Conflict Factsheet

The Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004 in Sri Lanka

Type of conflict	Intensity
Main	4

Conflict Locality	Time
Southern Asia	2004– 2009

Countries	Resources
Sri Lanka	Agricultural / Pastoral Land
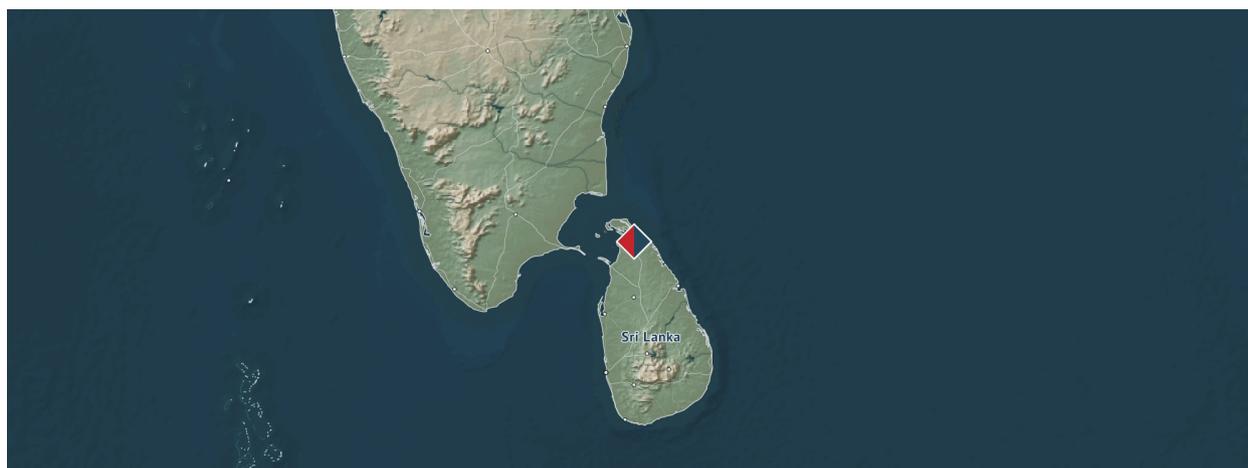
Extreme weather events and disasters

Conflict Summary

Ethnic and religious marginalisation caused a civil conflict in Sri Lanka, lasting about thirty years. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami exacerbated the existing conflict between the national government and different separatist groups. In 2009, the most known rebel group LTTE was finally defeated by the Sri Lankan army.

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Conflict History

Note: In this conflict, a natural disaster might have contributed to affecting a conflict outcome, but it is not a "typical" case in our framework where environmental change contributed to conflict onset. For this reason, we are not displaying a full conceptual model here as it does not fit the framework.

The independence of Sri Lanka in 1948 triggered the marginalisation of the former privileged Tamil population in the northeast of the island, reaching its peak in the 1970s, when the constitutionally protected minority rights for this ethnic group were disposed. This discrimination caused the formation of the „Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam" (LTTE) as an armed rebel movement in 1976. According to official statistics, more than 60.000 people were killed and 375.000 were forced to migrate, due to the insurgency in the northern region of Sri Lanka, until a first fragile ceasefire entered into force in 2002 (Le Billon and Waizenegger, 2007).

In 2004, a devastating tsunami hit Sri Lanka, leaving 30.000 people dead and forcing 700.000 people to migrate internally (Enia, 2008). At an early stage, the LTTE accused the central government of discriminating the north by providing insufficient humanitarian aid for the local population affected (Steele, 2005a), leading to intense armed clashes between the national army and LTTE fighters. After five more years of fighting, the Sri Lankan military forces defeated the LTTE in 2009 (AKUF, 2010).

Historical context of the ethnic and religious fractions

The Sri Lankan population is divided historically into two different ethnic and religious factions, which also separates the country geographically. The majority of Buddhist Singhalese makes up 75% of the total population, whereas the Hindu Tamil minority accounts for about 20% and is predominantly concentrated in the northeast of the insular state. After the independence from Great Britain in 1948, the Tamil population was gradually marginalized, accelerated by the abolition of all minority rights. In contrast, the historically discriminated Singhalese majority was now experiencing advantages, e.g. the awarding of prestigious position in society, or lucrative financial support. These developments led to the formation of the LTTE insurgent movement. The initial objectives of this rebellion ranged from a greater autonomy from the national government to a complete secession of the northern region. Shortly after the LTTE emerged, the Sri Lankan military forces began their armed fight against them (Stokke, 1998).

At the end of the 1980s, India decided to intervene in this intra-state conflict. As an important neighbouring state with strong ties to Sri Lanka, India was a perfect refuge for LTTE fighters as well as for refugees, who wanted to escape the escalating clashes in the Tamil region. India perceived the intensifying frays as a threat to its national security and established a peacekeeping force (Indian Peace Keeping Forces) to deescalate the violent conflict and stabilise the region. Especially those claims coming from the Indian Tamil Nadu state with its ethnic proximity to the minority population of Sri Lanka contributed to this decision.

However, this peacekeeping mission was not successful and the Indian forces left the country after 36 months without any major improvements. During that time, another rebel movement, the „Janatha Vimukhti Peramuna" (JVP), formed. This Singhalese group was established with the objective to fight for a

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communist and united Sri Lankan state. The Sri Lankan army defeated the JVP in 1989, giving the LTTE an opportunity to strengthen and broaden its influence in the northern region (AKUF, 2010).

Ceasefire in 2002 and developments thereafter

After two decades of fighting, a ceasefire was reached between the central government and the LTTE in 2002. At this time, the LTTE controlled six northern provinces of Sri Lanka (Le Billon and Waizenegger, 2007). The aim of this truce was to disarm the rebels and offer them greater autonomy in return. Moreover, refugees should have the chance to resettle. Although both sides initially agreed to the ceasefire, the LTTE as well as the central government accused each other of not complying with it and officially boycotted it since 2008 (Goodhand and Klem, 2005).

Resolution Efforts

After the tsunami hit Sri Lanka in 2004, large parts of the country's infrastructure were destroyed and two thirds of the total population were directly affected. This was also true for regions controlled by the LTTE, where more than 9.000 people lost their life due to this natural disaster. As a consequence, the central government as well as the LTTE promised to stop fighting and use their capacity for a pragmatic and effective response (Uyangoda, 2005).

Nevertheless, the election of prime minster Rajapakse in the same year, who was known to advocate for a united Sri Lankan state, together with a poor performance in the relief operations undermined any cooperation effort and led to an increase in violence (Steele, 2005b). Meanwhile, disagreements between the insurgents caused a split of a small group from the LTTE that called itself "Karuna group". This new movement did not shrink from using violence against the LTTE and was thus able to control two eastern provinces in the Tamil dominated north.

Escalation of violence in the years 2005-2009

In the years from 2005 to 2009, violence between military forces and different insurgents escalated further. In this context, the nationalist government successfully intensified its hard line against the Tamil separatist and launched several military offensives (Sengupta, 2005). With this approach, they tried to use the opportunity of the LTTE being weakened due to the severe impacts of the tsunami. Nevertheless, other interpretations deny any impact of the tsunami on the conflict outcome, claiming that the LTTE would have been defeated anyway, lacking appropriate military capacities (Kuhn, 2009). In 2006, the Sri Lankan army achieved large territorial gains in the northeast that was formerly occupied by rebel groups.

In addition, the LTTE was officially classified as a terrorist group by the United States and the European Union, making it even harder for the movement to receive any disaster relief or foreign financial support (Enia, 2008). In 2007, government forces moved quickly forward and were abled to completely control the north eastern region, successively pushing back the LTTE and other rebel fighters. Thus since 2008, the LTTE can be considered as defeated. The movement officially gave up their armed fight in 2009, when the Sri Lankan army symbolically captured the regional Tamil capital Kilinochchi (AKUF, 2010).
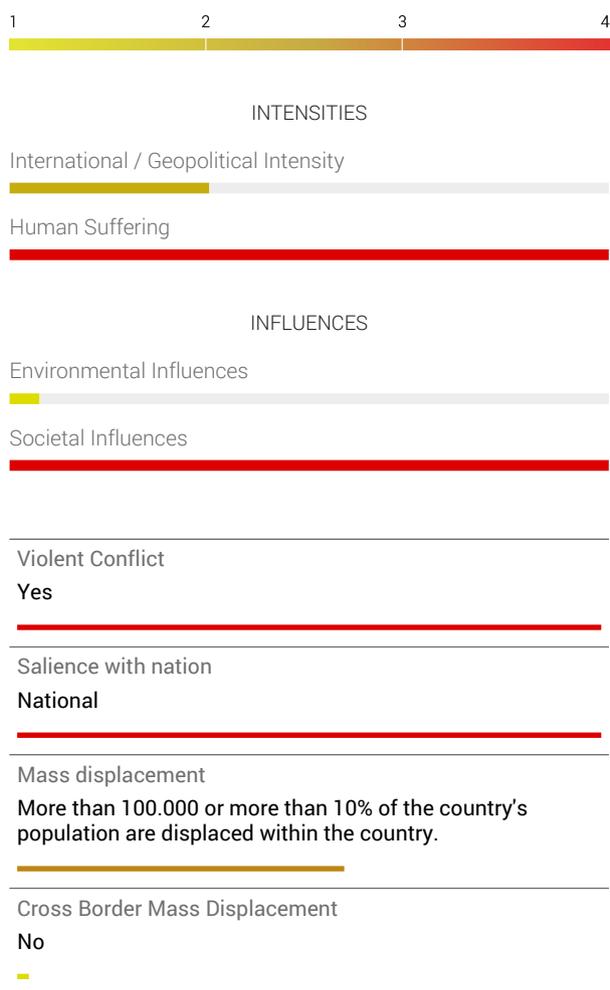
Summary

The case study on Sri Lanka yields further insights when comparing it with the conflict case of Aceh, Indonesia (see Responses to the Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004 in Aceh, Indonesia). Both countries

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experienced a civil war lasting over several decades and both were hit by the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004. Despite these structural similarities, the developments and outcome in the aftermath of the disaster were quite different. While a peace agreement was signed in Aceh, violence escalated in Sri Lanka and the conflict was finally determined by the defeat of the rebel movement after four more years of fighting.

Intensities & Influences

1	2	3	4

INTENSITIES

International / Geopolitical Intensity

Human Suffering

INFLUENCES

Environmental Influences

Societal Influences

Violent Conflict

Yes

Salience with nation

National

Mass displacement

More than 100.000 or more than 10% of the country's population are displaced within the country.

Cross Border Mass Displacement

No

Resolution Success

Reduction in Violence

Violence has ceded completely.

Reduction in geographical scope

The geographical scope of the conflict has decreased.

Increased capacity to address grievance in the future

There is no increased capacity to address grievances in the future.

Grievance Resolution

Grievances have been completely ignored.

Causal Attribution of Decrease in Conflict Intensity

The decline in intensity can be explained purely by the suppression or killing of grievance holders.

Resources and Materials

Conflict References

The Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004 in Aceh, Indonesia

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Further information

https://factbook.ecc-platform.org/conflicts/responses-indian-ocean-tsunami-2004-sri-lanka