



History of the Conflict in Sri Lanka

1948 – After 500 years of colonization by the Portuguese, Dutch, and British, Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was then named) became an independent nation.

1948/49 – The new government passed anti-Tamil legislation. The **Ceylon Citizenship Act** denied citizenship to Tamils of Indian origin (roughly 800,000 indentured laborers brought by the British from South India to work on rubber, tea and coffee estates when the majority Sinhalese refused to work on foreign-owned plantations). The Tamils had been looked down upon not only by the Sinhalese, but also by the minority indigenous Tamils (who had been overrepresented in the Christian elite of administrators and clerks that the British had developed to run the country). The **Ceylon Amendment Act** disenfranchised plantation Tamils, dropping the proportion of Tamils with voting power in the new legislature.

1950s – The country’s ethnic and religious conflicts escalated as competition for wealth and work intensified in the newly independent country. The Sinhalese, who felt resentful of their place under the British, wanted to reassert their culture, language, schools, and Buddhist religion.

1956 – **Sinhala Only Official Languages Act** passed, making Sinhalese the national language and effectively reserving the best jobs for the Sinhalese. This “Sinhala only” law was partly designed to address the imbalance of power between the majority Sinhalese and the English-speaking, Christian-educated elite. When the bill was introduced, Tamil political leaders were attacked in a four-day riot that left more than 100 Tamils dead. The law limited the education and work opportunities for many Tamil youth. As a result, the *Tamil Hindu* minority started to push for a federal system of government with greater autonomy in the mainly Tamil areas in the north and east.

1957 – **BC Pact** was signed to protect Tamil interests with a regional autonomy package. Brokered between Sinhala Prime Minister Bandaranayake and the Tamil leader Chelvanayakam, the pact was broken under pressure from Sinhalese ultra nationalist extremists (who were, themselves, encouraged by Buddhist fundamentalist clergy). In 1959 Bandaranayake (the “B” of the “BC Pact” was assassinated by a Buddhist monk.

1958 – Anti-Tamil riots broke out when Tamils were driven away from the South.

1971 – Worsening economic conditions set the stage for deep class divisions among the Sinhalese and an anti-government insurrection. Tens of thousands of educated, unemployed Sinhalese young adults had joined the JVP (People’s Liberation Army). In 1971, they took up arms against the government. The Sri Lankan army responded by killing over 25,000 youth. Rajani’s future husband, Dayapala, is arrested, tortured and sent to solitary confinement during this period.

1972 – Ceylon was officially renamed the Republic of Sri Lanka. The constitution formally made Buddhism the country’s primary religion. Tamil places at university were cut back.- Subsequent civil unrest resulted in a state of emergency in Tamil areas, with Sinhalese security forces imposing many discriminatory laws. As a result, a large number of militant Tamil groups emerged.

1975 – LTTE (the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), known as the Tamil Tigers, was formed to fight for an independent Tamil state. At the end of the 1970s, the government instituted the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act and under its authority thousands of Tamil youth were arrested.

1983 – The Tamil Tigers ambushed an army convoy killing 13. News of fallen Sinhalese soldiers set off an anti-Tamil rampage in Colombo and elsewhere. Mobs of Sinhalese viciously killed thousands of Tamils and

destroyed property in pogrom-like attacks. The army and elected officials did nothing to stop it. More than 2,500 people were killed. In the ensuing ethnic crisis, half a million Tamils left the country to seek refuge in India and elsewhere.

1986 – The government retaliated against the Tamil militants, who had been receiving arms and training from India. In April 1987 the government mounted Operation Liberation, the carpet bombing of the north and east part of the country. The government responded to criticism for countless cases of torture and disappearances by arguing that they had to defend themselves against the militants. The armed separatist Tigers emerged supreme among Tamil liberation movements by eliminating all other groups, violently when needed.

1987 – India and Sri Lanka signed an accord to bring an end to the conflict. An Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) was sent to the island to end the hostilities and supervise surrender of arms by the Tamil militants while diplomats attempted to negotiate a ceasefire. Instead, another conflict broke out, this time between the peacekeepers and the Tigers.

1987/89 – In the south of the country there was a second JVP insurrection. In what has been described as a three-year reign of terror, many left-wing activists were targeted by government killing squads and the JVP ultra-nationalist groups, leaving an estimated 60,000 dead or disappeared.

1987/88 – Rajani and a few close colleagues formed the **University Teachers for Human Rights (UTHR)** to document human rights violations by all sides in the conflict. They compiled their detailed witnessing of atrocities in their manuscript “The Broken Palmyra.”

September 21, 1989 – Rajani was gunned down, just months after the LTTE had entered into a deal with the Sri Lankan government and declared a ceasefire.

1990 – The Indian Peace Keeping Forces left. The ceasefire broke down and all-out war erupted between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers. Thousands of women and child soldiers were “recruited” by the LTTE, which fought 235,000 government forces to a stalemate. The Tigers emerged as one of the world’s most feared and effective paramilitary organizations.

2002 – A formal, but fragile ceasefire between the government and the Tamil Tigers was brokered by Norway.

2003 – Ongoing peace talks broke down.

2004 – The December tsunami interrupted the downward spiral of government-LTTE relations, but only temporarily.

2006 – In February 2006, to address the escalating violence, both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government reaffirmed their commitment to the 2002 ceasefire during talks in Geneva, but the LTTE pulled out of the second round of talks when there was a dispute over the safety of their transportation. In April 2006, the Sri Lankan government blamed the LTTE for a suicide bomber attack on its army headquarters in Colombo, which badly injured the head of the army. In return, the government launched a two-day air strike against the rebels. The LTTE has not admitted to carrying out the suicide bomber attack nor to assassinating Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgama last August, but have been blamed for both incidents. As of May 2006, nearly 64,000 people have been killed in Sri Lanka, and one million displaced. The United States has classified the LTTE as a terrorist group predominantly responsible for the violence, and sees the Sri Lankan government as a cooperative partner in the U.S. war against terrorism.

(Sources: National Film Board of Canada and BBC News)