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The Sri Lankan Civil War: From Conflict to Peace Building

By Viziru Mirela Adriana
University of Chicago Press, Sri Lanka

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It could not be settled even after several rounds of peace talks, international mediation with India and Norway as facilitators, and a very supportive international context. It is very important to note that failed and inconclusive mediation not only did not put an end to the war, but made it re-escalate to a level of terror unprecedented in the history of the country - the LTTE was labeled as a terrorist organization by 32 countries.

The present study conviction is that there is one factor in particular that can be considered a huge obstacle in the way of ethnic reconciliation and sustainable peace: the unaddressed ethnic issues which caused the war in the first place. The military victory over the LTTE left these issues still not brought up for solution, since state actors were oriented towards "solving the problem" and ending the war at all costs, and promoted it as a successful defeat of terrorism. This does not guarantee that their conflictive potential has been entirely spent.

Keywords: *civil war, conflict management, peace process, reconciliation*

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I. Introduction

Post colonial Sri Lanka revealed a land of tensions: two different cultures fighting for survival. As it was soon going to become evident thorough the Sinhalese and Tamil decisions and behavior, the colonial period in Sri Lanka had made the two groups conscious of their distinct identities. Introducing the European element in the island's body was perceived as a threat and eventually determined a reaction of protecting one's culture from being absorbed. The identity crisis that the Sinhalese and the Tamil communities experienced during the colonial period led to the need to establish national identities. In the process, their ethnical, linguistic and religious differences surfaced.

The 1981 census revealed the following ethnic Composition of the population: Sinhalese 74%, Sri Lanka Tamils 12.6%, Sri Lanka Moors 7.1%, Indian Tamils 5.6%, Malays 0.3%, Burghers 0.3%,Others 0.2%.[1]

Author : University of Chicago Press. e-mail: viziru.mirela@yahoo.com

[1] "Census of Population and Housing, Sri Lanka". Retrieved 07.03.2013 from http://www.statistics.gov.lk/

The Sinhalese speak Sinhalese, an Indo-European language which is not spoken anywhere else in the world. They claim Indo-Aryan origin and are in their big majority Buddhist (93%).

The Tamils speak Tamil language, a Dravidian language spoken by Tamils all over the world. They claim Dravidian origin and are mostly Hindu. We can distinguish two groups of Tamils living in Sri Lanka: Sri Lankan Tamils and Indian Tamils. The first group shares a long history with the Sinhalese and is located in the north and east parts of the island. About 80% of them follow Hinduism. Indian Tamils were brought by the British in the 19th century to work on plantations and are concentrated in the central part of Sri Lanka. 80% of them are Hindu. They consider themselves however separated by the Hindu caste system, the latter being seen as "low caste.[2]

Even though after the independence both Sinhala and Tamil leaders have interpreted and presented the written history in a very biased way, in order to emphasize the all time existence of two distinct groups, it seems that prior to the colonial period Sri Lankans were not so much aware of their different identities. There were wars in between them, but they "did not take the form of communal violence as seen after independence in 1948"[3], and ethnicity was not the dominant criteria: "Tamil speaking soldiers were crucial elements of the armies of the Sinhala kings, even acting as guards of the temple of the tooth in Polonnaruwa."[4]

The British colonization left a polarized society between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Especially in the fields of employment, a process of raising racial awareness began. Most probably in order to avoid any risk of giving too much power to the already majority Sinhalese, the British placed the Tamils in better administrative positions. Moreover, the Sinhalese were also deprived of the high educational facilities the missionaries established in the schools of the Jaffna peninsula. The good education that the Tamil people were provided with allowed them to get good jobs,

[2] Kearney, Robert, "Ethnic Conflict and the Tamil Separatist Movement in Sri Lanka" in *Asian Survey*, University of California Press, Vol. 25, No. 9, 1985, pp 898-917.

[3] Wanigasooriya, P.R., *The Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: a Clash of Civilizations*, Kansas, 1997, p 27, retrieved 07.03.2013 from http://www.dt ic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA331785

[4] Spencer, G.W., *The politics of plunder: the Cholas in eleventh century Ceylon*, JAS, 1976, vol. 2, pp 410-416, apud.

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which undoubtedly made the Sinhalese feel that the minority had too many privileges and was given too much power. Soon after the independency, Sinhalese nationalists would make a purpose out of rectifying the situation.[5]

The racial dimension that the Sinhalese and Tamil identities acquired in the 19th century was backed by the rise of racialist theories in Europe, which linked linguistics to origin. The similarity of Sinhalese with Sanskrit and north Indian languages created a connection between the Sinhalese people and the Aryan race. They started to develop anti-Tamil feelings.[6]

In the efforts of retrieving their ethnic heritage and reaffirm their position as majority, the Sinhalese political elite adopted a series of discriminative laws against Tamils. In 1949, Indian Tamils have been disfranchised, dropping the Tamil voting power in the Parliament from 33% to 20% and leaving them with an ineffective opposition.

In 1956 the "Sinhala Only Language Act" was adopted, which made Sinhalese the exclusive language of the country. This led to several riots which determined the Prime Minister to negotiate with the Tamil Federal Party and recognize Tamil as a minority language. This pact was contested by the Buddhist clergy, sustaining it was an act of betrayal. More riots followed in 1958.

The constitution of 1972 gave Buddhism a superior status, shaking even more the already fragile communal relationships.

Two years before the independence, in 1946, Tamils represented 33% of the Ceylon Civil Service, 40% of the Judicial Service and 31% of university students. The Sinhalese-dominated governments tried to "balance" these facts and began eliminating the Tamils from governmental positions. To the same purpose, the university admission system has also been modified. Entrance on merit was replaced by a weightage system, a clear discrimination against Tamils. Moreover, the Sinhalese government fueled the Tamil distrust by colonizing areas that the latter considered to be their historical homeland. Sinhalese resettlement was seen as a conspiracy to divide the Tamil ethnic concentration and delegitimize their claims. In response, the Sinhalese insisted on the ancient civilization of Anuradhapura region. They were also concerned about the proximity of the region to the Tamil Nadu, which they believed reinforced Sri Lanka Tamils; surprisingly enough, the Sinhalese had a complex of minority in majority.

In 1970, the government banned the import of Tamil films, books, magazines etc from Tamil Nadu, India, cutting the cultural ties between them and the Sri Lanka Tamils and stating it was part of a socialist project of encouraging local economy and self-sufficiency. However, most Tamils did not believe this and considered this measure an act against their cultural survival.[7][8]

Feeling, much as the Sinhalese, that the symbols of their ethnic group were threatened, Tamil people stood up to defend them in the political arena. In 1951, the Federalist Party pronounced itself for a federalist state with increased autonomy for the Tamil regions, declaring the following: "the Tamil-speaking people in Ceylon constitute a nation distinct from that of the Sinhalese in every fundamental test of nationhood, firstly that of a separate historical past in the island at least as ancient and as glorious as that of the Sinhalese, secondly by the fact of their being a linguistic entity entirely different from that of the Sinhalese, with an unsurpassed classical heritage and a modern development of language which makes Tamil fully adequate for all present day needs, and finally by reason of their territorial ambition of definite areas which constitute over one-third of this Island."[9] The keywords of the declaration seem to be "distinct", "separate" and "entirely different".

Many Sinhalese argued they were pushing for a separate state. Yet the demand came two decades later, as a result of the frustrations accumulated by the minority. Alienated by the change of the name of the island from "Ceylon" to a Sanskrit name – "Sri Lanka" and by a new constitution which did not meet their federalist demands, and angered by the special status of Buddhism and Sinhala language, many Tamil youngsters turned to arms.

In response, a "Prevention of Terrorism Act" was adopted, which is believed to have made legal many abuses and right violations against the rebels. Enabled for the first time in 1976, the document allowed police officers "to arrest any person, enter and search any premises, stop and search any individual or any vehicle, vessel, train or aircraft and seize any document or thing" without a warrant.[10] This law has been highly criticized. The International Commission of Jurists drew the attention to it, stating that "No legislation conferring even remotely comparable powers is in force in any other free democracy operating under the Rule of Law, however troubled it may be by politically-motivated

[5] Kearney, Robert, *Op.cit.*

[6] Tambiah, S.J., *Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992, apud.

[7] DeVotta,Neil, ., "Control Democracy,Institutional Decay, and the Quest for Eelam: Explaining Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka" in *Pacific Affairs*, University of British Columbia, Vol. 73, No. 1, 2000

[8] "Origins of the Sri Lankan Civil War", Retrieved 08.03.2013 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Origins_of_the_Sri_Lankan_civil_war

[9] Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kadchi (meaning Federal Party in Tamil Language), "The Case for a Federal Constitution for Ceylon: Resolutions Passed at the First National Convention of the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kadchi", Colombo, 1951, p.1, apud.

[10] Government of Sri Lanka, "Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions)", retrieved 12.03.2013 from http://www.lawnet.lk/section.php?file=http://www.lawnet.lk/docs/statutes/stats_1956_2006/indexs/Vol2/1979Y0V0C48A.html

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violence."[11] Even nowadays many international actors, like the Asian Human Rights Commission, ask for it to be repealed.

When a new constitution was adopted and Sinhala and Tamil became both "national languages", the question had become far more serious to be calmed down by this concession. Therefore, in 1976, TULF (Tamil United Liberation Front) asked officially for an independent Tamil state – "Eelam", supported by many Tamil groups, among which one called Tamil New Tigers (TNT), which would become the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1976. By 1985, this group would impose itself as the only Tamil movement representative after systematically eliminating all those in favor of a political solution.[12]

On the evening of July 23rd 1983, the LTTE ambushed a military patrol in Jaffna and massacred 13 soldiers. Not to draw the attention, the government decided to bury the soldiers in Colombo on the 24th, skipping the formal procedure of burying army members in their home villages. However, Sinhalese civilians who had found out about the ambush formed mobs and began attacking the Tamils, burning their cars and their properties. It was widely believed that the authorities were also involved, since the attackers had voter registration lists which helped them accurately identify the Tamil homes. Another famous example sustaining this theory would be the case of over thirty Tamil prisoners detained under the Prevention of Terrorism Act who were murdered by Sinhalese prisoners using knives. The controversy created around the event is based on the accusation of some survivors which claimed that the police officers allowed for it to happen, giving the keys to the Sinhalese, whereas the authorities claimed the keys had been stolen. Some Sinhalese tried to save lives by sheltering Tamils in their houses or in temples. But, despite the emergency curfew declared by the government on the evening of the 24th, violence continued and rapidly spread with ferocity all over the country. Tamils were being beaten and killed. Nowadays this event is referred to as "Black July".[13]
The war had begun.

II. Management of the Intercultural Conflict: Peace Negotiations and International Mediation

Edward Azar, a reference in the conflict resolution domain, developed the theory of protracted social conflict, introducing the following definition: "In brief, protracted social conflicts occur when communities are deprived of satisfaction of their basic needs on the basis of communal identity. However, the deprivation is the result of a complex causal chain involving the role of the state and the pattern of international linkages. Furthermore, initial conditions (colonial legacy, domestic historical setting, and the multi-communal nature of the society) play important roles in shaping the genesis of protracted social conflicts."[14]

Mediation is often used as intervention strategy in conflict management and resolution. "Mediation is a third party-assisted, or third party-initiated and led, communication between representatives of conflict parties, in order for them to directly talk to each other, discuss issues, reach an agreement and make decisions together."[15]

Protracted social conflicts can't easily be solved through mediation because "the process of protracted social conflict deforms and retards the effective operation of political institutions. It reinforces and strengthens pessimism throughout the society, demoralizes leaders and immobilizes the search for peaceful solutions. We have observed that societies undergoing protracted social conflict find it difficult to initiate the search for answers to their problems and grievances. As the protracted social conflict becomes part of the culture of the ravaged nation, it builds a sense of paralysis which affects the collective consciousness of the population. An environment of hopelessness permeates all strata of society, and a siege mentality develops which inhibits constructive negotiation and any resolution of society."[16]

As indicated by the facts presented so far, the Sri Lankan civil war is a protracted social conflict case as well and, given the complexity and the reproduction capacity of such conflicts, it couldn't be solved through mediation either.

To illustrate the difficulty of the international mediation process, we will focus on the role Norway played in the attempt to reach a peace accord.

Prior to Norway's involvement, India had also tried to mediate the conflict and was until 1987 very active in diplomatically approaching the matter through political meetings. In secret, it also supported the LTTE providing them with weapons and training. In 1987, the Indian Prime Minister and the Sri Lankan president signed the Indo-Lanka accord. The Sri Lankan government agreed to give the Tamils increased regional autonomy if they renounced to the secessionist

[11] Sieghart, Paul, *Sri Lanka: A Mounting Tragedy of Errors*, vol. II, International Commission of Jurists, March 1984, apud.
[12] Senanayake, Darini R., "Disfunctional Democracy and the Dirty War in Sri Lanka" in *Asia Pacific Issues*, East West Center, no 52, 2001
[13] "Black July", Retrieved 09.03.2013 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_July
[14] Azar, E., *The Management of Protracted Social Conflicts: Theory & Cases*, Aldershot, Dartmouth, 1990, p12, apud.
[15] Mirninamova, Natalia, *Mediation and Dialogue: Official and Unofficial Strands*, International Alert, 2009, p8, retrieved 10.03.2013 from http://www.initiativeforpeacebuilding.eu/pdf/Mediation_and_Dialogue_Official_and_Unofficial_Strands.pdf
[16] Azar, E., *Op. Cit.,* apud.

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claims. It also agreed to the presence of Indian military forces in the north-east of the island in order to enforce the agreement. However, the LTTE did not sign the agreement and refused to cede arms to the Indian Peace Keeping Forces, which led to an intense confrontation. Instead of calming the situation, the IPKF presence resulted in an escalation of violence and terrorism. Meanwhile, Sinhalese nationalists became more concerned of the prolonged Indian instance on Sri-Lankan soil. Facing Sinhalese accusations and rising hostility from the Tamil population, Indian troupes eventually had to withdraw. India put an end to its involvement in the conflict in 1991, when a suicide-attack planned by the LTTE and carried out by a Tamil woman assassinated the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi.[17]

So Norway's task was not an easy one by far. Taking into account the previous experience with India, someone with no political and economical interest in the region was considered more suitable for the task. India's failure opened the path for a smaller, more neutral and trustworthy country which would not be perceived as a treat by any of the parties of the conflict.

Norway accepted to play this role and became officially a mediator in 2000. Two years later, on the 22nd of February of 2002, it managed to get a Ceasefire Agreement signed by both parties. Six more rounds of talks between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE with Norway as a mediator followed in the next year and the situation looked promising. The LTTE chief negotiator – Anton Balasingham decided to drop in September 2002 the demand for a separate state and give a serious thought to the option of autonomy. By December 2002, both parties declared themselves interested in the concept of a federal solution.

Unfortunately, very soon the achievement would prove unsustainable, since both actors had different understandings of the federal solution. When the LTTE was not invited to the preparatory meeting for Japan's donor conference, therefore not recognized as an international player (the conference was held in the US, which had proscribed the LTTE as a terrorist organization), they reacted by withdrawing from the peace negotiations.

Mediation was temporarily suspended. Despite Norway's ulterior efforts to reinitiate the procedures towards reaching a peace accord, the mistrust between the two parties and the non-negotiability of their demands proved to be stronger.

In 2004, Sri Lanka was hit by a devastating tsunami, yet not even the natural catastrophe or Norway's efforts to seize the opportunity for cooperation were able to produce a constructive dialogue. On the contrary, both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government started rearming and the violence increased.

In 2006 they met at Geneva to discuss the implementation of the Ceasefire Agreement, which had been violated many times. The meeting resulted instead in mutual accusations and the refusal of LTTE representatives to take part in future rounds of talks.

However, Norway remained officially a mediator until 2009, even though it did not achieve significant performance in peace building and violence decrease. A reason was the death of Anton Balasinghan in December 2006, which severely altered the communication in between Norway's team and the LTTE.

Since April 2003, when the talks were suspended, all Norway's efforts failed to revive the peace process. Therefore, it can be considered the key moment of the mediation failure. Instead, after the window of opportunity of 2002 and the suspension of talks in 2003, parties adopted less negotiable positions and the conflict escalated.

One month after the temporary suspension of peace talks, the government sent the Norwegians a proposal that made minimal concessions in terms of administration of the LTTE controlled areas, offering no more than a North-East Development of Reconstruction Council. As it was to be expected, the LTTE refused it. The next proposals showed more steps back, getting even further from the federal solution parties had initially agreed upon. In response, the Tigers sent in November 2003 a proposal on the same matter which didn't mention once "federalism" and which was easily interpreted by the government as a reinforcement of their demand of a separate state in the north-east of the island. So, after a moment in which both sides showed interest in negotiating their strategic objectives during the mediation, the suspension of talks resulted in both parties shifting back.

Moreover, since 2004, violence increased and even though the Ceasefire Agreement was still in place, the LTTE attacks became more and more frequent. On the other side, we assist a revival of Sinhalese nationalism and critics of international mediation became even more radical.[18]

Given these facts, how plausible is international mediation in interethnic conflicts?

From Uyangoda's point of view, "failed and inconclusive attempts at resolving the conflict have not led to sustainable de-escalation but have instead reconstituted the conflict, redefining its parameters and making the possible paths to peace narrower. Peace negotiations have been occasions for the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE to discover new differences,

[17] Bouffard S., Carment D., "The Sri Lanka Peace Process: A Critical Review" in *Journal of South Asian Development*, 2006, pp 163-164

[18] Destrady S.; Johannes V., *The Consequences of Failed Mediation in Civil Wars: Assessing the Sri Lankan Case*, Giga, 2012, retrieved on 10.03.2013 from http://www.giga-hamburg.de/dl/download.php? d=/content/publikationen/pdf/wp202_destradi-vuellers.pdf

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explore new enmities and reinforce existing antagonisms."[19]

III. A Failing Peace Process? the Persistence of the Conflict and its Cost

As shown in the previous chapter, peace negotiations have failed in producing an agreement. Parties turned back to war even after several rounds of talks, international mediation and a natural disaster which affected all communities of the island.

What made the protracted conflict in Sri Lanka intractable? Why was it so hard to settle, resisting even the most serious attempts of resolution despite the supportive international context?

In his book entitled "Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: Changing Dynamics", Jayadeva Uyangoda approaches the parties' "incurable habit of returning to war". According to him, there has been a popular resistance to reaching a peace agreement due to "arousing ethnic passions" and "ethnic-emotional mobilization", very common in societies traumatized by violence acts such as mass ethnic killing. He draws several conclusions.

First is that, even though necessary, mediation is not sufficient as long as the parties are unwilling to compromise on the issue of power. Secondly, he makes a clear distinction between the concepts of "ethnic conflict" and "ethnic war". Whereas "ethnic conflict" is fought on a more flexible ground, which does not exclude the possibility of bargaining and compromising, the second has produced two "war machines" whose agendas exclude each other leaving no space for negotiation. As long as Tamil nationalism is keen to achieving a separate state and Sinhalese nationalism is committed to preserve a unitary one, the war cannot be ended through a political solution. The author's third conclusion is that negotiations between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE could deescalate the conflict only as long as they address the ethnic issue. A compromise would work only if openly supported by all ethnic communities and social and state reconstruction should be done respecting ethnic lines.

Finally, he states that stable peace in protracted ethnic conflicts can only be achieved through a "transformative process". A ceasefire agreement or even a peace agreement does not guarantee long lasting peace in this type of conflicts which are often "unending". A perfect peace cannot be achieved all of a sudden. It would be, therefore, unrealistic to expect a conflict of Sri Lankan civil war's dimensions and complexity to end unless conditions for permanent peace are created and efforts are made to work on the possible peace, even though imperfect. [20]

The unsuccessful conflict management of the Sri Lankan civil war had tragic consequences on the population. The persistence of conflict despite all peace attempts meant a terrible human loss and sacrifice for all ethnic communities living on the island. Although hard to estimate, we will try however to illustrate the cost and impact of an ethnic problem turned into a violent war.

According to a document published by the Ministry of Defense of Sri Lanka, the LTTE used children soldiers in front-line troops, being considered according to UNICEF "the world's worst perpetrator of child soldier recruitment". It is believed that, since 2001, more than 5000 children fought for the LTTE.

Not only children, but women as well died for the cause of the Tamil Tigers. It is estimated that 20 to 30% of the fighting cadre were women. More than 4000 have been killed and a significant number died in suicide attacks.

All LTTE recruits carried a cyanide capsule and had specific instructions to swallow it if captured. No disengagement was accepted and those who disagreed with the views of the leader – Prabhakaran were immediately suppressed.

The LTTE was suspected of collaborations with terrorist organizations, like al-Qaeda which seems to have been inspired by the LTTE, especially after the attacks on the United States of 11th September 2001. "The LTTE invented the modern suicide bomber and deployed it against political, military and civilian targets. Islamic groups copied the LTTE by carrying out similar suicide attacks." stated Glen Jenvey, specialist on international terrorism. For the methods adopted in the war, LTTE was also labeled by 32 countries (India, US, Malaysia, UK, European Union and Canada) as a terrorist organization under the allegation that they committed crimes against humanity. They attacked civilians in several occasions, targeting villages, trains, buses, mosques and temples. Besides civilian massacres, assassinations carried out by the Tigers include as well political personalities which had been perceived as opponents, like Rajeev Gandhi, Prime Minister of India (1991) and Ranasinghe Premadasa, president of Sri Lanka (1993). Tamils have also been victims of LTTE attacks if they tried to pursue a peaceful solution. One of the most frequently used tactics was suicide bombing.

Another tactic LTTE has been blamed for is "ethnic cleansing", that is removing by force the Sinhalese and the Muslims from the areas controlled by them.

In order to get resources and cover its financial needs, the Tigers got involved in a series of criminal

[19] Uyangoda, Jayadeva, *Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: Changing Dynamics*, East-West Center Washington, Washington D.C., 2007, p viii

[20] Uyangoda, Jayadeva, *Op. Cit.,* pp 45-47

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activities which includes sea piracy, human smuggling, passport forgery and drug trafficking. An important means to get money was extortion. Tamils living abroad were asked to send money and threatened that they and their relatives will suffer if they did not comply. Most of them were too afraid to refuse: "Ninety percent of people, even if they don't support the LTTE, they are scared. The killing doesn't just happen back home in Sri Lanka. It happens in Paris, in Canada. (…)It's everywhere, all over the world." (Tamil community activist, Toronto, January 2006).[21]

The government has also been accused of abuses and human rights violations. In 2011, United Nations published the "Report of the Secretary-General's Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka." The report stated that the military operations conducted by both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government took place "with flagrant disregard for the protection, rights, welfare and lives of civilians and failed to respect the norms of international law."

The report found credible several allegations related mostly with the final stage of the war. More precisely, "the Panel found credible allegations that comprise five core categories of potential serious violations committed by the Government of Sri Lanka". The first is "killing of civilians through widespread shelling". The Sri Lankan army used heavy weapons to shell No Fire Zones where it had previously advised civilians to go. The government is held responsible for most civilian deaths that occurred during the last months of the war. The second refers to "shelling of hospitals and other humanitarian objects" and points out to the fact that a lot of civilians who had come to the hospital to get treatment were either re-injured or killed through repeated governmental targeting. Third allegation accuses the Sri Lankan Government of "denial of humanitarian assistance", implying that the government has deliberately deprived civilians living in the conflict zones of food and medical supplies. Moreover, its actions are associated with "human rights violations suffered by victims and survivors of the conflict" and "human right violations outside the conflict zone." There are reasons to think that the Government has detained survivors in terrible conditions and has used torture against suspected LTTE members. There were found photos of naked women that might have been raped. Some suspects disappeared, along with the journalists criticizing those actions.[22]

As for the LTTE, the report found credible six allegations. The first one is "using civilians as a human buffer". Civilians were not allowed to leave the conflict zone and were used as human shields against the Sri Lankan Army. According to the experts, LTTE is also responsible for "killing civilians attempting to flee LTTE control" and for "using military equipment in the proximity of civilians". It seems that the Tigers increased dramatically the number of civilian deaths by shooting anyone trying to escape towards Government-controlled areas as well as by firing from among civilians. Surprisingly enough, the behavior of the LTTE towards Tamils shows that their so called "liberators" have often turned against them. The two next allegations concern the "forced recruitment of children" and "forced labor" and blame the cruel policy of using people of all ages against their will on the battlefield or for hard work like digging trenches. Last but not least, the LTTE is accused of "killing of civilians through suicide attacks" outside the conflict zone.[23]

Published 2 years after the end of the war (2009), the report found that the causes of the Sinhalese-Tamil conflict were still unaddressed. So are these allegations, considered by the post-war Sri Lankan government biased and fabricated.

"Strategic Foresight Group" also tried to approach the impact of the war and published the "Cost of Conflict in Sri Lanka", portraying a society dominated by human value erosion and low tolerance. According to the document, a large number of children lost their parents, have been exposed to severe brutality and stopped attending school. In 2003 only, 20 children died because of landmines. Women from the north and east part of the island have been repeatedly raped, harassed and deprived of security. About 50.000 women lost their husbands, becoming dependent on NGO and governmental support to make a living and raise their children, since they don't have incomes.[24]

The press has also pointed to the immense human cost of the Sinhalese-Tamil dispute. In an article published in 2009, The Economist counted "too many heroes", pointing out to the fact that a lot of civilians died during the final three months, when the LTTE were struggling on a stretch of beach in the country's northeast becoming smaller and smaller. Tens of thousands of people found themselves caught in between the Army and the Tigers and traumatized by assault from both sides. As a result, it became almost impossible to distinguish the combatants from the non-combatants, which led to a tremendous number of civilian being injured or killed through government shelling. Their lives were the cost of a speeded-up victory, and their families are still paying the price. [25]

[21] Sri Lankan Ministry of Defense, "The LTTE in Brief" , Retrieved 16.03.2013 from http://www.defence.lk/pps/LTTEinbrief.pdf

[22] United Nations, "Report of the Secretary-General's Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka", 31 March 2011, p 49-50, retrieved 11.03.2013 from http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Sri_Lanka/ POE_ Report_Full.pdf

[23] Ibidem, p 50-51

[24] Strategic Foresight Group, "Cost of Conflict in Sri Lanka", Retrieved 18.03.2013 from http://www.strategicforesight.com/ccinsrilanka.htm

[25] The Economist, "Too many heroes", 2009, Retrieved 19.03.2013 from http://www.economist.com/node/13794780

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Many statistics have been issued trying to estimate the cost of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict. Whereas the economic cost is easier to approximate and has been estimated at around 200 billion dollars[26], the human cost is harder to explain. Of course, figures have been presented counting the number of casualties. But what about the families of the soldiers who died on the battlefield? What about the women that have been raped and assaulted? What about the children that have witnessed such scenes?

Try as they may, all these reports and articles fail in making us understand people's pain and the uncountable tragic stories produced by a 26 years long culture of violence.

IV. The End of the War. Community Recovery and Social Reconstruction

In May 2009, the Sri Lankan president publicly announced victory over the LTTE through military defeat after 26 years of war,[27] marking the beginning of a new era: post-war reconciliation. But how is reconciliation reached after a terrible war?

In Sri Lanka, community recovery and social reconstruction were far from being an easy task when shadowed by about 70.000 to 100.000 deaths (depending on the source; some NGOs claim the number is much higher) accompanied by serious allegations[28]. Therefore truth and accountability needed to be delivered in order to enable trust.

Still, up to present, the Government has been accused of ignoring these accusations, thus making no progress to ensure justice for the victims of the war. Also, the police and the army were blamed for abuse of power, arbitrary arrests and use of torture over suspects in custody. The violence continued. People living on the north-east coast complained that the military forces, still present, interfere too much in their civilian life. Since the army is mostly Sinhalese, Tamils perceive their presence as occupational. Another emphasized problem is the situation of the internally displaced persons. Out of 300.000 people that had to leave their households, tens of thousands still don't benefit of permanent accommodation and many haven't returned to their homes because the regions are still mined. Another key aspect in post-war Sri Lanka is the international influence. Whereas many countries, like India, are pressuring the government demanding accountability, a new element emerged in the scenario - China, which has been investing a lot of money in the economical development of the country and has openly pronounced itself against a Human Rights Council resolution. Although the government set the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission, critics, e.g. Amnesty International, said it was not a serious attempt and that it failed in promoting post-war reconciliation because of its lack of impartiality and witness protection.[29][30]

Given these institutional flaws, hope seems to come from the civil society. A series of NGOs and projects are promoting ethnic diversity, acceptance and mutual understanding. The list includes, among others, Survivors Associated, which promotes ethnic co-existence as solution to the conflict, Peacebuilding and Development Institute, trying to improve inter-ethnic communication and Peace and Community Action, involved in conflict transformation. One particularly successful example would be Sri Lanka Unites-Youth Movement for Hope and Reconciliation which aims at encouraging reconciliation in schools and among community leaders. Their great merit is the liberal, cosmopolitan and loose approach to reconciliation. They promote reconciliation in terms of social interaction rather than political reform, unlike the government, which is focused on state-society reconciliation.[31] [32]

Despite growing civil involvement in the process of peace building, very recent press articles portray a post-war society which is still hunted by the past and healing its wounds. In an article on Sri Lanka published in December 2012, The Diplomat affirms that the "war is over but tensions run high" and describes violent events in the Northern Province, the part of the island where the last and more brutal stage of the war enfolded. It seems that a group of students from Jaffna University decided to celebrate Martyrs' Day on campus. This day honors every 27th of November the Tamils killed in the civil war. Whereas most Tamils lights lamps in their houses, a group of student decided to complete the ritual there, but were forbidden by security forces, who saw in the gesture an open statement of support towards the LTTE. "Tensions have been shimmering for a while and burst to the fore. (…) Why are we not allowed to moan our dead?" declared a student. [33]This proves how fragile the

[26] Asia Economic Institute, "Economic Impacts of Sri Lanka s Civil War", Retrieved 19.03.2013 from http://www.asiaecon.org/special_articles/read_sp/12556

[27] Voice of America, "Sri Lankan President Declares Military Defeat of Rebels", retrieved 20.03.2013 from http://www.voanews.com/content/a-13-2009-05-16-voa15-68734572/357880.html

[28] These allegations were exposed in the chapter "A failing peace process? The persistence of conflict and its cost"

[29] BBC News, "Post-war Sri Lanka", retrieved 20.03.2013 from http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11393458

[30] Human Rights Watch, "World Report 2013: Sri Lanka", retrieved 20.03.201 from http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2013/country-chapters/sri-lanka?page=3

[31] Insight on Conflict, "Sri Lanka: Peacebuilding Organizations", retrieved on 21.03.2013 from http://www.insightonconflict.org/conflicts/sri-lanka/peacebuilding-organisations/

[32] International Peace and Conflict, "Reconciliation in post-war Sri Lanka", retrieved on 21.03.2013 from http://www.internationalpeaceandconflict.org/profiles/blogs/reconciliation-in-post-war-sri-lanka-by-dr-oliver-walton?xg_source=activity#.UVVAMhd0wl8

[33] Ramachandran, S., "Sri Lanka: War is Over but Tensions Run High" in *The Diplomat*, retrieved on 21.03.2013 from http://thediplomat.com/2012/12/13/sri-lanka-war-is-over-but-tensions-run-high/2/

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situation in the north is, 4 years since the war has ended.

International Crisis Group has also released an interesting document in March 2012, pointing out that the North of the island was "rebuilding under the military." Paradoxically, the military, instead of protecting the people from any potential violence, is alienating them and is perceived as a threat. Overwhelmed by the presence of the Sinhalese soldiers, Tamils feel excluded from the process of reconstruction. Tamils feel also deprived of improvement in their lives despite the immense amount of money invested in the north since 2009 because the army has got involved in commercial and agricultural activities. When these activities were questioned, the army has easily adopted violence against protestors and is accused of severe punishments and disappearances. On top of that, Tamils are living under the impression that Sinhala and Buddhist culture is taking over the region with the purpose of banning theirs. The state has sponsored Sinhalese settling in the north and has built Buddhist monuments.[34] This recalls the exact same measure taken immediately after the independence, justifying Tamils' growing anger and disappointment. Is history repeating itself?

Or better yet, is the war really over? I personally received very interesting answers to this question. I went to Sri Lanka in November 2011 and spent two months teaching English as an intern at a college in Colombo. I tried to find out what people thought about the war, their perception and whether they thought it was all really over. I personally met with two sorts of reactions. Coincidently or not, the Sinhalese I asked were comfortable talking about the war and strongly believed the conflict was now behind Sri Lanka. I shared the apartment with a Sinhalese girl of 22 years old at the time. She had no problems in being interviewed by me on the matter. She told me that the war was definitely over, and she believed there were no ethnic tensions left what so ever because " people have learnt lessons the hard way." When I asked her if there was any good outcome of the war, she said no. I asked about the negative outcome and she replied that "it ate everything up, and that the biggest cost was people's lives." I wanted to get her opinion on the allegations brought by the United Nations' Report of the Secretary-General's Panel of Experts. She agreed with all of the accusations brought to the LTTE and with none of those regarding the government.

I decided to get more versions of the story. I asked my colleagues at work, all English teachers, if they agreed to talk to me about the war. They responded by silence. Since no one was looking at me, I asked again, assuming they didn't hear me. They all promised me that they would and then politely smiled. They never did. After a few days I reminded them about the promise. This time one of them closed the door and asked why I wanted to know about the war. I said I was trying to do a research paper for my master. One of them asked if their names were going to appear in the paper. "Of course", I replied, not realizing yet that they were afraid. Another teacher said that they shouldn't speak about the war and that I shouldn't ask these questions. He told me that it was not safe, especially as a foreigner, to try to get information about what had happened and that they were supposed to say it was something good and not further discuss it. The girls, encouraged by the fact that he had opened up to me, said many journalists had disappeared as of result of their attempts to dig into the past and they were glad I didn't bring it up with "the wrong people". They also encouraged me to ignore any invitation to give my personal opinion about the current situation or the president. They implied that even taxi drivers sometimes can deliberately make you talk about it and then turn you in. I didn't mention it again to them and was surprised by their fear to talk.

My supervisor was a Sinhalese woman. I mentioned this conversation to her and she said that our colleagues' attitude was understandable. She said they were all Tamils and that they had moved to Colombo from Jaffna (the Northern Province, the most affected area). She added that they might be afraid they will lose their jobs if they helped me with my research and that it is sometimes difficult for Tamils to get jobs. From her point of view, they had exaggerated and I had no reason to be scared. Reassured, I also mentioned the warning I was given – not to talk if asked by taxi drivers or anyone to give my opinion on the country's situation. She admitted that it did happen and people avoided saying in public how they really felt and what they thought. I was confused by her attitude. On the one hand, she was trying to convince me that people were free and everything was all right, so I shouldn't worry, on the other she was partially confirming the story of my Tamil colleagues. When I explained that this fact contradicted the principle of democratic freedom of speech, she said "then maybe it's me who doesn't know what real freedom is".

But undoubtedly, the highest peak of my experience in Colombo was during a class when two students started to fight on whether the war had ended. A student insisted the war wasn't over, another colleague contradicted him and it all escalated into a fight. I did not dare to ask to which ethnic group they belonged to.

The two months I spent in Sri Lanka gave me the impression that not everybody was living in the same country. Coincidently or not, the Sinhalese I had spoken

[34] International Crisis Group, "Sri Lanka's North II: Rebuilding under the Military", 16 March 2012, retrieved on 22.03.2013 from http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/220-sri-lankasnorth-ii-rebuilding-under-the-military.pdf

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to were content with how things had turned out, whereas Tamils were more reserved in making any comments. At the moment, since I had heard parallel narratives about the war and the current situation, I did not know whom to believe. But soon I realized their versions of the story did not exclude each other. People had lived different experiences. Therefore they had different points of view.

V. Conclusions

The Sri Lankan civil war is an example-case of the dimensions intercultural conflicts can acquire, if the root causes are ignored and the management of the conflict is focused on "solving the problem" instead of addressing the issues that have generated the conflict in the first place. Protracted conflicts are not easily solved through mediation and this is the case as well. The military victory of the Sinhalese Army over the Tamil Tigers was achieved with an immense human cost and has left behind a scarred society. Even though the war has officially ended in 2009, it will take many years to heal, if ever.

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