

A corner of Sri Lanka of living under siege. (1994, October 16). *The New York Times*.

A Corner of Sri Lanka Tires of Living Under Siege

By JOHN F. BURNS
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JAFFNA, Sri Lanka — After years under siege, this old colonial city in a far corner of Asia has become a sad vestige of blasted buildings and ripped-up railway lines, of flickering kerosene lamps and tinkling bicycle bells.

For nearly five years, the 750,000 people who live in the windswept Jaffna peninsula on the northern tip of Sri Lanka, almost all members of the Tamil ethnic group, have lived without electricity, without telephones, and with scarce supplies of food and fuel.

Even the railroad line to other parts of Sri Lanka is gone, its ties chopped for firewood and its rails melted for scrap.

Surrounding Jaffna are Sri Lankan Government forces, which have used bombing raids, artillery salvos and naval attack boats to strike homes, churches and flotillas of small boats that try to flee the siege.

But what seems to instill the most fear in one of the world's longest-running and most brutal ethnic wars is the rebel group that rules here, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, which has built one of Asia's most repressive societies.

The fear is acknowledged, obliquely, even by top Tiger officials.

"We are a small guerrilla organization fighting for the rights of a small people," said Anton Balasingham, the chief spokesman for the rebel group. "So we have had to utilize certain extraordinary methods in our style of war."

Human rights groups say Tiger rule has been built on arbitrary arrests and torture, disappearances and assassinations. Similar practices have flourished on the other side of the conflict, where death squads formed from the Sri Lankan Army and police have operated for years.

Most estimates put the combined death toll among civilians at 40,000, perhaps more, in addition to the 20,000 to 30,000 combatants who have died on both sides since 1983.

But where the Tigers are unique is in their reliance on what amounts to a children's army. Tiger leaders have recruited boys and girls as young as 11, sending them into battle equipped with "suicide capsules," glass vials of potassium cyanide on cords around their necks to be taken if they are threatened with capture.

At Tiger war cemeteries, headstones show many fighters who were not yet teen-agers when they died, only a few older than 18. At street corners throughout Jaffna, there are shrines to dead Tigers consisting of life-size cutouts of teen-age fighters killed in battle.

Moving about Jaffna in sullen-faced groups, young fighters spread an atmosphere of anxiety. When a truckload of guerrillas carrying Chinese-made automatic rifles stopped beside a row of food stalls in the city, adult shoppers fell silent. Many hastened away.

Asked why, one middle-aged man replied curtly, "Can't say." A woman companion placed a finger to her lips, saying, "The facts must rest in our hearts."

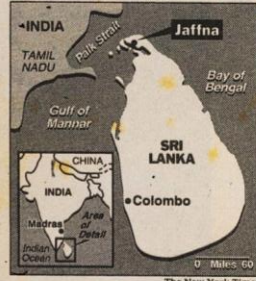
The Tigers are the survivors of a violent rivalry among militant groups acting to avenge decades of grievance among the country's three million Tamils.

After independence from Britain in 1948, succeeding Governments in Colombo, the capital, passed measures that gave privileges in education, Government employment and language to the country's Sinhalese majority, who make up three-quarters of the population of 17 million.



Donn Doli/JRS for The New York Times

The western edge of the Sri Lankan city of Jaffna lies in ruins after years of violent ethnic conflict.



The New York Times
People in Jaffna, the Tamil rebel center, live in need and fear.

Since the rebellion began among Tamils in 1983, Jaffna has known little peace.

Hopes for an end to the war rose in 1987, when India, which had been the rebels' main arms supplier, stepped in with a peacekeeping force. Before long, the Indians were at war with the Tigers, losing 1,500 soldiers killed before they withdrew.

Recently there have been fresh hopes for peace. In a conciliatory gesture, the newly elected Government of Prime Minister Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga has begun raising the possibility of creating an autonomous Tamil homeland in northern Sri Lanka that would have its capital in Jaffna but would remain linked to the rest of Sri Lanka in a federation.

[The Government released 13 rebels prisoners on Saturday, a day after the first round of peace talks ended, The Associated Press reported.]

Vellupillai Prabhakaran, the Tiger leader, has hinted that he may be ready to settle for less than an independent Tamil state.

"We want a peaceful solution, one that will make our people secure," said Mr. Balasingham, the rebels' spokesman. "We know we cannot go on like this forever."

By encouraging reporters to visit Jaffna for the first time in years, the

Both sides in an ethnic conflict are finding conditions intolerable.

two sides offered another sign of lessening tension.

On both sides, the urge for peace seemed pervasive. Government troops at the airbase, an arid encampment of gun bunkers and earth embankments, said conditions were barely tolerable, with intense heat for much of the year and malaria epidemics.

"We can't beat the Tigers," one officer said. "All we can do is to try and hang on."

In Jaffna, too, war-weariness is strong. Along streets made gap-toothed by bombing and artillery, many people compared conditions under the siege to the battles involving colonial conquerors that went on for hundreds of years.

"We are living in the 18th century," said Vincent Selvanayagam, 62, a notary who makes his living typing documents on a battered Olivetti in a storefront in Jaffna's battered center. "We have come to the tether's end."

In a sign of continuing distrust, Government commanders worry that the Tigers will use peace talks to press for a cease-fire, then smuggle in fresh supplies of arms and ammunition. "They'll talk as long as it suits them, then go back to war," a Sri Lankan officer said.

In Jaffna, many Tamils fear that powerful Sinhalese nationalist groups may force Mrs. Kumaratunga to pull back from her concessions.

"We are fighting for our survival," said K.S. Chandran, an editor at the main Tiger newspaper, the People's Daily. "This is a fight we cannot afford to lose. So any arrangement for a federal state can only be

an interim arrangement. It can never be final."

Some of the doubts focus on Mr. Prabhakaran, 42, the Tigers' leader. Many believe that his secretive, authoritarian style may prove an obstacle to peace. Although he appears in camouflage fatigues in portraits on the walls of virtually every home and office here, he rarely appears in person, and always with carloads of heavily armed bodyguards.

When asked about him, even senior rebel officials lower their voices and look furtively about.

Mr. Prabhakaran is also a wanted man in India, where the authorities have vowed to pursue him for his alleged involvement in the suicide bombing that killed Rajiv Gandhi, the former Indian Prime Minister, in 1991.

Similarly, the rebel leader was blamed by the Sri Lankan Government for the suicide bombing that killed President Ranasinghe Premadasa during a May Day procession in Colombo in 1993.

Those in Jaffna who believe that the Tigers may be genuinely interested in peace cite an easing of repression in the last year. Although arrests continue, reports by human rights groups suggest that the killing of Tiger opponents has been reduced, and possibly stopped.

Still others believe that the Tiger leaders may have been shocked by a battle last November that inflicted enormous casualties on all sides. At least 600 Government troops died in the battle, but Tiger casualties, at least 500 killed and 800 wounded, were proportionally even heavier for a force that Tiger leaders says numbers only 20,000.

"They are changing," said a Jaffna lawyer, one of few in the city who was prepared to talk about the Tigers. "They are looking beyond the end of all this, to the reckoning they know must come for all they have done."

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