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State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2010 - Sri Lanka

The year 2009 will undoubtedly go down as a pivotal one in post-independent Sri Lankan history, as it saw the end of the country's 30-year war. Fighting between government forces and the Tamil Tiger (LTTE) rebels reached a climax in the early part of 2009, as the government took over large areas of land that had been under rebel control. By February, the LTTE was cornered in a tiny area of land in north-eastern Sri Lanka, where they were essentially holding over 200,000 ethnic Tamil civilians hostage. Despite the concentration of such a large number of civilians in the conflict zone, the Sri Lankan military continued to press on. Between February and May 2009, daily reports emerged in international media of dozens of civilian killings. In March, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights accused both sides of committing war crimes.

The Sri Lankan government clamped down on media coverage, and media and local and international NGOs were restricted from entering the war-torn areas, making it difficult to verify information. The government maintained that only some 75,000 people were caught up in the fighting and vigorously denied reports that civilians were being killed. According to MRG's December 2009 briefing, *Six Months On: No Respite and Little Hope for Minorities in Sri Lanka*, the Sri Lankan military unilaterally declared a no-fire zone, and asked civilians to leave LTTE-controlled areas and come to the zone, assuring them of their safety. However, beginning on 7 April 2009, the military shelled the zone, killing hundreds of civilians, including children.

The Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakshe declared that the conflict had ended on 19 May 2009, following the killing of the LTTE's senior leadership, including its leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran. In most parts of the country, people thronged the streets, jubilant and celebrating the end to a conflict that had claimed more than 70,000 lives. In the north of the country, however, the situation for ethnic Tamils was alarming. International media reported that over 280,000 people, who had been trapped by the fighting for months without food and who were traumatized by the violence, had begun pouring into displaced camps. The displaced were held in makeshift closed camps that were severely overcrowded and lacking facilities. Food, water, shelter and sanitation were huge problems. Families were separated. Local and international NGOs and the media were given very limited access. The UN and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) also faced severe restrictions. There were reports of abductions, kidnappings, arbitrary arrests and torture from within the camps. Some 10,000 people were detained as suspected LTTE cadres, local NGOs reported.

Six months after the end of the conflict, the government had begun a hasty return and resettlement process. Nearly half of those housed in Menik farm camp were allowed to return to their areas of origin. MRG and other international human rights groups argued that the process did not meet international standards. The government had not guaranteed adequate security for the returnees, nor had they ensured that facilities

such as schools, hospitals and transport would be in place. In November 2009, the government announced that it was opening up the camps, granting freedom of movement to the remaining displaced persons. The entire issue of displacement had been dealt with haphazardly by the government. By year's end, there remained close to 300,000 internally displaced, including about 100,000 members of the Muslim minority.

Despite the end of the conflict, the situation for minorities remained uncertain. During the second half of 2009, the government did not offer, nor hint at, any minority rights guarantees. More specifically, there was very little discussion of a political autonomy package for minorities. Accountability, both generally concerning human rights violations in Sri Lanka and more specifically relating to the last few months of fighting, remained a considerable problem. There was a pervasive climate of impunity in the country, where human rights violations went ignored and unpunished.

The general human rights situation in Sri Lanka remained poor during 2009, and those most affected were generally from minority communities. Media freedom hit a new low, and there were several attacks on journalists through the course of 2009, including the killing of high-profile editor Lasantha Wickrematunga and the imprisonment during most of the year of Tamil journalist J.S. Tissanayagam. There was also a clamp-down on work by NGOs, particularly human rights and aid agencies, as well as threats and intimidation directed at those working in these organizations.

Muslims make up 8 per cent of the Sri Lankan population. The government did not make clear its plans to resettle Muslim displaced who have been living in camps for nearly 20 years. Some Muslims began to return to their homes during 2009, but they received no assistance from the government, Muslim NGOs reported. The community also feared that they would be neglected in plans to redevelop areas affected by the conflict.

During the last stages of fighting, both Hindu and Christian places of religious worship were destroyed in shelling and artillery attacks by both sides, according to local human rights activists who cannot be named for security reasons. In January 2009, some 17 civilians were killed and 39 injured in the bombing and shelling by the Sri Lankan army of the American Ceylon Mission church in Suthanthirapuram. Six Christian priests, who chose to remain with the trapped civilians till the very end, were arbitrarily held in detention for months without charges. Shantha Fernando, a Sinhalese Christian, was arrested by Sri Lankan police in March 2009 and handed over to the Terrorist Investigation Department, as he was on his way to India for a World Council of Churches meeting. Fernando, who is Executive Secretary of the Justice and Peace Commission of the National Christian Council of Sri Lanka, was held without charge under emergency regulations. He was released later on bail, but a case against him is pending in the local courts.

In the past few years, there has been a rise in Sinhala Buddhist nationalism that is affecting minorities. Christians and Muslims have borne the brunt of it. In 2009, there were sporadic incidents where Christian churches or religious leaders were attacked by such extremist groups, local minority groups have told MRG. Muslims have also been targeted by such groups. Muslim religious practices that have been part of Sri Lankan culture for centuries are now increasingly criticized. Objections are often aired in Sri Lankan media by Buddhist groups over the 'azan' or the muezzin's call to prayer and other religious practices, such as the slaughtering of animals for Eidh al-Adha, the Muslim festival of sacrifice.

The year also saw an increase in intra-religious conflicts among both Christians and Muslims. For Muslims, the conflict is mainly between radical groups inspired by the Saudi Arabian Wahhabi movement and the more traditional Sufi groups. In July 2009, a police curfew had to be imposed as one person was shot dead and several injured in rioting between the two sides in the southern town of Beruwala. There have also been some violent incidents between Catholics and evangelicals in the Christian community.

