

## SRI LANKA | disaster in a state of conflict

**beyond the headlines** | Sri Lanka is recovering from two decades of civil war and violence. Between 1983 and 2002 the conflict between the Sinhalese majority government and the separatist LTTE (the Tamil Tigers) claimed more than 64,000 lives. Over 200,000 Sri Lankan nationals fled the fighting to seek refuge in other nations. The political landscape is unstable following an uneasy truce in 2002.

The conflict is based in traditional ethnic tension between the Sinhalese majority population, who control governance and trade in most parts of the country, and the Tamil separatist minority, who make up around 20% of the population. Both sides of the conflict have a history of human rights abuses. The LTTE has been accused of kidnapping and coercing children into military service, political assassinations, and use of suicide bombers. The Sinhalese state has been accused of abuses that include beating and rape of imprisoned Tamil women.

Following the cease-fire, the Tamil movement gained control of parts of the north and east of the country, and has shown some willingness to enter into participation in a single-state system.

Before the tsunami hit, the country was undergoing a protracted peace negotiation process. Ethnic tensions continued to fester as the LTTE was accused of using the cease-fire as a time to rebuild its armies.

**after the tsunami** | Sri Lanka was the second hardest hit of the fourteen tsunami-affected nations. Nearly 50,000 people died after the wave hit the northeastern coast, wiping out communities in the stronghold of the Tamil separatist movement. In addition, the tourism industry was hit hard with the destruction of key transport corridors between Colombo and the southern beach resorts.

The distribution of aid to affected areas under Tamil control has been hampered by the issue of the Tamil separatists being designated a terrorist organisation by the UK, USA, Canada, Australia and India. Aid from private sources has been travelling across ethnic and religious lines, however, bringing basic supplies from Colombo to places such as Batticaloa in the northeast.

The Sri Lankan Government entered into discussions with the LTTE for a "joint mechanism" to distribute the \$3 billion in pledged aid and some

positive steps were taken in the weeks and months immediately following the tsunami disaster.

However, a humanitarian crisis has remained a possibility while the political environment continued to be so tense. The LTTE threatened to end the shaky three-year truce with the Government of Sri Lanka if an agreeable aid deal was not brokered. In response, non-Tamil political parties threatened to quit federal and local government bodies where their support was crucial for the governing Freedom Alliance coalition to retain power.

Meanwhile, over a million people in Sri Lanka remain homeless and destitute, after the wave swept away their shelter and livelihood. Very little of the promised foreign aid has made its way to those who depend on it to survive. New post-tsunami governance has made it harder for north-eastern seaside villages to return to their traditional way of life – an example of this is the new "100 metre rule", which states that nobody may live within 100 metres of the sea. Practically speaking, this rule means that people whose livelihood depends on fishing, are being told to relocate inland, often to unsustainable distances from the ocean.

**building justice and peace** | To date in Sri Lanka the humanitarian issues have taken a poor second seat to political machinations, continuing ethnic and religious tensions, and impractical government bureaucracy. Speaking from the minority Christian community, Anglican Bishop of Colombo, Duleep de Chickera, has advocated a different approach, calling for transparency and justice in the massive task of rehabilitation:

*It is time we acknowledged that external packages and agreements for a peace process, useful for the short term, are hopelessly inadequate as long term solutions. What we need is forgiveness and reconciliation through a change of heart and a commitment to a peace pilgrimage. The culture of interreligious suspicion and computation on the one hand and the subtle and cynical rejection of true religion as a force for transformation on the other has gone on for too long and just won't do.*

The situation in Sri Lanka demonstrates the increased vulnerability of people in conflict situations to natural disasters. In places where the cycles of violence and suspicion are so entrenched, it is not

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always the case that natural disasters bring people closer together.

How can we as Australians and Christians respond to the tsunami, and encourage our Government to do so, in ways that sustain peace-building in Sri Lanka and other situations of conflict?

It is important that the Australian Government work with the United Nations and other international organisations and governments to bring peaceful solutions to such protracted conflict situations. In times of crisis it is critical that international pressure is brought to bear on opposing parties so that programs for humanitarian aid, reconstruction and development, both short-term and long-term, are not hampered by political opportunism.

Australian Christians can help by supporting peacemaking activities in Sri Lanka, including those of the Sri Lankan Christian communities, through denominational and ecumenical organisations.



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**remembering our faith** | Peace-building and overcoming violence are basic to God's mission. Peace is a fundamental concept for Christians. Jesus Christ is our peace. Through Jesus Christ we have peace with other human beings, and peace with God. Both Ephesians 1:8-10 and Colossians 1:15-20 talk about how in Christ, God brings everything in the universe (everything in heaven and on earth) into unity and wholeness. Jesus calls us to love our enemies and demonstrated in his words and through his actions that such love requires compassionate and generous spirits.

*The World Council of Churches' Decade to Overcome Violence calls churches, ecumenical organisations, and all people of goodwill:*

- *to work together for peace, justice, and reconciliation at all levels - local, regional, and global*
- *to embrace creative approaches to peace building which are consistent with the spirit of the gospel*
- *to interact and collaborate with local communities, secular movements, and people of other faiths towards cultivating a culture of peace*
- *to empower people who are systematically oppressed by violence, and to act in solidarity with all struggling for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation*
- *to repent together for our complicity in violence, and to engage in theological reflection to overcome the spirit, logic, and practice of violence.*

*The destruction of a fishing village at Vellore Beach near Trincomalee on Sri Lanka's northeast coast*