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Tamils

Profile

There are two groups of Tamils numbering in total some 3.7 million: 'Sri Lankan Tamils' (also known as 'Ceylon' or 'Jaffna' Tamils), the descendants of Tamil-speaking groups who migrated from south India many centuries ago; and 'Up Country Tamils' (also known as 'Indian' or 'estate' Tamils), who number more than one million, descendants of comparatively recent immigrants. Both Tamil groups are predominantly Hindu. Tamil strongholds are established in the northern and eastern parts of the island.

Historical context

The Ceylon Tamils are south Indians who were amongst the first settlers in Sri Lanka who arrived as early as the 5th century BC.

The 'upcountry' Tamils are comparatively of recent origins. At the dawn of independence they were made stateless and deprived of their political rights through the Citizenship Acts of 1948-9. Agreements with the Indian government, providing for repatriation or the awarding of Sri Lankan citizenship, were not fully implemented. In the 70's India and Sri Lanka entered into a pact where India agreed to grant citizenship to 600,000 Tamils who wanted to return back. Sri Lanka agreed to grant citizenship to 470,000 Tamils who decided to stay on. According to UNHCR at the time a little more than 500,000 people had applied for Indian citizenship and 470,000 had applied for Sri Lankan, which was well over the number the country had agreed to grant nationality to.

In the 1980's there were some 86,000 applications for Indian citizenship pending when India informed Sri Lanka that previous agreements were not binding because the implementation period had ended.

By the year 2000 there were still some 300,000 Tamils who were stateless and living in Sri Lanka. In 2003 in a new act, citizenship was granted to all persons of Indian origin. According to UNHCR, those who had an Indian passport but remained in Sri Lanka were given the option of making a written declaration rescinding Indian citizenship and taking on Sri Lankan nationality.

RISE IN TWO NATIONALISMS

The post-independence history of the conflict trace back to the years leading up to Sri Lankan independence and to assurances given to the Tamil minority by the first Sri Lankan Prime Minister, Stephen Senanayake, that they would not be discriminated against with regard to representation and legislation. However, this did not transpire in a manner that met minority aspirations.

The growth in Sinhala nationalism and the adoption of Sinhala as the official language of Sri Lanka

contributed to the discord amongst the Tamils and resulted in further discrimination and isolation of minorities. The assassination of Bandaranaike in 1959 led to the strengthening of the main Tamil party, Tamil Federal Party, which called for parity of status for Tamils, citizenship on the basis of residence, and the creation of one or more linguistic states. Elections held in 1960 saw the Federal Party gain the Northern Province and all seats in the Eastern province.

During the 1960s the 'Sinhala only' policy was expanded by the ruling UF government to include court proceedings, previously conducted in English. In 1964 an agreement between Sri Lanka and India provided for the repatriation of 975,000 Tamils over a period of fifteen years; 300,000 others would be granted Sri Lankan citizenship. In 1968 the Federal Party left the government and the new UF government which came to power in 1970, wrote a new constitution. This 1972 constitution further discriminated Tamils. State-sponsored colonization schemes put many Sinhalese settlers into Tamil areas. Gradually groups from both communities moved towards extremism. The idea of a separate state became dominant in 1976 with the creation of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF). Among several resistance groups formed at this time was the Tamil New Tigers, later becoming the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

ANTI-TAMIL RIOTS AND MILITANCY STRENGTHENS

The United National Party (UNP) led by J.R. Jayawardene came to power in 1977. The TULF, now pledged to achieving a separate state, gained all 14 seats in the Northern Province and 3 out of 10 seats in the Eastern province and became the principal opposition party. Relations with the UNP were at first cordial. Standardization in university admissions was abolished, and Tamil was recognized in the constitution as a national language. Talks were planned on the subject of removing discrimination in employment and education. Within a month of the elections, however, violence broke out in the north, quickly spreading to the south. The government extended legislation renewing special powers to curb the violence, and from this time on there was a steady erosion of democratic government and human rights protection which affected all communities but most particularly Tamils.

During the upheavals Up Country Tamils, who had not previously been involved in the trouble, came under Sinhalese attack. A scheme put forward by President Jayawardene in 1981, offering Tamils some degree of autonomy under an all-island system of district development councils, was far too little to satisfy Tamil aspirations. Sinhalese hardliners opposed any concessions to Tamils, and Jayawardene instituted a series of measures which effectively curtailed civil liberties. A state of emergency and censorship of the press were imposed in 1981, while in late 1982 a referendum was used to extend the government's term of office until 1989. Extremist actions were increasing, and in July and August 1983 inter-communal violence reached a new pitch of intensity in the south when state-backed Sinhalese mobs turned on Tamils. Several hundreds lost their lives. Almost every Tamil in the urban areas lost their home and/or business. Tamils began to leave the county as refugees resulting in an exodus of close to half a million.

Tamil militant groups that had formed during the 1970s were able to consolidate their positions in the 1980s. In 1983 four such groups came together under the umbrella of the Tamil Eelam Liberation Front (TELF) with the goal of complete independence. Infighting among the Tamil groups, however, gradually led to a position of dominance for the LTTE, aided by its fanatical fighting force as well as support from India and abroad. As the government tightened its counter-insurgency campaign in the north, all Tamils were seen as suspect; thousands of young Tamil men were routinely detained and tortured.

INDIAN FACTOR

Fighting between the LTTE and the security forces assumed greater intensity throughout the first half of 1987. In May a large-scale offensive against LTTE positions in the north-east resulted in the detention of over 2,500 Tamils and the deaths of between 200 and 1,000 people, many of them civilians. By this time there were over 130,000 Tamil refugees living in camps in Tamil Nadu, India, and the Indian government was under increasing pressure to intervene on behalf of the Sri Lankan Tamils. At talks held in New Delhi the leader of the LTTE rejected settlement proposals put forward by the Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi. In July 1987, however, India and Sri Lanka signed an agreement which provided for regional autonomy and for the creation of newly elected provincial councils on an island-wide basis.

The agreement made provision for the merging of the Northern and Eastern provinces into one provincial council, pending the outcome of a referendum to be held in the east alone to decide whether the merger should proceed. Provincial councils were to be largely autonomous, and Tamil, Sinhala and English were to be given equal status as administrative languages. Hostilities would officially cease on 31 July 1987, and an amnesty would be granted to all political prisoners after the lifting of the state of emergency in mid-August. In accordance with the agreement, 3,000 Indian troops, designated the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF), were sent to the north-east.

The peace proposal foundered against a backlash of Sinhala public opinion, as well as the insistence of the LTTE on independence, despite having initially agreed to accept the terms of the peace accord. The LTTE repudiated the agreement as a direct response to the failure of guarantees that Tamils would have control over the new northern-eastern provincial councils. The LTTE demanded that the Indian forces withdraw to their original positions and cease patrolling the region, but instead more Indian troops were brought in. By mid-1988 an estimated Indian 70,000 troops were present, including paramilitary police, and air force, naval and support personnel. More than 1,000 civilians had died and an equal number of troops and guerrillas.

MORE AUTONOMY FOR TAMILS

Despite the disturbances, in November 1987 a constitutional amendment created the provincial council the Eelam People's Liberation Organization (EPLF) won the 1988 elections to take control of the council. The councils were never allowed to work properly and were eventually overtaken by political events. The elections to the new provincial council had been boycotted by the LTTE, which had established itself as the dominant Tamil group fighting for independence. With the Sri Lankan government beset by myriad problems, including the rise of an extreme left-wing Sinhala movement, the situation deteriorated rapidly once Indian troops had withdrawn in 1990. The life of the councils was short; they were dissolved soon after the departure of the IPKF. Fighting between Sri Lankan government forces and the LTTE continued. On its part the LTTE had grown from a small guerrilla group to an organized deadly militant movement. The Tigers were thriving on large scale funding mainly through donations from Tamil Diaspora communities in the west and through extortion. The rebels were also responsible for several suicide attacks on civilian targets and for the assassination of political leaders including President Premadasa and Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi.

NEW GOVERNMENT NEW HOPES

The coming to power of the People's Alliance government after victory in the August 1994 elections raised hopes and expectations that the long-running Tamil dispute would eventually be settled through a process of negotiation and political accommodation. The Chandrika Kumaratunga government promised fresh devolution proposals, and the LTTE called a cease-fire on 8 January 1995 to allow a process of talks to begin. However, these expectations were shattered after a few months. While the government resorted to coerce Tamils into submission, the LTTE called off its ceasefire, alleging that the

government was not sincere in its approach resolving the dispute. War was resumed with savage intensity, and the government declared that the only way to resolve the issue was to wipe out the LTTE. Government forces launched their biggest-ever military offensive against the Jaffna stronghold of the LTTE, and the subsequent fighting resulted in untold misery and death for Tamil and Sinhala people, and pushed further back any chance of a negotiated settlement. With the government forces' capture of Jaffna in late 1995, this long and bitter civil war appeared to reach new intensities of bloodshed and human suffering. In May 1996 official sources claimed to have established complete control over the entire Jaffna peninsula. While the situation remained volatile, there were reports of increasing repression of the Tamils and loss of life, with a mass exodus of thousands of Tamil civilians from the region.

CONTINUING VIOLENCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSE

During the following five years fighting between the LTTE and governmental forces remained fierce. A government offensive in August 1996 resulted in displacement of 200,000 civilians. In May 1997, government troops launched an assault in LTTE-controlled Vanni and in October 1999 Vanni was again attacked from the South. Accusations of torture, rape, arbitrary arrests and extra-judicial executions were leveled against the Army and Security Forces. By the same account the LTTE was also charged with carrying out killings of civilians and of arbitrary disappearances.

This conflict witnessed many tragedies including that of the assignation of the leading human rights campaigner Neelan Tiruchelvam, founder of the International Centre for Ethnic Studies in 1999. On 24 June 2001, a deliberate and pre-planned gang rape of a twenty-eight year Tamil women sparked large-scale rioting and violence, leading to a general strike on 6 July 2001.

NEW CEASE-FIRE

Elections held in December 2001, which saw the victory of United National Front led by Ranil Wickremasinghe elected on a pro-peace platform. A cease-fire and peace agreement was engineered and brought into place in February 2002. International donors and countries overlooking the progress of the peace process also pledged substantial support at a June 2003 conference. In return for further progress and continuation of the peace accord, the governments of Japan, Norway, United States and European Union pledged an aid package of US \$4.5 billion for post-war reconstruction package. The peace initiative was however to be short-lived. The LTTE's lack of commitment to the process and the election of a nationalist hard-line coalition government by Sinhala voters saw the country edge towards war.

In 2006, fighting broke out between the LTTE and the government security forces. The situation was further exacerbated by the split within LTTE itself. Vinayagamorthy Muralitharan, the eastern commander, broke ranks with the main party on 3 March 2004, claiming neglect and poor treatment of eastern Tamils. Fighting between the two LTTE groups erupted in early April and continued intermittently for several months.

Current issues

The position of Tamils in Sri Lanka remains precarious. In July 2007 the government said it had successfully taken control of the entire eastern province. More than 250,000 people were displaced in the fighting and many remain in camps. Sri Lanka's East is a focal point of ethnic tensions as it has equal numbers of all three main ethnic groups. Recent government development plans for the east point to further isolation of minorities. Thousands of Tamil families have been barred from access to their homes in new high-security zones created in these areas.

Following the eastern victory the government in August 2007 begun an offensive in northwestern Sri Lanka, which led to thousands being displaced. The years 2006 and 2007 have also seen Sri Lanka slowly slipping towards a human rights crisis. Tamils have suffered the most with the worsening human rights situation.

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