



www.theabodetrust.com

'The Situation'

Wherever you go in Sri Lanka – well off the beaten tourist tracks anyway – you will find local people refer to 'The Situation', meaning the civil war, as if it is something which is happening elsewhere. But as well as it being a detached phenomenon, and after 26 years this is not unexpected, it is also used as the reason why many things do not happen or why some are unwilling to do things.

I have heard 'The Situation' invoked for many reasons, from it being why there are very few western tourists - and given the UK Foreign Office's advice not to travel to Sri Lanka this is understandable - to why there are power cuts and few road signs, the high cost of fertiliser, censorship and a reluctance to name the civil war for what it is.

Recently, Sri Lanka's government has declared victory in its war with Tamil Tigers. TV stations aired footage of a body said to be that of rebel leader Velupillai Prabhakaran. So what has it been all about? The information below is taken from the BBC website and may be of interest.

Who are the Tamil Tigers?

The rebels started fighting in the 1970s for a separate state - Eelam - for Tamils in Sri Lanka's north and east. They argued that Tamils had been discriminated against by successive majority Sinhalese governments. The rebels have been among the most disciplined and organised guerrilla groups in the world in recent times. They had their own "capital", ground forces, navy and even a rudimentary air force. They honed the tactic of suicide bombings to deadly effect and are a proscribed terrorist group in many countries.

Are the rebels finished?

The government says the rebels have been crushed, following months of heavy fighting in the last rebel stronghold in the north-east. For the first time in decades, the army now controls the whole of Sri Lanka's territory, and President Mahinda Rajapaksa has formally declared the country "liberated". Now the rebel movement is over as a conventional military force and its leadership has been decimated.

However, correspondents say there are still likely to be scattered guerrilla-style attacks - although it is not clear how many rebels may have escaped from the conflict zone in recent months. The Tamil Tigers have also controlled huge financial and logistical resources, and are supported by many expatriate Tamils around the world.

What is the human and economic cost of the war?

The conflict has now killed well in excess of 70,000 people, displaced tens of thousands more and held back the island's growth and economic development. The death toll of civilians in 2009 overall could run into the thousands, the UN and aid agencies say. Both the military and the Tigers have been regularly accused of gross abuses of human rights by organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Sri Lanka's defence expenditure has soared in recent years - to 166.4bn rupees (\$1.48bn) in 2008. This amounts to about 5% of GDP, nearly double that spent by India and Pakistan.

How were the rebels defeated?

Analysts say the main factor is increased defence spending since President Rajapaksa came to power in 2005. The military offensive was stepped up at the beginning of 2008 after the government formally abandoned a ceasefire which critics say was largely being ignored on the ground. There were also crackdowns across Europe, Canada and the US on overseas fundraising for the rebels, who faced renewed pressure following the 11 September 2001 attacks on the US. Joint patrols by the Sri Lankan and Indian navies drastically reduced arms supplies to the Tigers.

What about civilians?

Both sides in the conflict are accused of repeatedly ignoring the plight of tens of thousands of people trapped by the fighting. The rebels denied using civilians as "human shields", while the army rejected accusations it was guilty of indiscriminate shelling. Several hundred thousand displaced people are now housed in government-controlled camps. Aid agencies worry the government may not have the resources to look after them.

What now?

Much now depends on what the Sri Lankan authorities choose to do next. The manner in which they pursued their military victory - ignoring international calls for restraint - may have radicalised a new generation of Tamils, both on the island and in the diaspora in Europe, Asia and North America. There will be international pressure on Sri Lanka to give some measure of political autonomy for Tamil civilians quickly, to try to ensure that the conflict does not reignite with more violence in the future. In his victory speech, President Rajapakse urged an end to ethnic and religious divisions and promised a "homegrown solution to this conflict".

General background

Sri Lanka is located about 31km (18.5 miles) off the southern coast of India. For much of the last 20 years it has suffered fighting between the armed forces of the predominantly Sinhalese government and Tamil Tiger rebels who want an independent homeland in the north and east.

Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic country, with a population of 18m people. It is an ancient centre of Buddhism. It also has a significant number of Hindus, Christians and Muslims and smaller communities such as the Burghers and the Veddas. The civil war has killed about 70,000 people, displaced hundreds of thousands and held back the island's growth and economic development.

The origins of the current violence go back to the island's independence from Britain in 1948. Although the years immediately following the end of colonial rule were largely peaceful, from the outset there were

tensions between the majority Sinhalese community - who are mostly Buddhist - and the Tamil community who are mostly either Hindu or Roman Catholic. The communities speak different languages - Sinhala and Tamil - and both claim their ancestors were original settlers on the island. 1

While the island's population has what is arguably the highest per capita standard of living in South Asia, in the years after independence the Tamil community complained of discrimination when it came to getting jobs in the civil service or winning places at universities. The government argued it was redressing the imbalance from colonial times when Sinhalas accused the British of giving preferential treatment to Tamils.



The run-up to war

Resentment over perceived discrimination was cited by the Tamil Tiger leader, Prabhakaran, as the motivating factor behind his decision to form the Tamil New Tigers militia in 1972. In 1976, this body changed its name to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) - more commonly known as the Tamil Tigers.

The cause of "Eelam" - a Tamil homeland in the north and east - has been invoked to justify countless suicide bombings by the Tigers on civilian and military targets. One of the first such attacks was ordered by Prabhakaran in 1983, when the Tamil Tigers attacked an army patrol in the north of the country. That in turn led to anti-Tamil riots in which an estimated 600 people were killed and thousands displaced.

Pattern emerges

From that moment onwards, it can be argued that the Sri Lankan conflict followed a pattern. Throughout the 1980s, 1990s and for parts of this decade, the country has witnessed a combination of Tamil Tiger suicide attacks on the one hand and repeated military skirmishes in the north and east on the other. The violence over this time has been interspersed by various international efforts to negotiate a peace settlement.

The country was dealt a further blow when the 2004 Asian Tsunami killed more than 30,000 people. But the conflict escalated sharply when in 2008 the government formally pulled out of a ceasefire brokered by Norway six years earlier. Fighting had been going on despite the truce and each side accused the other of breaching the ceasefire.

Both the military and the Tamil Tigers have been frequently accused of gross violations of human rights by international rights groups. Civilians have been routinely murdered and the situation has also been complicated by the existence of shadowy paramilitary groups.

However, unless common ground can be found between the government's oft-stated position that it is

only prepared to allow more autonomy for the north and east and the Tiger's desire for full-scale independence for these areas, a lasting solution to this most intractable of disputes may be as far away as ever.