

## Rights of Sri Lankan Tamils; Do they have a future?



Courtesy of [www.asianews.it](http://www.asianews.it)



Courtesy of [www.warwithoutwitness.com](http://www.warwithoutwitness.com)

### Sri Lanka: Country profile

**Official name:** Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka

**Area:** 65,610 sq km (25,299 square miles)

**Population:** 19.7 million [1]

**Capital City:** Colombo (population 2.2m)

**People:** 74% Sinhalese, 18% Tamil, 7% Muslim, 1% other [1]

**Languages:** Sinhalese, Tamil, English

**Religion(s):** Buddhist (70%); Hindu (15%); Muslim (7%);

Christianity (8%) [1]

**Media freedom index (ranked out of 173, best is 1):** 165 [12]

**Failed state index-2009 (ranked out of 177):** 22 (Somalia is ranked 1) [14]

*"Wherever minorities are being persecuted we must raise our voices to protest. According to reliable sources, the Tamil people are being disenfranchised and victimized by the Sri Lanka authorities. This injustice must stop. The Tamil people must be allowed to live in peace and flourish in their homeland."*

*- Elie Wiesel (holocaust survivor, Nobel peace prize winner-1986, author), June 30th 2009*

### Historical Time line:

**1948:** Sri Lanka gained independence from Britain [2]. Tamils of Indian origin were **disenfranchised** [15]. Systematic **uprooting** of Tamils from their traditional homeland [15].

**1956:** "**Sinhala only**" act overnight replaced English with "Sinhala" (the language of majority Sinhalese) as the official language. Tamils were denied equal status as Citizens [2],[4] [15].

**1960-'70:** Non-violent political and youth movements demanding equal rights were met with sheer force and brutality by the Sri Lankan Government [2].

**1970-'80:** Changes to the constitution further alienated Tamils. Resolution for independence brought in- "**Vaddukodai Resolution**" [15]. Armed groups in North and East emerged (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam-LTTE) [2].

**1981:** Burning of Jaffna Library, the academic and cultural center of Tamils [2].

**1983:** State sponsored pogrom, 1 "**Black July**" [2], beginning of full fledged civil war [2].

**2002:** Truce facilitated by Norway, talks failed to produce any political solutions [2].

**2005:** Change of executive presidency and renewal of war in 2006.

**2007:** Sri Lankan government withdrew from ceasefire unilaterally, war intensified in North and East.

**2009:** End of war, beginning of...?.

### Present situation:

The war against the LTTE turned out to be war against the Tamil minority. It has been estimated that almost one hundred thousand civilians died during 26 years of civil war, 99% of them are Tamils [13],[16]. According to UN sources, the death toll of innocent Tamils during the last battle (Jan 09 to May 09) may have exceeded 20,000, primarily due to indiscriminate aerial bombing and shelling in areas declared as safe-zones by the Sri Lankan Government [6],[13],[16]. There is credible evidence of the use of banned cluster bombs and chemical munitions. A team of French doctors stationed in a field hospital treating the wounded civilians found that people had burn injuries due to white phosphorous (AFP) [1],[16].

Nearly 300,000 Tamil people were driven from their native places and forcefully detained in military controlled detention centers surrounded by barbed wire, called "Welfare Villages," where families are separated and held in separate camps (**Amnesty International called this the largest open prison in the world**) [10]. Access to local and international humanitarian aid organizations, including the ICRC, is very restricted, and no media is allowed except state media [7],[10]. A news team from UK Channel 4 news reported the shortage of food and water, unattended dead bodies, separation of women from their families, and sexual abuse [7]. Soon after the report was released the team was arrested and deported from Sri Lanka on the instruction of defense secretary [3].

Lack of medical care, food, and water has escalated the death rate in the detention centers due to wounds sustained during the war [7]. There are no official, transparent and publicly available lists of the people detained in the centers and the government publishes conflicting numbers each time. In addition, no humanitarian organization is allowed to monitor or observe the screening process for LTTE cadres. This fuels the unconfirmed reports of disappearances of

young men and women from the camps with the aid of the government sponsored paramilitary groups [7].

Table 1: Vanni IDPs since 27 October, 2008 till 7 August, 2009- UN OCHA [9].

District/Location	Families	Individuals
Vavuniya-Camps	77,340	246,408
Vavuniya-Hospital	-	2,036
Jaffna-Camps	3,755	10,861
Mannar-Camps	541	1,453
Mannar-Hospital	-	524
Trincomalee-Camp	2,245	6,816
Trincomalee-Hospital	-	2
Other Hospitals	-	141
Total	85,881	268,241

Though there were many brutal killings, abuses and other serious human rights violations, only a few have managed to surface in the media and international spotlight [1],[5],[16]. To name a few, the massacre of 17 (Tamil) aid workers with a French NGO Action against Hunger in 2006 and the disappearance of Rev. Nihal Jim Brown. Unfortunately, journalists (Sinhala and Tamil) who gave voice against the atrocities committed by the government forces were killed or forced to flee the country [1],[12]. In addition, Tamil parliamentarians who gave voice against the human rights violations have also been killed [1].

A Presidential Commission of Inquiry to look into serious violations of Human Rights occurring since August 1, 2005, was dismissed by the President of Sri Lanka in June 2009 with no perpetrators being brought to justice. It should be noted this discontinuation came at time the government and military are seriously accused of human rights violations [1],[3],[5],[6],[8],[12]. The human rights violation against the Tamils extends beyond enforced disappearance and extra judicial killings [1],[3],[5],[6],[13].

The government appropriated large amounts of fertile land in the North and East declaring them "High Security Zones" and forcing the Tamil civilians to become IDPs (Internally Displaced People); restricted and banned fishing in the North and East destroying the livelihood of tens of thousands of people, and held thousands of Tamil political prisoners without filing a case for years [1].

Despite International pressure, the Sri Lankan government blindly denies any accusation made by human rights organizations [8],[10],[13],[16]. Though western nations call for investigations of the Sri Lankan government for war crimes and human rights violations, the UN stands powerless in front of the powerful neighboring nations including Iran who supported the government for whom Sri Lanka is a strategic point in the Indian Ocean [5],[6]. This clearly demonstrates the need for global action and awareness to prevent these atrocities from continuing and protect the rights of the Tamils before it is too late.

What can I do?

### 1. Support the House resolution on addressing the human rights and humanitarian needs of the IDPs

Request your Congressman/Women to support this bill. [www.ahrcl.org/country/Bill711.pdf](http://www.ahrcl.org/country/Bill711.pdf)

### 2. Take the issue to your elected representative

Stress the need to provide urgent humanitarian assistance, protect innocent civilians from enforced disappearances and extra judicial killings, and resettle people in their native places.

<http://www.house.gov/house/MemberWWW.shtml>

### 3. Join local and International groups for human rights and bring awareness within civic groups

You can subscribe to our newsletters and alerts by signing up in [www.ahrcl.org](http://www.ahrcl.org)

#### Resources:

[1] [2008 Human Rights Report: Sri Lanka, US Department of State](#)

[2] BBC: Sri Lanka+Tamil Tigers: Evolution of the Ethnic War-Video: [1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6]

[3] [Correspondent expelled from Sri Lanka, Channel 4 News, UK](#)

[4] [Discrimination in education in Sri Lanka in the past 50 years, Professor C Jeyaratnam Eliezer](#)

[5] [Execution video: is this evidence of 'war crimes' in Sri Lanka?, Channel 4 News, UK](#)

[6] [Grand Jury Indictment for Genocide, Tamils Against Genocide, 2009](#)

[7] [Grim scenes at Sri Lankan camps, Channel 4 News, UK](#)

[8] [High-Resolution Satellite Imagery and the Conflict in Sri Lanka](#)

[9] [Map of Vanni IDP Camps and Hospitals Information, UN OCHA](#)

[10] [Sri Lanka: Free Civilians From Detention Camps, Human Rights Watch](#)

[11] [Sri Lanka: Country profile, CARE](#)

[12] [Sri Lanka: Reliable Accounts, Transcend Media Service](#)

[13] [Sri Lanka, Genocide Intervention Network](#)

[14] [The Failed States Index 2009, Foreign Policy](#)

[15] [Vaddukodai Resolution, 1976](#)

[16] [www.warwithoutwitness.com](http://www.warwithoutwitness.com)

<sup>1</sup> "I am not worried about the opinion of the Jaffna people...now we cannot think of them, not about their lives or their opinion...the more you put pressure in the north, the happier the Sinhala people will be here... Really if I starve the Tamils out, the Sinhala people will be happy."  
- Former President J.R.Jayawardene, Daily Telegraph (UK) July 1983 (Jaffna people refers Tamils of Sri Lanka)

*The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by the bad people but the silence over that by the good people.*

*-Martin Luther King, Jr.*

#### Contact us:

Address: AHR&CL, PO BOX # 797273, Dallas, TX 75379 - 7273

Phone: (214) 377 1372, Fax: (972) 712 4188

Email: [president@ahrcl.org](mailto:president@ahrcl.org), Website: [www.ahrcl.org](http://www.ahrcl.org)

