

# Tami Sri Lanka in the Shadow of Civil War

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## **Abstract**

**E**very week I would see white charter buses roll by on the road near my office in Mulliyawalai, Mullaitivu District. The children from the nearby Tamil school would pedal out of the dust clouds in their white uniforms. The buses did not stop; they had no reason to. There was nothing going on in Mulliyawalai but business and rebuilding in the wake of nearly three decades of civil war. Instead, they continued on to the district capital and, from there, toward points further north: Killinochchi or Jaffna. They were full of Sinhalese passengers, the majority ethnic group in Sri Lanka, and until three years ago, they were a group that could not have safely come to this region.<sup>1</sup>

These outsiders have continued to come in droves since then to see the relics and ruined buildings left behind by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), or the Tamil Tigers to most. It was a phenomenon known in Sri Lanka as war tourism, and Mullaitivu was a prime destination. The district had been the LTTE's heartland until Sri Lanka's Sinhalese-dominated central government defeated them at the end of a spectacular and unprecedented assault ending in May 2009. Near the capital of the district, Mullaitivu town, was the lagoon where the Sri Lanka Army had gunned down the LTTE's supreme leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran. The Sri Lankan media televised the scene as soldiers paraded his corpse on their shoulders, his wide-open eyes and wounded head half-covered by a blue kerchief. His death marked the total defeat of a group that had been responsible for the deaths of thousands of people as well as the assassinations of several Sri Lankan and Indian government leaders. It had also come at the cost of 40,000 Tamil civilian lives during vicious shelling by government troops. Eyewitnesses and human rights groups claimed that the bombings deliberately targeted camps, safe zones, and hospitals. Mullaitivu District was a killing field.<sup>2</sup>

Along with the tourists, there is also a huge influx of Tamils who have come into the district. Most of them have arrived en masse as part of government resettlement

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programs. Between the start of the war in the 1980s and the end in 2009, nearly 400,000 Tamils had fled the northeast, scattering abroad to places such as India and Canada, or to government-run “welfare camps” outside of LTTE territory.<sup>3</sup>

For these returnees to Mullaitivu, the end of the war brought an end to physical dislocation but at the same time it left them in disarray. The LTTE had been a violent and deeply xenophobic movement. One scholar has described it as “Jim Jones’ Temple cult of Guyana in possession of a ‘navy’ and ‘air force,’ as well as (at its height) some 20,000 fanatical and armed zombie followers.” It not only killed thousands of non-Tamils, but preyed on Tamil communities as well, engaging in widespread extortion and conscription.<sup>4</sup> Yet the foundation of all that horror was a dream shared by many Tamil people—one of equality and self-determination. Prabhakaran’s message tapped into Tamil rage at decades of mistreatment by the Sinhalese-dominated central government. It was a longing for local control of development, prosperity, and empowerment. Since 2009, however, the government had expressed little interest in addressing these or in examining the complex legacy of the conflict.

Notably, in the wake of the conflict, deep geographical and ethnic divides remained between the Tamils of the northeast and the rest of the island. Mullaitivu had been cut off from the rest of the island throughout the war. To non-Tamils elsewhere on the island, it had been like the throne room of the Great and Terrible Oz. Few Sinhalese lived there and even fewer foreigners, although I was permitted to live there between February and August of 2012. Even then, three years after the end of the fighting, it remained extremely isolated, rural, and sparsely populated. When I told non-Tamils I worked in Mullaitivu, they looked at me with utter confusion. Sitting on the beachside under the awning of a luxury hotel in Colombo I told a group of Sinhalese friends that I had to head back to Mullaitivu tomorrow. “You mean the Maldives?” one of them asked me. Mullaitivu may as well have been a foreign country.

Because of this obscurity and its role in the fiery end of the LTTE, Mullaitivu District is now ground zero for a contest of memory between Tamils and non-Tamils that will play a central role in the emerging Sri Lanka.

For non-Tamils, thirty years of war had meant the near ruin of their country. Its victorious conclusion was, for them, a triumph of the human spirit and a unifying national struggle. For Tamils, I sensed that the end of the LTTE left them feeling disconnected, the spare parts of a larger apparatus, not fully Sri Lankan and certainly not victorious.

You could still feel the tug. The war continued to be achingly present in the national imagination. And in Mullaitivu it was still physically present in the mass of material left by the fighting.

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The Ministry of Defense assiduously curated those relics in a massive public relations campaign, fitting them into its own triumphalist narrative. They reconstructed iconic locations, designed complex memorials, and ran refreshment stands throughout the

region. The white buses' Sinhalese war tourists passed from attraction to attraction, viewing the district from behind glass. Most of the visitors to Mullaitivu arrived and departed the same day. It was a momentary dip into an exotic place—something done once, a pilgrimage for the faithful. The sites were to be clean and safe and, most importantly, segregated from the dross of the mostly Tamil world around them.

In June, I read that the president and his brother, the Defense Secretary, were planning to build a private luxury hotel, called Lagoon's Edge, for conflict tourists near Mullaitivu town. A few Tamil friends and I went out to see the construction site. We drove out to an isolated corner of the lagoon which had been choked with corpses in 2009. We stopped near a thin breaker of rocks that threaded over the brackish water. On a near shore, local road workers hammered at a massive girder. On the far side we could see a military checkpoint and a sign pointing to the nearby brigade headquarters. Little Tamil boys in dirty red t-shirts fished off the rocks for crabs.

My friend pointed to a tangle of barbed wire and crumbling concrete on the beach—this was the future site of the hotel. All around it would be the landscape of conflict, set pieces leftover from the war. In a number of places the land was still rolled up into trenchscape and pitted by shell blasts. Collapsed houses leaned into stands of toddy palms with exploded tops. All around the site of the future hotel was evident what Mullaitivu's other echoes had led you to clearly suspect: the war may have just ended but the peace had yet to begin.

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Less than half an hour from my office was one of the most famous sites: an LTTE bunker built to shelter Prabhakaran and other leaders. The armed forces had stormed and cleared it in the final days of the war. As a tourist destination it received over 3,000 visitors a day at that point, according to the Sri Lankan Defense Department.<sup>5</sup>

My Tamil friends decided they wanted to visit the bunker. "We should be allowed to see," my friend said. "It is our leader's house, our soldiers." They hired a van and with it, we too became war tourists.

Along the path to the bunker from the road, soldiers sold tickets to a motocross competition underneath a sign which explained the significance of the site in English and Sinhala. There was no Tamil translation. The bunker was beneath a building made to look like a small family home. In an incredible feat of engineering, the LTTE had excavated the sandy soil and built four basement levels with a network of offices, meeting halls, and storerooms. My friends quietly marveled. "Did you ever see a house like this before?" one kept asking, "No one in the world built a house like this. Only he had the self-confidence to build a house like this." Inside the house itself was empty, just bare concrete floors and freshly painted walls. In separate corners leaned two bullet-proof doors with twisted hinges.

We descended into the ground, reading the English and Sinhala placards on the wall. Children ran past us into the lower levels, laughing like it was Disneyland. My Tamil friends stayed quiet; they pointed to the walls, counted bullet holes, and guessed

at what might have happened here in the final assault. Examining the curled smoke on the walls, they decided that the government soldiers had cut the electricity first and whoever had been inside had burned candles. One of them pointed to a Tamil name scratched into a plaster wall, the name of a famous LTTE cadre.

Outside, we walked among the baggy teak leaves on the grounds. Soldiers watched us through the trees. Nearly everything had been stripped away, dismantled. While we poked through a shed full of metal scraps an old man in a white sarong came up to us and began speaking in Sinhala. Few Tamils I met in the northeast spoke Sinhala and few Sinhalese seemed to speak Tamil. We had no words to respond. We stared at him until he said, "Oh, Tamil." He turned and walked away.

We left the bunker in our van along a recently re-opened road. After twenty minutes, a line of wrecked cars, buses, and lorries appeared, stretching to the horizon. The metal had crumpled and turned to the color of old bananas. After the war had ended, when the district was empty, the Sri Lanka Army had gathered and catalogued all of the vehicles stalled on roads, stashed in thickets, and parked in LTTE facilities. My friend pointed to the pile and said something in Tamil. Another friend whispered, "Her father's three-wheeler is in there, the LTTE confiscated it from her family."

In the next few weeks, local Tamils came to the pile to claim their vehicles. I began to note the ruined hulks leaning in front yards—large rusting buses and family cars. To most eyes they were useless by this point; looters had stripped them of their engines and copper components. But the owners had an instinct to reclaim these objects, these things that had been stolen or cast off in flight. This discarded junk was theirs. It was the only thing among many lost things that could be physically retrieved from that time.

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Near the end of my stay in the country, a Tamil friend told me that he was not sure the fighting was over. We were standing at the same junction in Mulliyawalai where I had so often seen the white charter buses toddle along with enthusiastic tourists further north.

My friend had just arrived by overnight bus and his face was pale. Along the way a drunkard had stood up and began to shout in Tamil, "Prabhakaran is coming, LTTE will come again, Prabhakaran is coming." Two men on the bus had gotten on their cell phones and at the next stop the man had been arrested. Still shaken, my friend said that he was seriously thinking of moving to Singapore to take a job as a hotel clerk. "Still this ethnic conflict," he sighed. "Similarly, another friend would later tell me: "This is not a period, this is a comma."

Tamil frustration with continuing communal tension was palpable by that point. Government triumphalism paired with a failure to provide a balanced examination of the past kept uncertainty and tensions high. The legitimate demands of the LTTE for local control and ethnic rights remained unaddressed.

Nonetheless, I could not quite believe that this meant looming violence, and today

I am not sure that most Tamils do either. The LTTE is gone, scattered. My friend never left for Singapore. Instead he put out a bid for an ice factory in the district. His brother did the same. He has two children now and even a side-business selling sand for construction projects. Block by block, the people of the northeast have rebuilt. What else could they do?

Nevertheless, more unclear to me was that they seemed to be left with one question to answer: in the wake of all that darkness, under the clutter of all that history, how can one still be a Sri Lankan and Tamil?

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## Endnotes

- 1 Sri Lanka has three main ethnic groups: Sinhalese (73.8%), Tamil (8.5%), and Muslim (considered an ethnicity) (7.2%) Central Intelligence Agency, "CIA World Factbook; Sri Lanka," (accessed December 25, 2012) <<http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ce.html>>; John Clifford, ed. [For further information on the role of the Muslim ethnicity, see "Muslim Identities: an Introduction" in *The Sri Lanka Reader: History, Culture, and Politics* (Duke University Press, 2011), 409.]
- 2 United Nations, "Report of the Secretary General's Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka," April 12, 2011, (accessed December 25, 2012) [http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Sri\\_Lanka/POE\\_Report\\_Full.pdf](http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Sri_Lanka/POE_Report_Full.pdf),> 4.
- 3 "Operations Update September 2, 2011, (Accessed December 25, 2012) <<http://img.static.reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/MDRLK00208.pdf>,> 3,
- 4 Radu, Michael, "How to Kill Civilians in the Name of 'Human Rights': Lessons from Sri Lanka," E-Note, Foreign Policy Research Institute, [fpri.org](http://fpri.org), February 2009.
- 5 "First stop Prabhakaran's Bunker," Sunday Times, April 1, 2012, (accessed December 25, 2012) <[http://sundaytimes.lk/120401/Plus/plus\\_01.html](http://sundaytimes.lk/120401/Plus/plus_01.html)>.