. Violence erupted again in 2005. The conflict eventually came to an end in May 2009 when the Sri Lankan armed forces defeated the Tamil Tigers. The political branch associated with the Tamil Tigers, Tamil National Alliance, have now denounced their secessionist claims in favor of a federalist state.

The period from 1983 to 2009 is commonly referred to as the Sri Lankan civil war, during which approximately 100,000 people died according to estimates of the United Nations, and hundreds of thousands of people were internally displaced or fled to neighboring countries. Both parties to the conflict committed atrocities. The Tamil Tigers organized bloody attacks on police, military and civilian targets. Their tactics included ambushes and suicide bombers, and they were notorious for their use of child soldiers.

Sri Lankan troops committed war crimes during the final phase of the Tamil rebellion from January – May 2009. The Tamil Tigers aggravated the atrocities by using civilians as human shields. A recent report of an investigative panel of the United Nations confirmed that the Sri Lankan troops deliberately targeted civilians, hospitals and aid workers, arbitrarily executed prisoners, and committed mass rape, all contrary to the Geneva Conventions which have been ratified by Sri Lanka (read more).

From January – May 2009 at least 7,934 persons died, of which 550 were children younger than 10, but real figures probably amount to tens of thousands victims –most sources speak of approximately 40,000 casualties. No one has been held accountable. Instead, the Sri Lankan government has relied upon one of the typical forms of denial: substituting reconciliation efforts that do not address the crimes committed (read article on the denial of genocide by Gregory Stanton).

Persecution of Tamils by the Sinhalese government continues today. The Sri Lankan government continues to commit forced disappearances, arbitrary arrests and physical intimidation, including murder and torture, of Tamils and journalists. Because of these human rights abuses Human Rights Watch has called upon the British government not to deport Tamils to Sri Lanka (read more).

Sri Lanka has not signed the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. As long as there is no accountability for the massacres that occurred during the Sri Lankan civil war, there can be no sustainable peace among the ethnic communities, a failure confirmed by Desmond Tutu and Mary Robinson (read more). An international Commission of Inquiry should investigate the atrocities committed by both sides in the conflict, and the Sri Lankan government should arrest and try those who committed war crimes. However, it is unlikely that the current Sri Lankan government will make such a commitment.

Genocide Watch fully supports the resolution of the U.N. Human Rights Council and urges the Sri Lankan government to investigate the final months of the Sri Lankan civil war. Furthermore, Sri Lanka should immediately end any persecution of Tamils.

Because of the discrimination against Tamils, Sri Lanka is at Stage 5: Polarization.