SRI LANKA'S MUSLIMS: CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout much of the 25-year Sri Lankan conflict, attention has focused on the confrontation between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils. The views of the country's Muslims, who are 8 per cent of the population and see themselves as a separate ethnic group, have largely been ignored. Understanding their role in the conflict and addressing their political aspirations are vital if there is to be a lasting peace settlement. Muslims need to be part of any renewed peace process but with both the government and LTTE intent on continuing the conflict, more immediate steps should be taken to ensure their security and political involvement. These include control of the Karuna faction, more responsive local and national government, improved human rights mechanisms and a serious political strategy that recognises minority concerns in the east.

At least one third of Muslims live in the conflict-affected north and east and thus have a significant interest in the outcome of the war. They have often suffered serious hardship, particularly at the hands of the Tamil rebel group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Since 1990 Muslims have been the victims of ethnic cleansing, massacres and forced displacement by the insurgents.

The 2002 ceasefire agreement (CFA) was a disappointment to many Muslims. They had no independent representation at the peace talks, and many feared that any agreement that gave the LTTE exclusive control of the north and east, even in a federal arrangement, would be seriously detrimental to their own interests. Despite talks between Muslim leaders and the LTTE, they continued to suffer violent attacks. Since the resumption of large-scale military action in mid-2006, Muslims have again been caught up in the fighting in the east. Dozens have been killed and thousands displaced. They have also come into conflict with a new, pro-government Tamil paramilitary group, the Karuna faction. Memories of LTTE oppression are still fresh, and rancorous disputes with Tamils over land and resources remain potent in the east.

Muslim political leaders have often been divided, representing different historical experiences and geographical realities as well as personal and political differences. Muslims in the east and north – who have

been fundamentally affected by the conflict – often have very different views from those who live in the south among the Sinhalese. Nevertheless, there is consensus on some key issues and a desire to develop a more united approach to the conflict.

Muslims have never resorted to armed rebellion to assert their political position, although some have worked with the security forces, and a few were members of early Tamil militant groups. Fears of an armed movement emerging among Muslims, perhaps with a facade of Islamist ideology, have been present since the early 1990s, but most have remained committed to channelling their frustrations through the political process and negotiating with the government and Tamil militants at different times.

There is no guarantee that this commitment to non-violence will continue, particularly given the frustration noticeable among younger Muslims in the Eastern province. In some areas there are Muslim armed groups but they are small and not a major security threat. Fears of armed Islamist movements emerging seem to be exaggerated, often for political ends. Small gangs have been engaged in semi-criminal activities and intra-religious disputes, but there is a danger they will take on a role in inter-communal disputes if the conflict continues to impinge upon the security of co-religionists.

There is increasing interest among some Muslims in more fundamentalist versions of Islam, and there have been violent clashes between ultra-orthodox and Sufi movements. This kind of violence remains limited and most Muslims show considerable tolerance to other sects and other faiths. Nevertheless, the conflict is at least partly responsible for some Muslims channelling their frustrations and identity issues into religious disputes.

Muslim peace proposals have tended to be reactive, dependent on the politics of the major Tamil and Sinhalese parties. Muslim autonomous areas in the east are being pursued but seem unlikely to be accepted by the present government. Muslims are concerned about Colombo's plans for development and governance in the east, which have not involved meaningful consultation with ethnic

minorities and do not seem to include significant devolution of powers to local communities.

In the longer term, only a full political settlement of the conflict can allow historical injustices against the Muslims to be addressed and begin a process of reconciliation. The LTTE, in particular, needs to revisit the history of its dealings with the Muslims if it is to gain any credibility in a future peace process in which the Muslims are involved. Only an equitable settlement, in which Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim community concerns are adequately addressed, can really contain the growing disillusionment among a new generation of Sri Lankan Muslims.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Government of Sri Lanka:

1.   Support the Muslim community's demand for a separate delegation at any future peace talks.

2.   Ensure that the right of return of northern Muslims to their original properties and the displacement of eastern Muslims during the conflict are addressed in any final peace settlement.

3.   Establish a presidential commission to investigate the expulsions of the Muslim population from the Northern province in 1990 and address both immediate needs and long-term legal, political and physical obstacles to an eventual return.

4.   Ensure that any new interim governing arrangements for the Eastern province:

    (a)   include equitable power sharing in which Muslims and Tamils are adequately represented and local government structures enhanced; and

    (b)   do not impede a final political settlement of the conflict.

5.   Suspend major development plans for the east, such as the Special Economic Zone in Trincomalee, until there has been serious consultation and negotiation with local residents and their political representatives.

6.   Reject state-aided development or land-settlement schemes with potential to transform the ethnic balance in the east to the detriment of Muslims and Tamils and increase development aid to the east, but only in consultation with local communities and while ensuring an equitable distribution among communities.

7.   Assert effective control over Tamil paramilitary groups, notably the pro-government Karuna faction (Tamileela Makkal Viduthalai Puligal, TMVP), by:

    (a)   restricting them in civilian areas to political activity;

    (b)   prosecuting all TMVP members engaged in criminal activities, including abduction, child recruitment, robbery and extrajudicial killings; and

    (c)   strictly limiting the role of TMVP members in administration, relief and resettlement programs.

8.   Investigate and prosecute atrocities and human rights abuses, including the December 2006 massacre of Muslims in Pottuvil.

9.   Take tangible steps to reduce ethnic imbalances in the security forces, including in Eastern province police.

To the Muslim Community and Political Parties:

10.   Build on Muslim communities' assistance to Tamil internally displaced persons (IDPs) by developing broader economic and social programs to encourage Tamil-Muslim reconciliation and cooperation.

11.   Monitor carefully the role of Muslim armed groups in the east.

12.   Support enforcement of the constitutional rights of all believers and religious sects to freedom of religion and protection from harassment, including minority Muslim sects.

13.   Encourage more local democracy and better representation among Muslims and promote state reforms to ensure more equitable distribution of resources among communities and less reliance on patronage networks.

14.   Encourage civil society groups, including expansion of such groups as the Muslim Council, and greater involvement of women in civil society movements, and seek broader involvement in and support for the Muslim Peace Secretariat.

To the LTTE and Other Tamil Political Groups:

15.   End any harassment, illegal taxation or human rights abuses of Muslims, re-examine the record of past abuses and make reconciliation a priority.

16.   Support the Muslim community's demand for a separate delegation at future peace talks.

17.   Publicly assert the right of northern Muslims to return to their original properties and of Muslims in the east to resume cultivation of their lands.

18. Make a public commitment to a multiethnic political future for the north and east, in which Muslims share political power.

To the International Community:

19. Make a greater commitment to include Muslim concerns in any new peace process, including a separate delegation at peace negotiations.

20. Press the government to:

    (a) severely limit the role of the TMVP and prosecute TMVP members who indulge in criminal activity;

    (b) seriously address atrocities in which security personnel may have been involved and end the climate of impunity; and

    (c) include Muslim and Tamil communities in discussions about development in the east and develop a proper political process to enable real power sharing in any interim administration.

21. Consult representatives of the Muslim community and take their priorities into account in planning development assistance.

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I.   INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka's 25-year conflict has primarily been a struggle between minority Tamils, seeking autonomy or a separate state, and the majority Sinhalese, who reject this. But there are many other social fractures and ethnic divisions that are vital to a proper understanding. One of the most significant and under-researched issues is the history and status of Muslim communities, who have been the target of discrimination, political violence, massacres and ethnic cleansing since the fighting began in the early 1980s. Unless the problems faced by Muslim communities are resolved, a viable, long-term peace settlement will be difficult to achieve.[1]

Unlike the Tamils and Sinhalese, who have an ethnic identity based on language and history, the Muslims claim a separate ethnicity based predominantly on their adherence to Islam. In the national census they are listed separately, as "Moors", reflecting European colonial usage. Some trace their roots back to Arab traders, who may have settled on the island as early as the seventh century. Arab settlers often intermarried with local Tamils and Sinhalese, while retaining their traditional faith and separate identity. Other Muslim communities appear to have come to Sri Lanka via India over a long period, some as late as the early twentieth century.

The early Arab settlers were traders, and before the Portuguese period of colonial rule, Muslims were said to control much of the commerce through Colombo and Jaffna harbours, a position they regained under Dutch and British rule. This stereotype of Muslims as itinerant traders, with no real affinity to land and place, persists, although many Muslims in the north and east in particular have long been farmers and fishermen, and many in the middle classes now prefer to train for the professions.

Historically, the political leadership of the Muslims came from the trading class, and in particular from those usually referred to as "southern" Muslims – residents of Colombo, the western seaboard and central regions of the country. These groups tended to be Tamil-speaking at home, but since they grew up among the Sinhalese, they were often bi- or tri-lingual (with English as a third language). They are scattered throughout the south but have a large population in the Western province, particularly in the Colombo area (204,000, 9.1 per cent) and Kalutara (93,000, 8.8 per cent). Although many southern Muslims are active in business, they also form a significant proportion of the urban poor.

Two other broad groups of Muslims are usually distinguished. The eastern Muslims live in scattered villages along the coast, from Pottuvil in the south up to small towns such as Mutur near Trincomalee. They form roughly one third of the population in the Eastern province, and in one district – Ampara – are the largest ethnic group, with 41.6 per cent of the district population.[2] Many are involved in agriculture, particularly rice cultivation.

The other major regional grouping is termed the northern Muslims. They lived in predominantly Tamil areas, particularly on Mannar and in Musali, on the north west coast, but with a large population in Jaffna, the main city of that part of the island. The Tamil rebel group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) expelled the entire community from the north in 1990 (see below), and many still live in temporary housing in Puttalam district.

Other smaller Muslim groups have been less affected by the conflict. A community of some 50,000 Malays are listed separately from the Moors in the national census, and many have retained their separate language and

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[1] This is the first of a series of Crisis Group reports addressing issues related to the conflict within Sri Lanka's main ethnic groups. Subsequent reports will address the search for a consensus on the conflict among Sinhalese political forces, the state of politics among Sri Lankan Tamils and the social and political challenges facing the Up-Country Tamil population.

[2] All figures are from the 2001 census, available at www.statistics.gov.lk/census2001/population/district/t001c.htm. At the census the Moor population was some 1,350,000, about 8 per cent of the total. The proportion is not known exactly as the census did not include large parts of the Tamil population in the north and east. Figures for the Eastern province as a whole are only approximations, because there has not been a full census in LTTE-controlled areas in Batticaloa and Trincomalee districts since 1981. The figures for Ampara district are considered complete.

identity: most are Muslims of Javanese origin, brought to Sri Lanka in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by Dutch colonisers. They now have little impact on national Muslim politics, and many feel that their interests are poorly represented by Muslim leaders.[3] The only significant Shiite sect is the small Bohra community, which is particularly strong in the business world. There is also a small Memon (Sunni) community originally from north India.

A. RELIGION AND IDENTITY

While other ethnic communities in Sri Lanka define themselves, to a considerable degree, in terms of their language and history, the identity of Sri Lankan Muslims is defined primarily by religious belief.[4] This has prompted a complex search for identity at different periods, particularly in reaction to the growing nationalisms of the Sinhalese and Tamils throughout the twentieth century.[5]

One fundamental argument over Muslim identity has been discussed since the nineteenth century, namely whether Muslims are really a separate ethnic group, or simply Tamils who have followed a different religion from Hindu or Christian Tamils. Many Tamil nationalists argue there is no separate Muslim ethnicity in Tamil Nadu, India, and that Indian Tamils consider themselves as Tamils who are also Muslim, Hindu or Christian.

However, the specific political context of Sri Lanka engendered a very different consciousness among most Muslims: as far back as 1885 there had been a dispute with Tamil leader Ponnambalam Ramanathan over whether the Muslims were a separate ethnic group that deserved separate Muslim representation in British colonial structures.[6] Muslims asserted their own identity and gained separate representation from the Tamils but many Tamil nationalists are still ambivalent about the distinct nature of Muslim identity. The conflict has hardened these pre-existing communal identities, and there is now a deep political divide between Tamils and Muslims in the north and east, although language and some cultural traditions continue to provide a basis for mutual understanding.

Muslims now clearly have a separate ethnic identity, based partly on the political trajectory of the past 30 years, but more fundamentally on their Islamic belief and culture. Almost all Sri Lankan Muslims are Sunni (mostly following the Shafi school of jurisprudence). There has historically been only limited public dispute over religious belief, and most Muslims have adhered to their beliefs in a way that is tolerant of different strands in Islam and of other faiths. However, there is some evidence that this historically moderate and tolerant approach to religious difference is beginning to change. The growth of strict interpretations of Islam and a concerted effort by some groups to oppose Sufi sects have led to violence in Kattankudi, a small eastern town (see below). Orthodox Muslims also reject the small Ahmaddiya sect as "un-Islamic".[7] Ahmadis have been subjected to harassment and attacks.[8]

Interest in religion has grown over the past two decades, partly as a reflection of a global resurgence in Islamic belief and the influx of ideas from other parts of the Islamic world. Groups such as Tabligh al-Jamaat and Jamaat-i-Islamiya have grown rapidly in Sri Lanka, particularly since the 1980s. Their influence on politics, so far, has been rather limited, but they have probably contributed to a narrower range of acceptable beliefs in parts of the Muslim community and more concern about orthodoxy.

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[3] One writer asserts that: "The Sri Lankan Malays are politically left out as a neglected ethnic group in Sri Lanka", and points out that while they are classified as Muslims, they have specific problems distinct from those of the broader group of "Moor" Muslims. M. A. Nuhman, *Sri Lankan Muslims: Ethnic Identity within Cultural Diversity* (Colombo, 2007), pp. 24-25.

[4] Most Muslims use a dialect of Tamil as their first language (which still contains a few words from Arabic), but many, particularly in the south, also speak Sinhalese. Many in the south study in Sinhalese schools, whereas in the east most study in the Tamil language. In general, they have adapted flexibly to their linguistic surroundings. Although northern and eastern Muslims, in particular, have been affected by the state promotion of the Sinhalese language, they have not been closely involved in the politics of language that has been a key issue in the conflict between the Tamils and the Sinhalese. See M. A. Nuhman, op. cit., p. 59.

5 "[T]he leadership of the Moors of Sri Lanka from the late nineteenth century onwards seem to have been perennially vexed by questions of their own identity". Dennis McGilvray, "Arabs, Moors and Muslims: The Mobilisation of Muslim Identity in Sri Lanka", Paper for the Third International Sri Lanka Conference, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 3-5 April 1991, p. 12.

[6] M. N. M. Kamil Asad, *The Muslims of Sri Lanka under British Rule* (New Delhi, 1993), p. 75.

[7] Crisis Group interview, M. I. M. Rizwe, president, All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (Council of Muslim Theologians), Colombo, 8 May 2007.

[8] The Ahmaddiya Muslim Community stems from the writings of its founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, whom it believes was a prophet. Orthodox Muslims believe in the finality of the Prophet Mohammed, and most consider Ahmadi views heretical. Pakistan has declared Ahmadis non-Muslims. They have been frequently attacked there and in Bangladesh and have also been targeted in Sri Lanka. In October 2006 Abdullah Niyas Ahmad, caretaker of their main centre of worship in Negombo, was murdered, allegedly by a Muslim extremist. On 11 May 2007 their mosque in Negombo was forcibly occupied by hundreds of local Muslims for several hours. Crisis Group interview, A. H. Nasir Ahmad, national president, Ahmaddiya Muslim Community, Sri Lanka, Colombo, 17 May 2007.

Some ultra-orthodox Salafi groups are also growing in influence.

This heightened religious consciousness is also the result of the ongoing communal conflict. Since religious belief and culture is the only major element of Muslim group identity in Sri Lanka, some elements of the Muslim community have accentuated their beliefs as part of a search for identity. While Sinhalese and Tamil nationalists have stressed the separate nature of their languages, histories, and cultures to mobilise nationalist feeling, Muslim leaders have tended to stress religious difference as a way to emphasise their existence as a separate community. The rise of separate Muslim political parties from the late 1980s has deepened this trend.

B. MUSLIMS AND THE STATE

In formal terms, Muslims enjoy considerable freedoms within the Sri Lankan state. There are no restrictions on religious worship, and major Muslim religious holidays are celebrated as public holidays. Muslims have the right to use *quazi* courts to rule on family matters under Sharia law, although Muslims also have the right to seek redress through secular courts. Muslims likewise enjoy separate (state-funded) schools in which Islam is taught in addition to the standard national curriculum.[9]

There are Muslims in all political parties, and there are no restrictions on Muslim political parties. There are several such, although most of the smaller ones have just one representative in parliament, and their influence is somewhat limited by a proportional representation system that forces them to run in alliance with larger parties. There are many Muslim parliamentarians, and in May 2007 there were at least seventeen Muslim members of the government, albeit in a somewhat bloated administration of 107 ministers and deputy ministers.

Nevertheless, many Muslims complain of discrimination in the recruitment practices of state structures, claiming that well-qualified co-religionists are often passed over for jobs in key revenue bureaucracies, in particular, such as customs and income tax. They are substantially under-represented overall in state and semi-state structures.[10]

There is also limited representation in the security forces. Although Malays have a strong tradition of military service, a career in the security forces has traditionally not been favoured by other Muslims.

To a certain extent discrimination is built into the Sri Lankan system of governance, with much recruitment taking place through patronage rather than transparent procedures. As a result, ministries and other state institutions headed by Sinhalese officials will sometimes be at least partly staffed from the minister's patronage network. In the same way, ministries run by Muslims sometimes employ a disproportionate number of Muslims from the politician's home region or broader support network. Thus Muslim complaints of discrimination, although valid, are also part of a much wider problem of recruitment and governance which affects the many in all ethnic groups who have limited access to these patronage networks.

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[9] Muslim schools also celebrate Muslim holidays and close for the month of Ramadan. In addition, schoolchildren wear a specific Muslim uniform, incorporating a headscarf for girls and a white skull-cap for boys.

[10]According to official figures, Muslims are only 3.1 per cent of state sector employees (central state institutions and ministries), and 3.2 per cent of employees of semi-government institutions, such as state-run corporations. In provincial government employment, 5.7 per cent of employees are Muslims. See "Census of Public and Semi-Government Sector Employment, 2002", available at www.statistics.gov.lk/empcensus/index.html.

II.   RISE OF MUSLIM POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The once largely apolitical Muslim community has gradually been forced to engage in politics, mainly as a reaction to the nationalist politics of the Tamils and Sinhalese. Although its most violent confrontations have been with Tamils, the historical relationship between Sinhalese and Muslims has been an important element in determining Muslim political consciousness. For the most part, relations have been benign and bolstered by economic interdependence. However, disputes over business and trade, sometimes manipulated by nationalist groups, have fuelled occasional clashes.

A.   MUSLIM-SINHALESE RELATIONS AND THE POLITICS OF ACCOMMODATION

Anti-Muslim riots in 1915, in which Sinhalese gangs attacked Muslim traders and shops, were the first major communal disturbance in modern times.[11] The causes were complex but partly attributed to rising Sinhalese nationalism coming into conflict with the traditional Muslim control over much of the business world. Sinhalese nationalists were inspired by figures such as Anagarika Dharmapala, one of the most influential Buddhist revivalists at the turn of the last century, who wrote:

> The Muhammedans, an alien people, who in the early part of the nineteenth century were common traders, by Shylockian methods became prosperous like the Jews. The Sinhalese, sons of the soil, whose ancestors for 2,358 years had shed rivers of blood to keep the country free from alien invaders… today…are in the eyes of the British only vagabonds.…The alien South Indian Mohammedan comes to Ceylon, sees the neglected villager without any experience in trade…, and the result

is the Mohammedan thrives and the son of the soil goes to the wall.[12]

Such overt racism is rare in contemporary Sri Lanka, although a certain prejudice against the Muslims as traders, deceiving the poor "sons of the soil" is occasionally still evident in everyday, private discourse. But for the most part, the two communities have peaceful relations; there is limited social integration but a good deal of economic interaction. Nevertheless, violence has erupted intermittently, usually linked to organised nationalist campaigns or business disputes. In 1976 police shot several Muslims in Puttalam after clashes between Muslims and Sinhalese, apparently provoked by disputes over jobs and land.[13] There were sporadic incidents in the 1990s, including attacks on shops in Nochchiyagama in 1999.[14] In April 2001 Sinhalese mobs attacked Muslims in Mawanella: two Muslims died, and dozens of buildings and vehicles were destroyed. The riots seemed to have been sparked by Muslim complaints of police inaction over an assault on a Muslim store owner by three Sinhalese racketeers.

Sometimes these incidents may stem from small personal disputes but there are often accusations of underlying nationalist campaigns against Muslim business, in some cases instigated by extreme Buddhist-nationalist factions linked to local business or mafia groups. In the Mawanella case, Muslims accused the Sinhala Urumaya, a nationalist-Buddhist group, of supporting the rioters, through their United Sinhala Traders Association (USTA).[15] This body was apparently established under the aegis of the Sinhala Veera Vidhana (Sinhala Heroes' Forum, SVV), a forerunner of today's Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). In other cases, too, Sinhala nationalist forces have been blamed for instigating or benefiting from the violence.[16]

Muslims claim that they find it difficult to conduct business in some areas, particularly in Sinhalese parts of Ampara district and in strongly Sinhalese areas of Western

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[11] The anti-Muslim riots of 1915 were the first modern manifestation of the ethnic fissures that have plagued the country since independence. However, historians suggest that more people died in the brutal British repression of the rioters than in the riots themselves. The British viewed the unrest as anti-colonial but it seems to have been caused by inter-racial disputes over resources and trade and a growing Sinhala assertiveness in Colombo's business world. "[R]eligious sentiment gave a sharp ideological focus and a cloak of respectability to sordid commercial rivalry". K. M. de Silva, "Muslim leaders and the national movement", in Dr M. A. M. Shuhri, (ed.), *Muslims of Sri Lanka, Avenues to Antiquity* (Beruwela, 1986), pp. 453-472, 455. See also "The 1915 Riots in Ceylon: A Symposium", *Journal of Asian Studies* 24, no. 2 (1970), pp. 219-266.

[12] "Letter to Secretary of State for Colonies", in Guruge (ed.), *Return to Righteousness: A Collection of Speeches, Essays, and Letters of the Anagarika Dharmapala,* (Colombo, 1965), p. 540.
[13] V. Ameerdeen, *Ethnic Politics of Muslims in Sri Lanka* (Kandy, 2006), p. 104; Urmila Phadnis, "Political Profile of the Muslim Minority of Sri Lanka", *International Studies* (New Delhi), Jan-Mar 1979, vol.18, no.1, fn. 25.
[14] "Sinhala supremecists pursue economic dominance", Tamilnet, 17 February 1999, www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=79&artid=7395.
[15] "Now Sri Lankan Muslims under Attack from Sinhalese Nationalists", *Crescent International*, 16-31 May 2001, at http://muslimedia.com/archives/world01/sl-attack.htm.
[16] "Sinhala supremecists pursue economic dominance", Tamilnet, 17 February 1999, www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=79&artid=7395.

province such as Kiribathgoda, where local business associations and political groups make clear that their presence is not welcome. Some Muslim businessmen are concerned that nationalist elements in the new government may also begin a new round of pressure on Muslim businessmen. The presence in the government of the JHU leader, Champika Ranawaka, a former head of the SVV, has compounded these fears.

Despite this occasionally tense relationship, there is none of the deep history of conflict that has undermined Muslim-Tamil relations over many years. In most cases of violent confrontation, there are clear signs of manipulation of local economic grievances by political extremists. However, the resurgence of Sinhalese nationalism in the past few years, coupled with a rise in Muslim activism, and in some cases, more radical Islamic ideas, suggests that tensions may increase in the future.

The Muslim-Sinhalese relationship has had a direct impact on political consciousness among southern Muslims. Muslims in Sinhalese areas have always had a sense of being very much a minority and have acted accordingly in politics and business. For the most part, the need to ensure amenable relations with the Sinhalese community has led to Muslims remaining politically quiet and cautious, reluctant to draw attention to discrimination or ethnic tensions in public. Following the killing of Muslims in Puttalam in 1976, "not a single Muslim raised the matter in Parliament".[17] This has sometimes led to popular dissatisfaction with community political leaders, who have attempted to calm tensions rather than demand redress. However, it has also helped resolve difficult situations with the majority community through negotiation rather than confrontation.

B. THE RISE OF THE SLMC

For the first two decades of independence, this quietist approach to politics was characteristic of the Muslim business and political elite, who tended to support the most capitalist-friendly national party, the United National Party (UNP). Muslim parliamentarians generally downplayed specifically Muslim grievances and supported general policies that favoured the business class rather than their broader community. Many in the north and east – predominantly farmers and fishermen – felt unrepresented by this mercantile leadership.

The rise of Sinhalese and Tamil nationalism from the 1950s had an inevitable impact on Muslim political culture. Muslim leaders were often divided on how to respond: while some supported the Sinhala-only language

legislation of 1956, for example, others opposed it. The Tamil nationalist Federal Party attracted some Muslim support. It elected two Muslims to parliament in 1965, both of whom, however, quickly defected to the ruling party, contributing to disaffection among nationalist Tamils over the potential for political solidarity between Tamils and Muslims.[18] Many Tamils felt betrayed by what they viewed as the narrow self-interest frequently demonstrated by the Muslim community, believing that it should support the minority Tamil cause more strongly.

As Tamils began to organise militant groups in the 1970s, some Muslims in the north and east also joined in the struggle for Tamil rights, reflecting common concerns over land, language and the failure of the Sinhalese community to recognise the grievances of minority communities. Some young Muslims enlisted in the new Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) group; perhaps more popular were more pluralistic organisations such as the Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students (EROS). Arguably these young revolutionaries were protesting as much against their own leaders' conciliatory attitudes as against Sinhalese domination. Muslims had been affected by various state-sponsored development schemes in the east that had resulted in an influx of Sinhalese settlers and the loss of some Muslim lands but these issues had not provoked any real protest from their national leadership.[19]

The LTTE overtly supported Muslim concerns over land acquisition by Sinhalese settlers as a way of gaining their support for the separatist movement. Many Muslims were not content to subsume their own interests in a violent separatist cause but had little alternative channel for their disaffection. Historically, Muslims in the east had lagged behind southern co-religionists in education and representation in government service. Gradually, in the 1970s, greater educational opportunities began to produce a nascent eastern Muslim intelligentsia. It was this combination of unaddressed grievance and the rise of eastern Muslim leaders that contributed to the birth of the country's first Muslim political party, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), in 1986.[20]

The formation of the SLMC, led by a young lawyer, M. H. M. Ashraff, transformed Muslim politics. Ashraff's more confrontational approach and his desire to establish a separate party did not win over all Muslims. Indeed, he

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[17] V. Ameerdeen, op. cit., p. 104.

[18] Ibid, p. 73.
[19] Ameer Ali, "The Muslims of Sri Lanka: an ethnic minority trapped in a political quagmire", *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, vol. 5, no. 3 (2004), p. 377; V. Ameerdeen, op. cit., pp. 99-100.
[20] The rise of the SLMC was also the result of the introduction of proportional representation at parliamentary elections. This allowed any party that achieved 12 per cent (later reduced to 5 per cent) of the vote in an electoral district to claim a seat in parliament.

was forced to flee his native Kalmunai, after his house was burnt down.[21] But gradually his espousal of Muslim grievances, and his refusal to follow the accommodating politics of the community's traditional leaders, gave him a following, notably in his eastern homeland, where Muslims were increasingly under threat from the growing conflict.[22] The SLMC took most Muslim seats in the North East Provincial Council elections in 1988 and successfully contested national elections the next year.[23] Since then it has dominated Muslim politics in the east.

The SLMC cause was further advanced by the collapse in support among Muslims for Tamil radicalism. Already in the late 1980s clashes were developing between Tamil militants and Muslims. The attacks by the LTTE on Muslims in 1990 made any further involvement in the Tamil nationalist movement untenable for most Muslims. Instead, many young people in the east switched their support to the SLMC.

During the 1990s, the SLMC developed as a political force, using its parliamentary seats to form alliances that lent it political influence beyond its limited vote base. In 1994 it joined the government, giving it powers of patronage that increased Muslim opportunities in public service. Since then it has frequently been damaged by personal feuds and political infighting, not least following the death of Ashraff in 2000 in a helicopter crash. The subsequent battle for control of the party, between Rauf Hakeem and Ashraff's widow, Ferial, led to several Muslim leaders breaking away from the SLMC and forming their own small political parties. This disunity continues to plague Muslim politics.

III. THE LTTE, THE CONFLICT AND THE NEW MUSLIM POLITICS

While occasional tensions with the Sinhalese majority informed Muslim political attitudes in the south, in the north and east these have been shaped by a conflict with Tamil militant groups that has been continuing for two decades.

Some inter-ethnic tensions had existed for decades between Tamil and Muslim areas on the east coast but for the most part the communities mixed well, were strongly interdependent in economic affairs and had significant cultural and linguistic ties. It was the increasing activities of Tamil militants from the mid-1980s onwards, particularly their attempts at extortion from Muslim businesses, that provoked much more serious inter-ethnic tension. This seems to have been accentuated by a deliberate attempt to increase divisions between the two communities, as part of a government strategy to prevent formation of a united front.[24]

Security forces were implicated in several violent confrontations between Muslims and Tamils. One of the worst was an attack on the (Tamil) village of Karaitivu in April 1985, when Muslim youths, apparently with the support of the security forces, went on a rampage, killing several people and burning hundreds of houses.[25] Thereafter, violent incidents became relatively common between Tamil militants and Muslims. Some Muslims were armed by the government for their own protection but they were also involved in vigilante action against neighbouring Tamils, provoking more reprisals.

The intervention of the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) in 1987 did little to improve communal relations. The newly formed SLMC contested the 1988 North-Eastern Provincial Council elections despite the LTTE demand for a boycott. This contributed to a growing view in the LTTE that Muslims were an obstacle to their full control of the north and east. The formation of the SLMC was a clear political threat to LTTE domination of the region's politics. Nevertheless, despite growing tensions between Tamils and Muslims and the challenge posed by a newly assertive Muslim leadership in the east, what happened next was beyond anything that had previously occurred.

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[21] V. Ameerdeen, op. cit., p. 122.
[22] Eastern Muslims felt that the actions of Muslims in the government, such as Foreign Minister A. C. S. Hameed, who signed the Indo-Lanka Accord, to which many Eastern Muslims were opposed, again ignored their problems and representations. This reinforced the view that southern Muslims were not able to safeguard the interests of eastern Muslims. See F. F. Haniffa, *In Search of an Ethical Self in a Beleaguered Context: Middle Class Muslims in Contemporary Sri Lanka* (PhD dissertation, University of Colombo, 2007).
[23] V. Ameerdeen, op. cit., pp. 167-169.

[24] Rajan Hoole, "Massacres of Muslims and what it means for the Tamils", University Teachers for Human Rights, Jaffna (UTHR(J)), n.d., available at www.uthr.org/Rajan/muslims.htm.
[25] Crisis Group interview, former government official, Karaitivu, March 2007. See also K. N. Tharmalingam, "New Year's Bloody Dawn: Karativu 1985", *Northeastern Herald,* October/November 2003.

A. 1990: MASSACRE AND ETHNIC CLEANSING

The Sri Lankan war has included many bitter episodes, some of which have become widely known internationally, from the 1983 pogrom of Tamils in Colombo to the LTTE suicide bomb attack against Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, and subsequently against many civilian and military targets. But the ethnic cleansing of Muslims from much of the north and the massacres of Muslims in the east in 1990 remain little known outside the country. The effects of these few months of terror, however, have been devastating, not just for the Muslims, but also for the legitimacy of the Tamil self-determination struggle and resolution of the conflict as a whole.

1. Massacres in the east

On Friday evening, 3 August 1990, as was usual, some 300 men were at prayer in the Meera Jumma mosque in Kattankudi, a densely populated Muslim town on the eastern seaboard. At around 8 o'clock, LTTE gunmen drove up to the mosque, locked the doors to prevent escape and began firing into the crowd inside with automatic weapons. A similar incident took place at the Hussainiya mosque nearby. More than 100 men and boys were killed.

The Kattankudi massacre was only the most graphic incident in two months of LTTE attacks on Muslims in the east that may have killed as many as 1,000. The violence started in July, when more than 60 people, most returning from the *hajj*, were reportedly killed by the LTTE at Kurukal Madam. A further fourteen were killed in Akkaraipattu on 1 August and fifteen more in various locations over the next two days. The 3 August massacre in Kattankudi was followed by several weeks of attacks on the Muslim community, marked in many cases by extreme brutality. A Tamil human rights group reported on an LTTE massacre in Eravur, near Batticaloa, in which some 120 people reportedly died:

> LTTE cadre arrived in Eravur about 10.30 p.m. on 11th August and went about massacring Muslims until the early hours of the morning. They went through the Muslim areas of Surattayankuda, Michnagar, Meerakerni, Saddam Hussein village and Punnakuda, killing 121 persons. Among the worst reported incidents was the cutting of a pregnant lady's stomach. The baby is said to have been pulled out and stabbed….The soldiers accompanied by mobs then went through the Tamil wards (Four and Five) killing a number of civilians and burning dwellings. The rest fled.[26]

These events were a huge shock to the Muslim community. Most Muslims who had been part of the LTTE and other groups were expelled or left forthwith. Some were beaten or killed by young Muslims outraged by the Tamil militants' actions.[27] Muslim politicians called for calm but there were several instances of reprisals against Tamils, particularly after Muslim home guards were formed by the government in late August. Muslim leaders apparently agreed to the home guard movement for fear of more radical groups taking up arms against the LTTE.[28]

The expulsions and killings had broader ramifications. Many Muslims fled outlying villages and areas of predominantly Tamil population to the more secure Muslim towns and villages along the eastern coast. Others abandoned paddy lands they owned in rural Tamil areas, fearing for their safety if they went out to cultivate rice fields. Many of these lands have remained inaccessible for Muslim owners ever since, and their loss is a significant source of tension between the two communities. The Muslim Information Centre claims that at least 63,000 acres were lost in the Eastern province as a result of the events of 1990.[29]

2. Ethnic cleansing in the north

By 1990, as the IPKF left Sri Lanka, the LTTE came to control most of the Northern province. The region was predominantly Tamil but had a sizeable Muslim minority. Muslims in the north seem to have enjoyed good relations with their Tamil neighbours. Many counted Tamils as family friends, even though for the most part the two communities lived relatively separate but interdependent lives.[30] There was no history of violent clashes between them in the north, unlike in the east, where minor tensions had occasionally come to the surface even prior to the broader conflict.

Without any warning, in the third week of October 1990, LTTE cadres went from village to village in the Northern province, announcing over loudspeakers that Muslims had 48 hours to leave LTTE-held territory or face reprisals. In Jaffna Muslims were given only two hours to leave and permitted to take just 150 rupees ($1.40) with them. In other areas, they fled with just their clothes and a little

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[26] "The Clash of Ideologies and the Continuing Tragedy in the Batticaloa and Ampara Districts", UTHR(J), Report no.

7, 8 May 1991.
[27] Crisis Group interviews, Kattankudi, March 2007.
[28] "The Clash of Ideologies", op. cit.
[29] M. I. M. Mohideen, "Muslims need independent participation in talks", in "Why Independent Participation at Sri Lanka Peace Negotiations?", Muslim Information Centre, Colombo, n.d.
[30] Crisis Group interviews, former residents of Mannar and Mullaitivu, Puttalam, December 2006.

money. They left behind as much as 5,000 million rupees ($46 million) of property and valuables.[31]

Muslim leaders appealed to the LTTE to change their policy but were rebuffed and told that the orders came from the very top.[32] Nobody else seemed willing to help. Government forces did nothing to prevent the expulsions. A scholar claims that: "International humanitarian agencies, some of which were working in the Northern Province, made no effort to give international pressure to prevent the forcible expulsion of the Muslims".[33]

The number of those expelled is not known exactly. Some 15,000 Muslim families were living in the north at the time, and almost all are thought to have been caught up in the process. The best research suggests that at least 75,000 people were forced out.[34] Refugees fled across difficult terrain towards government-controlled areas in Vavuniya and Anuradhapura, while many from Mannar fled by boat to Puttalam, further south, where many continue to reside.

Some of the richer exiles – particularly the Jaffna business community – settled in southern suburbs of Colombo and other parts of the Western province, but most had no money or resources and were forced to live in refugee camps and makeshift housing. Some 65,000 are still in the Puttalam district about three hours' drive north of Colombo. Many of them settled in the barren and inhospitable Kalpitiya peninsula, surviving in simple huts or in camps, although gradually some have built up more permanent structures. Many continue to hope they will one day return but that hope has gradually faded.

A few went back after the 2002 ceasefire, only to find their houses destroyed and their lands overgrown by encroaching jungle. In other cases, Muslim properties have been occupied by Tamils, often themselves displaced by the conflict. As military confrontation began again in mid-2006, these returnees were again forced out by LTTE threats.[35]

Today the displaced face serious problems, including latent conflicts with the host community over access to public services and resources. There are few jobs in the area, and unemployment is high. There has been a long political argument about funding more permanent

resettlement in the area, with some fearing that it would undermine the claim to return. However, political leaders have sought funds to improve infrastructure in the Puttalam area, pointing out that the expelled groups have been living in difficult conditions for seventeen years, and something must be done to help, pending a resolution of the conflict.[36] In 2007 the World Bank approved a $32 million project to provide permanent homes for many of the displaced, as well as new education facilities and other infrastructure.

Any eventual return would pose significant problems. Under Sri Lankan law, property owners lose rights to property occupied by others for more than ten years, a legal issue that also affects many other displaced people. The issue of secondary occupation is extremely difficult, although some owners have found compromise solutions with occupants in similar situations in other parts of the country.[37] Rebuilding Muslim villages in areas where they have been abandoned would be very costly. Some of those expelled have lost hope and have sold their land in the north at low prices.[38]

Even without any sign of a resolution of the conflict, further investigation of the events of 1990 would provide an important element of recognition of the trauma experienced by the northern Muslims. Successive governments have done little to recognise the problems faced by those expelled in 1990, except as an expedient tool with which to attack the LTTE. Community leaders have called for a presidential commission to investigate the expulsions and recommend immediate assistance and also for the government to prioritise their plight at future peace talks. Such a commission could also examine ways to amend or suspend legal restrictions on property rights in the case of eventual return. Presidential commissions have a poor track record for achieving concrete results in Sri Lanka but one might at least produce a substantive record of the events of 1990 and provide a further channel through which the community could continue its campaign for recognition and compensation.

3. LTTE response

Very little information has emerged on the thinking behind the LTTE's anti-Muslim pogroms and expulsions in 1990.

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[31] S. H. Hasbullah, *Muslim Refugees: The Forgotten People in Sri Lanka's Ethnic Conflict* (Research Action Forum for Social Development, 2001), p. 45.
[32] Crisis Group interview, Puttalam, December 2006.
[33] Hasbullah, op. cit., p. 45. Figures are 1990 estimates.
[34] Ibid, p. 1. Dr Hasbullah, himself one of the displaced, conducted a painstaking survey of refugees from the northern provinces; his figures can be taken as the most reliable available.
[35] Crisis Group interviews, Puttalam, December 2006.

[36] Crisis Group interview, Rishad Bathiudeen, minister of resettlement and disaster relief services, Colombo, 27 April 2007.
[37] "Land Property Rights of Internally Displaced Peoples", Centre for Policy Alternatives, February 2003, p. 48, at www.cpalanka.org. This report is a comprehensive overview of land issues facing Sri Lanka's internally displaced peoples (IDPs).
[38] Many of these issues affect IDPs from all communities, of course, particularly Tamils, who have suffered repeated forced displacements across the north east.

They did not happen in a political vacuum but were one element in a brutal war in which hundreds of Tamils died at the hands of the security forces in the east. Nevertheless, the ferocity of the attacks on the Muslims went far beyond simple reprisals. They were clearly well planned and approved at the top of the movement.

There seems to have been a concern on the part of LTTE leaders that Muslims would act as a fifth column against the insurgency in the north and east. Some LTTE supporters have claimed that the Muslims were too close to the military or were potential informers.[39] However, it was not just a perceived security threat but also the political threat of a substantial non-Tamil minority living in the north east that seems to have provoked the attacks. By 1990 the SLMC was advocating a Muslim autonomous area, with Muslim-controlled cantons throughout the east and in some parts of the north, seriously undermining the LTTE campaign for exclusive political control in the region.

The LTTE has made some half-hearted apologies and has promised that the Muslims will be permitted to return "when conditions are right". In 2002 LTTE negotiator Anton Balasingham described the 1990 expulsions as a "political blunder". But many LTTE supporters continue to defend them as unfortunate by-products of the Tamil struggle.[40] As long as they remain unable to challenge the movement's official historiography, hope for a lasting reconciliation between the two communities is slim.

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[39] Nadesan Satyendra, "Muslims and Tamil Eelam: The forced evacuation of Muslims in 1989: Some Reflections", 1996, at www.tamilnation.org/tamileelam/muslims/ evacuation.htm.
[40] These apologia seem to focus mainly on arguments that the numbers of those displaced have been inflated, and the forced displacement was a reasonable response to a security threat. Some LTTE supporters have blamed the excesses on eastern Tamils, Col. 'Karuna' in particular. He in turn has denied any involvement, arguing that it was "Prabakharan [who] chased the Muslims through Kilali only with shopping bags in their hands". For a summary of LTTE views, see http://www.tamil nation.org/forum/sachisrikantha/051031muslims.htm.

IV. MUSLIM POLITICS AND THE PEACE PROCESS 2002-2005

A. A PROCESS OF DISILLUSIONMENT

The Muslims had never been a party to any of the negotiations between Tamil and Sinhalese leaders, from the abortive 1958 Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam pact to the talks between President Kumaratunga's government and the LTTE in 1994-1995. When the ceasefire agreement (CFA) was signed by the government and the LTTE in 2002, the Muslim community was again on the sidelines. It was not a signatory, understandably, because it had no armed units, but it was unable to persuade the two main parties to agree to a separate Muslim delegation to the negotiations to present its concerns in a formal way.

SLMC leader Rauf Hakeem did attend the early rounds as part of the government negotiating team but Muslims continued to press for a separate delegation. Most leaders did not want to be seen as part of the government delegation, since they sought to maintain an independent position. Neither the government nor the LTTE really supported Muslim demands; both preferred to deal separately with them, and the government in particular sought to use them against the insurgents.

Lacking a separate delegation, Muslim leaders attempted to talk directly to the LTTE. On 13 April 2002 the SLMC's Rauf Hakeem had unprecedented meetings with the LTTE's Prabhakaran and others. The two leaders reached what seemed to be a significant agreement, promising the right of return for Muslims to LTTE-controlled areas, an end to LTTE extortion of Muslim business in the east and access for Muslims to their lands in LTTE-controlled areas. At the second round of peace talks in Thailand (31 October–3 November 2002), the LTTE announced that it would return land and property to Muslim owners in the north and east.[41] None of these promises were kept, and the hopes Muslims had for some compensation remained largely unfulfilled:

> Muslims interpreted the new situation after the CFA as the creation of a new space for them to increase their economic and business activities reduced during wartime, to regain their land, and to stop payment of taxes to the LTTE….[Instead] they were asked to pay more taxes, the tax coverage was

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[41] M. I. M. Mohideen, "Sri Lanka Peace Process and the Muslim Question", in Kumar Rupesinghe (ed.), *Negotiating Peace in Sri Lanka* (Foundation for Coexistence, Colombo, 2006), vol. II, p. 323.

expanded and they were not allowed to reoccupy their land.[42]

Not only was there no significant reparation for previous losses and no economic improvement, but Muslims found themselves the victims of increasing violence as the LTTE attempted to consolidate its control in the east. There were clashes within a few months of the ceasefire in Mutur between Tamils and Muslims, which later spread to Vallaichennai in Batticaloa district, where in several days of rioting in late June 2002, nine Muslims and two Tamils were reportedly killed, over 100 injured and more than 100 shops destroyed. Muslims blamed the LTTE for provoking the violence, while the LTTE blamed "Islamic extremist groups". In April 2003 the LTTE abducted two Muslim fishermen, leading to riots in Mutur in which at least three people died.[43]

In late 2003 a new round of violence broke out in Trincomalee district. At least eight Muslim civilians were killed in a series of incidents in Kinniya in October-December 2003. This was presented by some as merely local incidents between the two communities and tit-for-tat killings. However, it seems much more likely that it was a deliberate LTTE strategy to purge Muslims from strategic areas along the south coast of Trincomalee bay, an area important for control of the entrances to Trincomalee harbour.[44]

This violence understandably undermined Muslim support for the peace process. A human rights activist said: "In the experience of the Muslims, the time to watch out is when the LTTE tries to be nice".[45] Instead of gradually building confidence between Tamils and Muslims, the LTTE's actions underlined widespread suspicions that the LTTE would be unable to overcome its past and come to terms with Muslim aspirations in the north and east.

The Hakeem-Prabhakaran deal produced no changes in LTTE behaviour, and local talks also failed to achieve a breakthrough. In September 2003 the Foundation for Coexistence, a non-governmental organisation (NGO), had helped to broker talks between the communities. Muslim leaders – grouped in a new North-East Muslim Peace

Assembly (NEMPA) – met with local LTTE leaders, and apparently agreed on the return of land and an end to insurgent extortion. But these talks seemed to have no real impact on the ground. A former parliamentarian, M. L. A. M. Hisbullah, suggests the lack of institutional follow-up to the agreements contributed to their failure.[46] An activist confirmed that while the talks often produced LTTE promises, there was no change in behaviour on the ground.[47]

The failure to obtain independent representation at the peace talks and the continuing LTTE violence seem to have contributed to "a rapid crystallisation of Muslim national identity" in 2002-2004.[48] Perhaps for the first time, the search for this identity was not led primarily by national political leaders but found new outlets in grass-roots movements, particularly among youth.

One outcome was the Oluvil Declaration, a statement in January 2003 by Muslim activist groups that ran ahead of many national Muslim political parties in setting out community demands for autonomy and separate status. It called for recognition of the Muslims as a separate entity and the establishment of an autonomous area for them in the east. It many ways it was reminiscent of the Vaddukkoddai Declaration of 1976, in which Tamils asserted their right to an independent homeland. The Oluvil Declaration attracted as many as 20,000 people at its launch but it was largely ignored by Colombo-based Muslim leaders. The civil activism that led to it has decreased somewhat, possibly as a result of a more active Muslim civil society and other Muslim political groups taking up many of the demands more strongly.

The LTTE-inspired violence against Muslims and the failure of the 2002 Hakeem-Prabhakaran talks left Muslims largely sidelined from the peace process. When the government proposed an interim administration for the north and east, and the LTTE responded with a proposal for an Internal Self-Governing Administration (ISGA), the Muslim perspective was again largely forgotten. Similarly, when an aid-sharing agreement was worked out between the government and the LTTE (the Post-Tsunami Operational Managing Structure, P-TOMS), Muslims argued that it overlooked the enormous destruction that the tsunami had wreaked on Muslim areas and gave too much control of resources to the LTTE, although safeguards were designed to address Muslim concerns. Eventually, P-TOMS was in effect scrapped as a result of a Supreme Court decision but the episode again compounded Muslim

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[42] Sumanasiri Liyanage, Nimanthi Perera-Rajasingham, "New Trends in Muslim Politics", *Lines*, November 2004, p. 3.
[43] Champika Liyanaarachchi, "Mutur: Lessons Unlearnt", *Daily Mirror*, 23 April 2003; Nirupama Subramanian, "LTTE and Muslims", *The Hindu* (online), 21 October 2003; "The Plight of Child Conscripts, Social Degradation and Anti-Muslim Frenzy", UTHR(J), Special Report No. 20, July 2002, available at www.uthr.org.
[44] "Tiger Manipulation of Tamil-Muslim Relations and the Creeping Siege of Kinniya and Mutur", UTHR(J), Information Bulletin no. 34, 21 December 2003.
[45] Ibid.

[46] Crisis Group interview, Colombo, 27 February 2007.
[47] Crisis Group interview, Kattankudi, March 2007.
[48] "New Trends in Muslim Politics", op. cit., p. 1.

fears of a government-LTTE deal that would ignore their political and economic interests.[49]

One major breakthrough for the Muslim community during the peace process was the creation of a Muslim Peace Secretariat. Both the government and the LTTE established similar institutions to take the lead in negotiations. Their institutions are now largely moribund, with little prospect of new talks in the near future. The Muslim Peace Secretariat, however, has played a useful role in developing political ideas among community activists and providing much needed infrastructure for Muslim approaches to the conflict, but it has also been beset by internal differences and party politics and has found it difficult to act as a unifying body.

B. MUSLIM FACTIONALISM AND DEMOCRACY

The Muslim community failed to make more headway in asserting its rights during the peace process largely because both the government and the LTTE viewed its concerns as a side-issue. But the case for an independent delegation was also undermined by disputes among Muslim political leaders that undermined their ability to present a strong and united case to the two main parties.

The disputed leadership of the SLMC following Ashraff's death was resolved in favour of Rauf Hakeem, but after 2002, further infighting led to more defections. Parliamentarian A. L. M. Athaulla left the party, having criticised Hakeem's failure to win separate status for the Muslims at the peace talks. Ferial Ashraff became leader of the National Unity Alliance (NUA), a party linked to the SLMC, but increasingly acting independently. The divisions within the Muslim political elite were due partly to personality but also to the lack of an overall political strategy. A Muslim civil society activist pointed out: "There are no cohesive policies that unite them so it becomes easy to divide them".[50]

The lack of a united front has been used by many in the negotiations to downplay Muslim demands for a separate delegation. It has certainly weakened the Muslims' case for more political recognition. However, similar internal problems are also present in the other two key ethnic communities. The LTTE has dealt with Tamil dissension through repression and killing. The Sinhalese have repeatedly failed to achieve a workable consensus on the ethnic conflict and have been twice divided by violent uprisings. Personality differences and party politics aside, the geographical dispersal of Muslims will always make any common political position very difficult.

The SLMC has attempted to lead, at times seeming to try to be sole representative for its co-religionists, a position that seems even more untenable in the Muslim than in the Tamil context. It has never been accepted by all Muslims as their political representative. Some have viewed it as unnecessarily nationalistic and are concerned that Muslims were following the same tragic path as Tamil nationalism did several decades earlier.

In any case, many groups feel that national Muslim politicians of whatever party do not represent their interests. Some northern Muslims feel they are not properly represented by eastern Muslim leaders. Equally, eastern Muslims for a long time felt that southern Muslim elites ignored their particular problems. Some parts of all branches suggest that national political figures are too far removed from the grass roots to represent ordinary Muslims. Some members of minority groups – such as the Malays – feel they have no representation at all.

There have been repeated attempts to unite Muslim political groups. The Muslim Council, a group of civil society leaders, has been relatively successful at bringing different political figures together but has found it harder to broker lasting agreements among them. Increased use of civil society groups, which are less prone to the factionalism of party politics, may help develop more common positions. The Muslim Peace Secretariat should also be playing a role as a common body for all Muslims but its achievements have been undermined by the perception among some Muslims that it is representative in effect of only two parties, the SLMC and the NUA. It should broaden its support base, perhaps by engaging more with civil society groups.

Just as important as the lack of unity at higher levels, is inadequate democracy in Muslim politics at the lower levels. Sri Lankan politics in general is based on patronage networks, and this dynamic is as strong among Muslims as elsewhere. The constant search by politicians for a reliable vote bank and the willingness of many Muslim voters to be directed towards one or another candidate by local leaders, businessmen or religious leaders has skewed policies towards winning elections rather than achieving inter-ethnic harmony or developing proper public services for all.

This patronage system does allow major figures, including Muslim politicians, to marshal resources for some public works in their home villages. For example, Kattankudi, a Muslim town, has a rather grand cultural centre named after a former parliamentarian. Similarly, a new stadium

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[49] For discussion of Muslim attitudes towards P-TOMS, see "P-TOMS: The Muslim Dimension", Council for Public Policy, July 2005, report of a seminar at Bandaranaike Centre for International Studies (BCIS), Colombo.
[50] Crisis Group interview, Colombo, February 2007.

in the "Athaulla play ground" in Akkaraipattu looks little used but shows the ability of Minister A. H. M. Athaulla to direct resources to his home town. This can provoke allegations of favouritism, however. In July 2005 Kalmunai residents protested that he was favouring his own village over the broader district.[51] Tamils feel this even more keenly, complaining that Muslim representatives ignore their concerns and allocate funds largely to their own community.

In the aftermath of the tsunami, in particular, Muslim residents complained about the inattention of national Muslim politicians. Muslim areas on the eastern coast had suffered significantly, with thousands dead and widespread destruction of homes and property. Muslim residents, according to one report, accused their political leaders of "investing resources in costly, high budget, high visibility projects to the detriment of other quicker, more community-friendly and practicable solutions".[52] In February 2006 tsunami-affected families in Kalmunai held a week-long sit-in before local government offices to protest lack of aid for their district.

Similarly, in August 2006 Muslim residents who had fled Mutur to avoid the clash between the military and the LTTE and were stranded for several weeks in makeshift camps complained about the lack of attention from national Muslim leaders. According to a fact-finding mission, the internally displaced persons (IDPs) of one camp said that "in the event any Muslim leaders allied with the government visited them, they would be assaulted, as the IDPs felt betrayed by these leaders".[53]

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[51]"Kalmunai Muslims protest against SL Minister Athaulla", Tamilnet, 29 July 2005.
[52] Mirak Raheem, Fara Haniffa, "Post-Tsunami Reconstruction and the Eastern Muslim Question", *Lines,* May 2005, p. 7, at www.lines-magazine.org/Art_May05/faramirakfullarticle.htm.
[53] "Report of a Fact-Finding Mission to Kantalai and Serunuwara", Centre for Policy Alternatives, 25 August 2006, at www.cpalanka.org/research_papers/Kantalai_Serunuwara_Report.pdf.

V. TAMIL-MUSLIM RELATIONS IN THE EAST

Since mid-2006 Sri Lanka's Muslims have been caught in the middle of a new war. As before, they are not party to the conflict and have little influence over events. But as usual, they are among its primary victims. To understand the impact of the conflict on Muslims in the east, where most of the fighting has occurred, it is important to outline the tensions between Tamils and Muslims that have only grown since 1990. Changes in settlement patterns, more segregation of the two communities and continuing disputes over land all fuel a complex mix of problems that will remain whatever the outcome of clashes between the government and the LTTE.

A. PATTERNS OF SETTLEMENT IN THE EAST

In the east, Muslims live primarily in picturesque coastal villages, stretching from Pottuvil in the south to areas around Trincomalee Bay in the north. From Batticaloa, south to Pottuvil, they occupy compact villages and towns, stretched out on both sides of a busy coastal road, often separated by small Tamil villages. Much of the rural hinterland is populated by Tamils, and parts of this interior were under LTTE control, at least until the government military offensive of 2006-2007. Further inland are almost exclusively Sinhalese areas. This spread of the ethnic groups ensures that the Muslim community is inexorably drawn into any new war.

Before the conflict there was much more integration between Tamils and Muslims, who shared many cultural commonalities, to the extent that one anthropologist calls this coastal strip "a Muslim-Tamil cultural complex".[54] Older residents – Tamil and Muslim – remember with some nostalgia a period when they had many mixed friendships and studied and worked together.

But 30 years of conflict have taken their toll. Now the two communities are largely segregated. At the 2001 census, only 77 of the 34,749 residents of Kattankudi were not Muslims. Tirrukkovil division in the south of Ampara district, has only 289 non-Tamils in its 23,739 population.[55] Some other divisions are more mixed but once integrated villages are now often divided into two administrative divisions, one for Tamils, the other for Muslims. This has happened in Kalmunai, for example, and Akkaraipattu,

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[54] Dennis B. McGilvray, "Tamil and Muslim identities in the East", Marga Institute, monograph no. 24, 2001, p. 5.
[55] All figures relate to the 2001 census, from the Department of Census and Statistics – Sri Lanka, at www.statistics.gov.lk.

where residents seldom venture after dark into the other ethnic group's enclave.

Similar informal rules of ethnic division apply to Sinhalese areas. Of the nineteen Divisional Secretariat (DS) divisions in Ampara district, seven are effectively reserved for Sinhalese residents, many of whom were settled by the state in the region as part of development and colonisation programs. In these seven districts, out of a population of 228,753, there are only 876 Muslims; 98.8 per cent is Sinhalese. Ampara is the main town of a district in which Muslims are the largest group, and Tamils form a significant minority, but in the town itself it is rare to see non-Sinhalese, at least after the working day. Some 98 per cent of residents are Sinhalese.[56]

This ethnic segregation is the result of several tendencies. In some areas, it is a natural progression from traditional patterns of settlement: Kattankudi, for example, has always been predominantly Muslim. However, years of war and displacement have also forced ethnic groups to segregate for their own security. And informal but powerful restrictions have developed that limit investment, residence and land ownership according to ethnic group (and also according to regional origin – both Tamils and Muslims are generally opposed to "outsiders" moving into the coastal strip, regardless of ethnic origin). The ban on Muslims acquiring property in Ampara has no legal basis but seems to be the result of Sinhalese nationalist forces blocking any attempt by non-Sinhalese from developing significant business or property interests in "their" areas.

This pattern of segregation has very negative consequences but does provide some level of stability and security in the Tamil-Muslim coastal strip against any further attempts at state colonisation of minority areas. Attempts to undermine these vetoes on land acquisition, as may be happening in Pottuvil district, where Muslims are concerned about Sinhalese taking more land, will almost inevitably spark off more conflict.

B. SEGREGATION AND INTERDEPENDENCE

For the most part, Tamil and Muslim communities in the east now have separate administrative arrangements, schools and hospitals. This segregation is not absolute. Some Tamils attend Muslim schools, and occasionally Muslims send their children to ostensibly Christian schools. At the respected Al-Ashraq school in Nintevur, about 5 per cent of the pupils are Tamils, according to the

principal.[57] And children do come together for private, extracurricular tuition, which is something of a national obsession in Sri Lanka, largely as a result of state school inadequacies.[58] Nevertheless, there is very little interaction among school-age children of different faiths.

There is similar segregation in some public services. In Kalmunai, for example, there are two state-funded hospitals. The Ashraff memorial hospital mainly serves the Muslim community, while the other hospital is used mainly by Tamils. Again, this is not absolute, but Tamil hospitals are poorly staffed and often less well equipped than the equivalent in Muslim areas. This may be partly the result of inadequate distribution of resources but it is also a result of the conflict. When the security situation is difficult, Tamil doctors may fear being caught up in a security operation, and hospitals have been targeted by Tamil militants, who have stolen drugs and extorted money from doctors. As a result, it is difficult to find Tamil medical staff willing to work in the east.[59] It is not surprising, therefore, that Muslims have tried to establish their own institutions, as isolated as possible from the conflict.

These separate administrative and public service arrangements mean there is little real interaction between neighbouring ethnic communities. Almost the only Tamils with permanent jobs in the Muslim part of the village of Akkaraipattu seem to be the barbers.[60] The booming post-tsunami construction industry means that many Tamils seek work as day labourers on construction sites in Muslim areas. There have traditionally been many skilled Tamil workers, notably masons and carpenters. By evening, however, they are home in their own community.

This segregation is accentuated by economic differences. At first glance, Muslim villages are vibrant and bustling: every other building seems to be a bakery, grocery store or hardware shop. Sometimes this activity hides considerable poverty but in general the Muslim population seems visibly better off than its Tamil neighbours. Since the tsunami, there has been a construction boom: houses are being rebuilt, and new buildings are going up. Tamil villages are markedly less successful economically, at least on the surface, although there has been some progress in the

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[56] Ibid. The seven predominantly Sinhalese DS divisions are Lahugala, Damana, Ampara, Uhana, Mahaoya, Padiyathalawa and Dehiattakandiya.

[57] Crisis Group interview, Nintevur, March 2007.
[58] Occasionally, according to a Muslim resident of Akkaraipattu, Muslim families have sheltered Tamil youths, who have been attending tuition classes, after there has been an attack on security forces. "[Otherwise,] they tend to arrest any Tamils on the streets in those cases", he claims. Crisis Group interview, Akkaraipattu, March 2007.
[59] According to medical officials, Tirrukkovil hospital for a long time was without a single doctor. Crisis Group interviews, Ampara district, March 2007.
[60] Muslims are traditionally reluctant to engage in this profession.

post-tsunami period, largely through assistance from aid
agencies and NGOs, and also through an influx of money
from relatives working abroad.

The causes of these economic discrepancies are multiple:
government discrimination in allocating resources; years
of neglect of the development needs of Tamil areas; and the
out-migration of many residents as a result of government
repression and conflict. Another major factor is the
inability of Tamil politicians (grouped in the pro-LTTE
Tamil National Alliance) to access significant patronage
networks in a way that some Muslim political figures can.
Perhaps most significantly, although Muslim businessmen
often have been forced to pay taxes to militant groups,
they are not subject to the same level of depredations as
the Tamil population. Those Tamils who have funds are
sometimes reluctant to invest in business for fear of
attracting the unwanted attention of the LTTE or
other Tamil militant groups. This mass extortion is a
major reason for Tamil inability to develop stronger
entrepreneurial capacities in the east.

Despite all the tensions, and the virtual separation of
communities, everyday relations are not perhaps as
difficult as might be expected. A resident of Akkaraipattu
explains that relations are relatively good in the adjoining
areas, where people still interact on an everyday basis:
"When there is trouble, it tends to be stoked by people
from outside the village".[61] Where a Tamil works in a
predominantly Muslim area, his or her colleagues seem to
be very supportive. "If there is a problem, like a *hartal*,[62]
they call me and I don't come into work", says one Tamil
teacher in a largely Muslim area.[63] Similar mechanisms
work for Muslims who work among Tamils.

Clearly there is a long-term need for communal
reconciliation. Perhaps, if left to themselves, without
the interference of Tamil militant groups and Sinhalese
nationalist politicians, the two groups could find common
ground and overcome the segregation that has developed
over the past two decades. In the present context, however,
any moves towards more integration are likely to fail.

Many older residents bemoan these artificial divisions in
communities that were once much more integrated. But
they are a reality that can not be overcome easily. Although
an ideal solution would promote more political, social
and economic integration, rather than further cementing
difference, at an interim stage at least any new
arrangements for governance in the east will have to take
account of the informal and formal arrangements that exist.

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[61] Crisis Group interview, Akkaraipattu, March 2007.
[62] A *hartal* is a cross between a strike and a protest. Shops are
closed and traffic is usually prevented from moving on main
roads.
[63] Crisis Group interview, Nintevur, April 2007.

C.   LAND DISPUTES

Muslims live in crowded urban and semi-urban areas on
the coastal strip but most of their agricultural lands are
inland, in Tamil areas. When the conflict broke out in the
early 1990s, it became much more difficult to access these
lands, since they had to pass through Tamil areas where
the LTTE was active. Some Tamils claim that Muslims
had encroached on Tamil land or bought it illegally, and
that they have merely reclaimed traditional Tamil lands.
In reality, there has clearly been a significant loss of rural
Muslim lands to Tamils. Some of this had been held by
Muslims for many years, while other areas were bought
by Muslims – who tended to be better off economically
than most Tamils – in the 1970s and 1980s.

Tamils suffered considerable displacement in the past,
largely at the hands of the government, and many of their
villages are impoverished. As a result, Muslims were often
able to buy Tamil land cheaply. In most cases, such
deals were probably legal but that does not remove the
resentment felt, particularly when Tamils have found
themselves working as labourers on land they previously
owned. In some cases, Muslim owners were virtually
absentee landlords, who visited at harvest time, but mostly
employed Tamil labourers for cultivation. When the
security situation made travel through LTTE areas
dangerous for Muslims in the early 1990s, these labourers
tended to take over, leaving Muslims with very little
available land for cultivation.

These disputes have been exacerbated by government
policies over several decades. There is no real shortage of
land in the east, although large tracts are not cultivated.
However, as noted above, Muslims and Tamils are in
effect barred by informal restrictions from cultivation in
Sinhalese areas, forcing them to dispute the narrow coastal
strips where they reside. The tenure system – much of it
left from the colonial period – provides too much leeway
for government interference and has insufficient land
under private title. In addition, huge swathes in the east
are controlled by centralised government agencies. The
Ports Authority, for example, controls large parts of
Trincomalee district. The Forestry Commission is also a
major landholder. This central control ensures that local
government institutions have very limited powers to
provide new land for cultivation.

There needs to be a complete review of land issues in the
Eastern province by an independent commission with
equal representation from all communities and input from
civil society. The state should disinvest more land and
develop new mechanisms to permit transfer to private
owners in a transparent, equitable manner. But many of
these issues await a political settlement of the conflict,
since provincial-level government, in concert with local

authorities, should be primarily involved in resolving complex land issues.

After the 2002 ceasefire agreement, some Muslims began to cultivate their lands again, but with the resumption of conflict in 2006, access to many of them has again became virtually impossible. In theory, the declining influence of the LTTE in parts of the Eastern province should make it easier for Muslims to regain control of their lands. In practice, there are several major problems:

❑ there are still disputes over ownership in many places, made more complex by a variety of tenure arrangements;[64]

❑ there is still considerable fear of the LTTE, with little trust as yet in the government's assurances that previously rebel-held areas are now secure;

❑ many Tamil agricultural workers will be left without land if Muslims reclaim their properties, potentially provoking serious disputes; and

❑ disputes are being manipulated by new Tamil militant groups, primarily the Tamileela Makkal Viduthalai Puligal (Tamil People's Liberation Tigers, TMVP, also know as the Karuna faction), for financial and political gain.

VI. EASTERN MUSLIMS IN THE NEW WAR

Since the conflict restarted on a major scale in August 2006, most fighting has been in the Eastern province, where Muslims are particularly vulnerable.

During the ceasefire, areas of LTTE and government control were fairly clearly understood, and both sides maintained effective borders and checkpoints between them. While the government controlled Batticaloa and Trincomallee towns, the LTTE held most of the hinterland and parts of the coast north of Batticaloa. During 2006-2007, the government has attempted to reclaim most LTTE areas.

The government is conducting a full-scale military operation in the east, with the assistance of the TMVP. It claims considerable success, destroying many LTTE bases in rural areas and reclaiming territories long held by the rebels, such as Vakirai. Independent information is very limited, however. As a commentator, Iqbal Athas, notes, "the ground realities are covered by the thick fog of high pitched propaganda".[65]

Government troops clearly made significant advances against permanent LTTE bases in January-April 2007 and regained control of considerable territory, but it remains unclear how extensive their control of formerly LTTE-held areas really is. Athas comments: "Contrary to all the official claims, a fuller control of the province by the security forces is yet to be achieved. Though they have dislodged Tiger guerrillas from some areas, causing serious casualties both in human and material terms, there is still resistance from many pockets".[66]

Whatever the real success of the government campaign, few Tamils or Muslims in the east seem to believe that the government will achieve a lasting victory without some form of political negotiations. Residents recall military campaigns in the 1990s, when similar victory claims were made, only to be reversed later. Regardless of the outcome of the military campaign, the perception of the LTTE as still influential in much of the Eastern province means Tamils and Muslims are unwilling to take any public steps that imply overt opposition to the rebels for fear of reprisals.

The most notable victims in this new round of the conflict have been eastern Tamils, hundreds of whom have died in the fighting and as a result of abductions and

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[64] Much of the land cultivated in the east is held under Land Development Ordinances, which provide permits to farm. This restricts buying and selling of land, although there is a grey market. More land is now being given as grants, which offer more substantial rights to the owners.

[65] Iqbal Athas, "More war on the cards", *Sunday Times* (Colombo), 22 April 2007, p. 5.
[66] Ibid.

extrajudicial killings, while others have been forced to flee in huge numbers. More than 120,000 IDPs were still stranded in Batticaloa in late April 2007.[67] The Muslim community has suffered less but has still been a victim of the renewed fighting and the emergence of the TMVP.

A.   MUTUR, AUGUST 2006

The first major conflict in the east was in early August 2006, when the government mounted an offensive to take control of a small sluice gate in the Mavil Aru area, which the LTTE had blocked, cutting off water to farmers. In response, LTTE cadres took control of Mutur, a small Muslim settlement on the southern side of the Trincomalee Bay. This may have been a diversionary tactic, or perhaps an attempt to capture or kill pro-government armed groups, either Muslim or Tamil paramilitaries.

There was already considerable suspicion of the LTTE among Muslims in the area. The clashes of late 2002-2003 in Mutur (see above) suggested the LTTE was again trying to push Muslims out of the area. On 29 May 2006 notices appeared in Mutur ordering Muslims to leave within 72 hours, prompting panic and recollections of 1990. The LTTE denied that it was behind the leaflets but did little to convince the community of its good intentions.[68]

The capture of parts of Mutur by the LTTE in early August led to artillery exchanges with apparently complete mutual disregard for trapped civilians. Residents took shelter in schools and colleges but after a shell hit the Arabic college, killing ten, almost all residents fled. More than 25,000 mostly Muslim residents escaped to the relative safety of Kantalai, a small town some 30km away. Tamil residents reportedly fled to LTTE-controlled areas.

What happened next is still disputed. Muslims had apparently been assured of safe passage by the LTTE but near the hamlet of Panchanoor, they were stopped by LTTE cadres, who separated some 200 men from the women and children, apparently on suspicion that they were members of a "jihadi" group. Some were tied up, presumably pending execution. At this point, at least according to one report, an artillery barrage landed nearby, killing several people but allowing most of the captured Muslims to escape.[69] Other sources claim that

more than 100 men "disappeared" after this incident but there has been no conclusive investigation.[70]

The military quickly regained control of Mutur but Muslim IDPs languished for more than three weeks in inadequate shelters, before returning to their homes, many of them damaged or destroyed. The trauma of the conflict and displacement continues to affect many residents. Some Tamil IDPs have still not returned to Mutur.

The Mutur incident reinforced Muslim fears of the LTTE throughout the east. Some Muslims privately welcomed the subsequent military action against the rebels in Trincomalee and Batticaloa districts but this support has ebbed away, partly because of scepticism that the government victories will be sustainable but also because Muslims have found themselves facing a new threat from the breakaway LTTE faction, the Karuna group.

B.   MUSLIMS AND THE TMVP

The Karuna faction, which left the LTTE in 2004 and allied with the government, has attempted to reform itself as a political party, with a military wing, calling itself the TMVP. It is led by the former LTTE commander in the east, Vinayagamoorthi Muralitharan, more commonly known as "Colonel Karuna".[71] Human rights organisations have attested to its recruitment of children as soldiers and claimed it is involved in abductions and extrajudicial killings.[72]

TMVP cadres are asserting control over Tamil areas in the east, their rough graffiti on walls and bus shelters marking areas of influence. In Batticaloa town, men and boys with guns but no uniforms were frequently seen on the heavily policed streets in March; they are even more predominant in Tamil areas north of the town and out towards their camps in Welikanda area. They have also opened offices in most Tamil areas to the south of Batticaloa and in Trincomalee to the north, but also in some predominantly Muslim villages, such as Pottuvil. The TMVP cooperates closely with the military.

Almost inevitably, the TMVP's attempt to fill the vacuum left by the LTTE has led to conflict with the Muslim community. Karuna was in command of the LTTE in

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[67] Crisis Group interview, Rishad Bathiudeen, minister of resettlement and disaster relief services, April 2007. Many IDPs began to return home in May 2007.
[68] Mirak Raheem, "A betrayal of a community", *The South Asian*, 4 September 2006, at www.thesouthasian.org/archives/ 2006/a_betrayal_of_a_community.html.
[69] Ibid; "Hubris and Humanitarian Catastrophe", UTHR(J), Special Report no. 22, 15 August 2006, www.uthr.org.

[70] The alleged massacre of Muslims during the flight from Mutur is one of the sixteen cases being examined by the Presidential Commission of Inquiry which began work in 2007 (see below).
[71] In early May 2007 there were reports of a split of the TMVP into two rival factions. It remains unclear what impact this will have on relations with the Muslim community.
[72] See, inter alia, "Complicit in Crime: State Collusion in Abductions and Child Recruitment by the Karuna Group", Human Rights Watch, 24 January 2007.

the east in 1990 when some of the worst violence against Muslims took place. Since the split with the northern LTTE, it has occasionally made more placatory statements towards Muslims but reality on the ground has appeared to be at odds with the rhetoric.

For the most part, the TMVP has been engaged in activities in the Tamil communities and has been replacing the LTTE in its role as "protector". In reality, this means repeating the insurgents' worst excesses: Tamil community leaders complain of racketeering, robberies, extortion and abductions of young men, some of them children of school age. This was all normal practice under the LTTE, but in some cases the TMVP seems even less disciplined, and some local Tamils appear to view them as more a criminal group than a political movement. In Akkaraipattu a community leader claimed there were more than twenty instances of robbery and extortion in February 2007, allegedly by members of the TMVP.[73] These cases are not confirmed, since victims are warned not to go to the police. In any case, the police are unable or unwilling to act against the TMVP.

In January 2007 serious tensions emerged between the TMVP and the Muslim community of Kattankudi, which lies between two predominantly Tamil areas. To the south is the Tamil village of Araiampathy, where the TMVP had been trying to win support. As it has begun seeking broader political backing among Tamils, the TMVP has been unable to rely on force alone. It has failed so far to articulate a policy that goes against government policy, because of close ties to the army. Its only political tool seems to be the manipulation of Tamil-Muslim relations to reinforce its stance as the "protector" of Tamils in the east.

Like many areas in the east, Kattankudi and Araiampathy had been divided on ethnic lines for administrative purposes but the demarcation of land between the two remained disputed. Kattankudi residents had lost considerable land in LTTE-controlled areas on the land-side of the lagoon and had sought alternatives in some predominantly Tamil areas. There seems to have been some resentment in Araiampathy at the economic expansion of Kattankudi businessmen into Tamil areas.

The TMVP successfully manipulated these minor tensions. When Tamil IDPs started arriving in Araiampathy in January 2007, escaping increasing conflict in LTTE areas, the TMVP took over some of the relief effort, putting up over 300 tents on lands claimed by Muslims. One report suggests Muslim youths burned down some tents.[74]

The TMVP also began intimidation. Muslim traders were banned from Tamil areas under their control. On 9 January TMVP cadres opened fire on men returning from prayer in Kattankudi, injuring two; on 10 January they threw a grenade into Kattankudi bazaar and roamed the streets threatening local residents. There were several reports of assaults on Muslims travelling through Tamil areas. Several houses were attacked and burnt in Paalamunai, a Muslim village outside the main town.[75] These incidents threatened to create a backlash: Muslim elders said they had trouble controlling armed youths but the fact that the TMVP was allied with the security forces was probably a significant restraining factor.[76]

At first, the security forces seem to have been reluctant to intervene. Only after Kattankudi Muslims staged a *hartal* and raised the issue with national politicians was there some reaction. Several rounds of talks between Karuna representatives in Colombo and Muslim civil society leaders ended some of the worst violence. Eventually, the local army brigade commander presided over talks. TMVP encroachment on Muslim lands was reversed. The local TMVP head, "Shanthan", was transferred, only to be reinstated after a local demonstration was staged in his support. Only further pressure in Colombo finally produced a new leader for the office, who promised Muslims that relations would be cordial. However, even after his appointment tensions continued.[77]

Serious problems have also occurred in Pottuvil, a majority-Muslim village with a small Tamil population.[78] Muslims were unhappy with the TMVP office, which opened in the centre of the town, and claimed there have been clashes between TMVP cadres and local youths. In March senior Colombo politicians reportedly rebuffed attempts to address the issue.[79]

In April 2007 these tensions threatened to turn to violence. The TMVP had intended to occupy a government building as a new office. Before it could do so, the Muslim-dominated *pradeshiya sabha* (local council) ordered its demolition. TMVP attempts to stop the demolition apparently involved threats to councillors, and a car was set ablaze. These events led to a Muslim

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[73] Crisis Group interview, March 2007.
[74] D. B. S. Jeyeraj, "TMVP foments friction in Kaathaankudi", 20 January 2007, www.transcurrents.com.

[75] "Tense situation prevailing in Kattankudy – Terrorists are terrorists including Karuna or Prabakaran", Federation of Kattankudy Mosques and Muslim Institutions, emailed report, 13 January 2007.
[76] Crisis Group interviews, Kattankudi, March 2007.
[77] Crisis Group interviews, Kattankudi, March 2007.
[78] Pottuvil was once a majority-Tamil district but there has been major displacement of Tamils from the district over the past twenty years, and they are now a relatively small minority.
[79] Crisis Group interviews, Pottuvil, March 2007.

hartal and eventually some national attention. The talks seem to have resolved the crisis, at least temporarily.

Such situations can easily spiral out of control. Media reports suggested young people were discussing defending themselves from Karuna cadres if the situation continued.[80] "We are just managing to keep young people under control", admitted a community leader, even before the April confrontations.[81] SLMC leader Rauf Hakeem claimed that TMVP activities against Muslims could "trigger another disastrous dimension to the conflict".[82]

The Pottuvil incident demonstrated the problems that local and national Muslim leaders face in raising concerns with a government that is heavily reliant on the TMVP for its military campaign and extremely resistant to any criticism of the alliance. When a Colombo newspaper ran a front-page story on the tensions in Pottuvil, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse telephoned the editor and allegedly threatened her.[83] Other Muslim leaders have apparently found it extremely difficult to raise the issue of Karuna with senior political figures. Government officials seem oblivious to the potential political problems that the TMVP is creating. Some simply deny that paramilitary forces exist.[84]

With possible elections in the east this year, and the TMVP seeking to manipulate Tamil-Muslim tensions to garner support, the potential for further Tamil-Muslim friction is still high. The issue could also have been compounded by the influx of so many IDPs into Batticaloa district. Inevitably, such a mass movement in the constricted coastal belt was bound to produce some friction, with complaints emerging of IDPs being settled by the TMVP on land claimed by Muslims in the north of the Batticaloa district.

However, in most cases, the displacement seems to have generated only a humanitarian response from the Muslim community, with Kattankudi leaders collecting aid for

thousands. Mosque leaders, businessmen and ordinary people collected money, food and equipment in a positive demonstration of inter-ethnic harmony. In several cases, TMVP cadres apparently threatened Muslims who were giving out food to IDPs, but Muslim leaders simply gave it out in other camps.[85] Since state agencies were apparently unprepared for this mass movement of civilians away from the conflict zone, the Muslim assistance was of more than just symbolic value.

C.   MUSLIM-SINHALESE RELATIONS AND GOVERNMENT PLANS FOR THE EAST

During previous bouts of fighting in the 1990s, Pottuvil had been relatively unscathed. The LTTE was relatively weak in the area, and many residents were mainly concerned about attracting more tourists to the neighbouring surfing resort of Arugam Bay. Since 2006, not only are Pottuvil residents having to cope with the TMVP, but they have also clashed with the security forces over the massacre of ten local men (see below) and are increasingly concerned over what they view as creeping "Sinhalese colonisation".

A number of apparently unrelated incidents – some alleged encroachment by Sinhalese settlers on Muslim land, a mismatch in post-tsunami funding, the erection of two Buddhist statues, the activities of a maverick monk and an attempt by business interests to seize valuable land in the surf-friendly tourist resort of Arugam Bay – are evidence to some local activists of a government plan to continue the colonisation plans of earlier decades.[86] Local leaders claim that government policy is guided by extreme elements, linked to the JHU and other Buddhist-nationalist groups.

The road from Pottuvil into the laid-back resort of Arugam Bay is guarded by a Special Task Force (STF)[87] camp on the seashore. Opposite the camp stands a new Buddha statue, clearly part of the military encampment. This kind of needless provocation suggests to local Muslims that the military is somehow engaged in an expansion of Buddhism into their areas. A statue erected in Ullai – the village around the resort – also annoyed the majority Muslim community.

Buddha statues in the east seem a minor irritant but are perceived by Muslims as a precursor to something much

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[80] Easwaran Rutnam, "Armed Karuna Faction running its writ in Pottuvil", *Daily Mirror*, 16 April 2007.
[81] Crisis Group interview, Pottuvil, March 2007.
[82] "TMVP will change dimension of conflict – SLMC", Muslim Peace Secretariat, 17 April 2007, at http://peacemuslims.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=196&Itemid=38.
[83] "Sri Lanka's Defence Secretary Threatens Editor", Free Media Movement press release, 17 April 2007, at www.freemediarilanka.org/index.php?action=con_news_full&id=523&section=news.
[84] Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama claims: "We don't believe that there are paramilitaries….There is zero tolerance in terms of paramilitaries….We have no paramilitaries". Interview with Marianne David, *The Nation on Sunday*, 13 May 2007.

[85] Crisis Group interviews, local officials, Kattankudi, Chairman, March 2007.
[86] Crisis Group interviews, residents, Pottuvil, March 2007.
[87] The STF is the counter-terrorist branch of the police.

more threatening.[88] They may be right. Certainly, the erection of statues and the "defence of Buddhist sites" is firmly linked to the political agenda of a small but vociferous group of activists. Most are tied to the JHU, a Sinhalese Buddhist political party which has demanded that the government act against Islamic groups that it claims oppose the erection of such statues in the east. A memorandum it submitted to the government claimed: "Every inch of the east traditionally belongs to Buddhists. Sinhala kings settled Muslims in the east to save them from the Portuguese. How can they now say that we have no right to put up Buddha's statues there?"[89]

The government's inability or unwillingness to control such activities in sensitive multiethnic areas inevitably creates tensions. In Pottuvil local Muslims are also concerned about attempts to claim that the archaeological site of an ancient Buddhist temple should be expanded as a new Buddhist religious site, taking over lands used by Muslim residents.[90]

Potentially more powerful than the claims of fringe Buddhist-nationalists are business interests and land issues. Pottuvil residents claim increasing encroachment on their lands from Lahugala division, a bordering Sinhalese region, and are concerned about plans to transfer some districts out of Pottuvil's jurisdiction. Poor boundary demarcation and the uncertain nature of some land tenure breeds insecurity and fuels concern over the government's overall plans for the east.

Business interests are also playing a role in creating uncertainty over future development. In Trincomalee, the government has declared that 600 acres around the harbour will be designated a Special Economic Zone (SEZ), which gives it sweeping powers to acquire land for investment and avoids any need for local consultation. The Trincomalee SEZ would include Muslim-dominated areas, such as Mutur, an area already traumatised by the fighting in 2006.[91]

The east needs extensive investment and development. However, the Trincomalee SEZ is clearly an attempt to assert centralised control over a key strategic area, without any consultation or public debate. It undermines government rhetoric about devolving power, since it negates any local or provincial authority in the district.

None of these plans ever involve any consultation with local people, whether Tamil, Sinhalese or Muslim. The attractive Arugam Bay area (part of Pottuvil district) has been the target of large developers for years, and only an alliance of local community leaders and normally laid-back, hippy-friendly hoteliers has prevented the government from seizing land for major investors, most of whom are likely to come from the Sinhalese business community.

The Arugam Bay Resource Development Plan was drawn up by some businesspeople in April 2005 after apparently only a two-day visit to the area and no consultation with residents, who were told they would be forcibly relocated and their land seized for an upmarket resort owned by the Tourist Board. This kind of approach affects all communities and reflects the general tenor of government-sponsored development.[92] In this case, community action and international support seems to have forced the government to suspend its plans.

Not surprisingly, some local Muslims and Tamils tend to view these investment plans as "government plots" to "Sinhalise" the east. The government has done nothing to assuage such fears, which inevitably breed insecurity and widespread suspicion of its intentions. A public commitment not to promote development plans that would involve resettlement to the detriment of minority communities, a strong denial that the government plans any state colonisation programs and a commitment to include local people in the development process would help to assuage the fears of eastern Muslims.

D. POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND MUSLIM GRIEVANCES

As government plans for the east are gradually developed, it will become clearer whether the concerns of Muslims about "Sinhalisation" are real or not. So far, the signs do not augur well. Following a judicial decision to de-merge the Northern and Eastern provinces, the government has begun to establish an Eastern provincial council. The appointments so far seem to suggest little real interest in

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[88] It is also an irritant to Tamils, who protested at the erection of a Buddha statue in Trincomalee in 2005. Rather symbolically, the statue is now surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by the military.
[89] Cited in "Sinhala Nationalists urge crack down on Muslim groups", *Tamilnet*, 12 April 2005.
[90] Buddhist activists, on the other hand, claim that Muslims have encroached on land belonging to the temple and vandalised part of it. See Rohan Abeywardena, "Pottuvil's pot pouri simmers", *Sunday Times*, 29 April 2007, p. 6; Mallika Wanigasundara, "Moodu Maha Viharaya: The sun sets in the East for Buddhist temple", *The Buddhist Channel*, 7 October 2005.
[91] Crisis Group interviews, Trincomalee, April 2007.

[92] Sarath Fernando, "After the Tsunami: Rebuilding for Tourists" (2005), www.socialwatch.org/en/informesTematicos/ 94.html; Kusal Perera, "Massive land grab at Arugambay, Panama", *Daily Mirror*, 6 June 2005.

creating a viable multiethnic governance structure. The governor is a Sinhalese retired military officer, Rear Admiral Mohan Wijewickrema; the chief secretary, Herat Abeyeweera, is also Sinhalese. The council should be an elected body, but no date has been set for elections.

Everyday powers are largely vested in the government agent (GA), whose "office is dominated by Sinhalese, and he sits in Ampara [the Sinhalese-dominated district centre]", points out a disgruntled Muslim local politician.[93] In a response to Muslim concerns, an additional government agent (AGA) has been appointed, who is a Muslim and has an office in Kalmunai. In theory he should have extensive authority to respond to the concerns of people living in the coastal strip but locals complain that he has no real power, and all key issues go to the GA in Ampara.[94]

There are several local government institutions that do have some authority in local affairs: the government-appointed divisional secretary is often responsive to public opinion on disputed issues but is also a government servant and therefore frequently in a difficult position. His writ is circumscribed by the GA, elected politicians, government ministers and finally the security forces, who wield considerable formal and informal power in everyday affairs. The local elected village council (*pradeshiya sabha*) lacks real power, and seldom has sufficient money. Kattankudi has an elected urban council, which has slightly more powers to solve everyday local problems.

In every case, these local government bodies face too many restrictions and have very limited tax-raising capability. Without responsive local government to deal with disputes, Muslims tend to use their political representatives in parliament as the channel for their grievances. A parliamentarian, who may often also be a government minister, can raise issues with the president, which seems the most effective way of achieving political goals. But this system is hugely unwieldy. Kalmunai residents called off their protest at lack of assistance to tsunami-affected families in April 2006 only when they heard directly from President Rajapakse by satellite television link. These kinds of problems – which should be addressed by local government or at most ministers – are only resolved if the head of state gets involved directly. Not only is this inefficient but it also cements in place the patronage networks that undermine so many government structures.

In the absence of strong local democratic institutions, Muslims have developed many civil society mechanisms to reflect their concerns, primarily based on mosque leaderships. Each settlement has a federation of mosque leaders, all part of a Mosque Federation of the Eastern Province. The latter body meets infrequently, and there are still considerable regional divisions among Muslims of the province.

Other civil society groups extend beyond the mosque. In Pottuvil and some other villages a Shura (council) includes community leaders and intellectuals and has been actively involved in settling disputes. Muslim NGOs and other civil society groups are also active and provide a forum for discussion outside the factionalism of party politics. Earlier inter-ethnic peace committees seem to be largely dormant and should be revived where possible. One of the strengths of the Muslim communities in the east has been their ability to use these community leaders to negotiate peaceful solutions to disputes. However, as mentioned above, there is a continual concern that local elders and community leaders are finding it increasingly difficult to control disaffected youths.

E. LAW AND ORDER AND CIVILIAN PROTECTION

The history of attacks on Muslim communities by the LTTE makes security the top priority for Muslims in conflict areas. Many have relatively good relations with security forces, accepting that their presence in many places has improved security for Muslims.[95] Nevertheless, in some cases there is latent suspicion towards the security forces, who are viewed not as neutral actors but as having a broader political agenda favouring the majority community. Whether correct or not, the perception is quite common among some parts of the Muslim community.

On the morning of 18 September 2006 a search party found the bodies of ten Muslim labourers who had not returned home the previous evening from their work in the fields a few miles south of Pottuvil. The men had been blindfolded, tied up and hacked to death. One man, seriously injured, survived the attack. The killings sparked protests in Pottuvil, whose residents blamed the local STF camp commander. During one of the protests, the STF fired into a crowd, injuring fourteen. Protestors burnt down a hotel in the Arugam Bay resort and Sinhalese residents temporarily fled.

Calm was eventually restored but the government initially refused an independent inquiry and immediately blamed

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[93] Crisis Group interview, Akkaraipattu, March 2007.
[94] Crisis Group interviews, Akkaraipattu, Nintevur, March 2007.

[95] Crisis Group interviews, residents, Kalmunai.

the LTTE for the killings.[96] Local Muslims, however, remained convinced that the STF was responsible, arguing that the area was under its control, and there was a history of tension with that particular STF camp, although relations with other units were good.[97] SLMC leader Rauf Hakeem reported these suspicions to the media. The government's response was to remove his STF bodyguards.

The videotaped testimony in which the one survivor claimed the LTTE was behind the massacre was broadly paraded by the government as evidence that the security forces were innocent. However, serious questions have been raised about how the interview was conducted, apparently when the survivor's family was unable to visit him in hospital and he was completely isolated. The truth remains unclear, and the massacre is one of the incidents to be investigated by a special commission of inquiry appointed by President Rajapakse. What is already obvious, however, is that the state failed to mount a proper investigation and instead relied almost entirely on a dubious witness statement broadcast on the internet as evidence for its charges against the LTTE.[98] It is not surprising that the majority of Pottuvil residents remain convinced that the state is engaged in a cover-up.

There have been repeated attempts to address Muslim insecurity. In the 1980s and 1990s Muslims were drafted into the home guards (local residents given limited training and used as security guards) but this did little to improve the security situation. Instead, home guards were implicated in abuses and revenge killings, provoking more reprisals. There were repeated ideas of recruiting more Muslims into the armed forces, but these also failed. Few wanted to join, and Muslim leaders were reluctant to encourage a move that would ensure they were seen as siding with the government in the conflict. In 2005 an effort was made to establish a Muslim army regiment. It is not clear who developed the idea, which seems to have been opposed by almost all Muslim leaders. The few Muslims who volunteered were given military training but released after the scheme was aborted.

Muslims traditionally have not followed security careers but in recent years there has been increased recruitment into the police in eastern areas, mostly in response to relatively attractive salaries – a constable can earn up to

20,000 rupees ($185) per month, a good local salary. Some less reputable residents have also apparently joined, allegedly because of the potential for corruption or racketeering.[99] Nevertheless, ethnic minorities are still sharply under-represented in the local police. According to SLMC leader Hakeem, there are 96 policemen in majority-Muslim Kattankudi, but only nine are Muslims (there are seventeen Tamils).[100] Ethnic balance is not a panacea, of course: "The most important thing is that the police are well trained and honest, not which ethnic group they come from", a Muslim leader points out.[101] In some areas, such as Kattankudi, where there are serious intra-Muslim disputes, a monoethnic police force could actually pose a serious problem, but in general much more could be done to ensure serious representation of minorities in the security forces.

The failure to develop police who can adequately reflect the communities they work in is one reason the government is often unable to assert real influence in minority areas it ostensibly controls. In addition, the police have clearly been warned off tackling the Karuna faction, leaving them in a difficult position whenever there are communal clashes. The problem lies not so much with the police force, although it faces serious structural and corruption challenges, and has links with organised crime. As a police officer notes, "we know how to do multiethnic policing. I could do it tomorrow. But I would not be allowed to do it because of politics".[102]

This sense of insecurity has encouraged some Muslims to arm themselves. In some areas, there are clearly Muslim groups that have access to weapons, either left over from the home guard movement, or bought privately, in some cases apparently from the Karuna faction after its split with the LTTE.[103] These informal groupings are likely to be ineffective against any serious threat and so far seem to have been involved mainly in intra-religious disputes or personal vendettas, rather than clashes with Tamil militants. Nevertheless, any further failure of the state to ensure security for the Muslim community will inevitably fuel the desire of many young Muslims to seek alternative methods of defence.

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[96] "Truth Exposed: Massacre of Muslims, A Contemptible Motive By LTTE To Discredit the State And Forces", 20 September 2006, www.nationalsecurity.lk.

[97] Crisis Group interviews, Pottuvil, March 2007.

[98] One report suggests that potential witnesses are afraid to testify, that evidence from the site was destroyed and the bodies were removed from the scene in breach of established procedures. See "Fact-Finding Mission to Pottuvil, 9-11 March 2007", Law and Society Trust/INFORM/Rights Now!

[99] Crisis Group interview, police officer, April 2007.

[100] Cited in "Tamil Tigers must honor agreement with Muslims to resettle them with security", *Asian Tribune*, 17 February 2007, at www.asiantribune.com/index.php?q=node/4589.

[101] Crisis Group interview, civil society activist, Colombo, February 2007.

[102] Crisis Group interview, April 2007.

[103] Crisis Group interview, community leader, Kattankudi, March 2007.

VII. INTRA-MUSLIM DISPUTES AND THE POTENTIAL FOR RADICALISATION

A. THE SECTS

While the main issue of Muslims with regard to the conflict has been relations with the Tamil community, there are also conflicts among Muslims themselves that have important implications for political stability. Many Muslim leaders feel the need to downplay these conflicts, arguing that the eastern community in particular needs unity in the face of political and security threats. However, there are clearly some growing issues that need to be addressed.

There have always been traditional differences among Muslims in Sri Lanka over issues of faith, most of which have not provoked serious conflict and have been accepted by religious leaders as part of a broader tolerance in the community. However, since the late 1980s there has been a strong growth in ultra-orthodox interpretations of Islam that have provoked conflicts with other sects, notably Sufism.

There are several emerging trends, with issues of identity and Muslim separatism also coinciding with the influx of some religious ideas from the Middle East, Pakistan and elsewhere. It is important not to merge these into a simplistic view of mass radicalisation of the Sri Lankan Muslim community. At present, there are small and discrete trends that may not even be related but may presage more difficult developments in the future.

1. Sufism

Sri Lanka has a strong history of Sufism dating back several centuries, although some of its forms are more modern imports.[104] Sufism is seen as a more mystical and ascetic form of Islam, although it subscribes to all the main theological tenets. A major element is the reverence of saints (*Awliya*, heads of sufi sects and sufi leaders), who are seen as intermediaries between the people and Allah. There are many shrines to these saints around the island, the most famous perhaps that of Sheikh Usman Siddique at the Dawatagaha mosque in Cinnamon Gardens, Colombo. Many Muslims visit these with small offerings of money or food and supplications for a good harvest, a child or other material needs.

2. Tabligh Jamaat

The dominance of Sufism has been undermined by the increasing popularity of other Islam sects over the past 50 years. Perhaps the most popular of these is Tabligh Jamaat, which has developed a mass following in the last two decades but has been active since the 1950s. It has eschewed overt political activity and concentrated on encouraging Muslims to engage more actively in religious rituals. A political activist admits: "We don't like Tabligh much, because they do not get engaged in politics".[105] They show no real interest in social work or the political problems Muslims face.

Instead, they are mostly engaged in encouraging performance of daily prayers and religious rituals. They stress rigid dress codes for their members, who also commit to spend time inviting others to make a real commitment to Islam.[106] Although it has had limited political impact, it seems certain that Tabligh has encouraged a more conservative view of Islam among many Sri Lankan Muslims.

3. Jamaat-i-Islamiya

Tabligh appeals across social classes and includes many urban professionals but anecdotal evidence suggests its rather simplistic approach to religious belief and antipathy towards political and social action is less popular among educated, middle-class Muslims, for whom the more intellectual approach of Jamaat-i-Islamiya (JI)[107] has greater appeal. JI has been active in Sri Lanka since the 1950s but has particularly gained adherents in the past fifteen to twenty years. In Sri Lanka it has not openly advocated radical political ideas but has largely concentrated on religious orthodoxy and developing a

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[104] Asiff Hussein, *Sarandib: An Ethnological Study of the Muslims of Sri Lanka* (Colombo, 2007), p. 376.

[105] Crisis Group interview, Colombo, March 2007.

[106] A characteristic requirement for a Tabligh member is to make regular journeys, usually three days but sometimes 40 and longer, around the country to espouse the virtues of Islam. Young members are particularly encouraged to do so. Not all parents like their children to go but activists claim it gives young people broader horizons and a chance to mix with other ethnic groups. Crisis Group interview, Tabligh teacher of Islam, Akkaraipattu, March 2007.

[107] Jamaat-i-Islamiya was founded in India in 1941 by Maulana Abulala Maududi, who was strongly opposed to secular democracy and supported an Islamic political order. In Pakistan and Bangladesh JI is a significant political party and has been linked to radical Kashmiri militant groups. Sri Lanka's Jamaat-i-Islamiya asserts that it is independent from the Pakistani political party. Crisis Group interview, M. Abdul Rahman, Social Service Department, Sri Lanka Jama'ath-e-Islami, Colombo, May 2007. It should not be confused with the Indonesian JI (Jemaah Islamiya), which has been implicated in a number of terrorist attacks.

new generation of sympathetic Muslim scholars. It is very influential in Islamic colleges and directly controls five major Arabic colleges.[108] It is also very effective in social work, developing a broad range of projects in response to the 2004 tsunami, in particular.

4. Salafi groups

Ultra-orthodox Islamic movements that fall into the broad category of Salafi movements are often referred to locally as "Tawhid" groups and sometimes also as Wahhabis. For the most part they are close to the strict form of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia but this latter label is not favoured by Tawhid followers.[109]

Salafism literally means a return to the religion of the ancients, referring to the leaders of the original seventh-century Muslim community.[110] It first emerged in the late nineteenth century, combining attempts to return to the original fundamentals of the faith with selective modernism, borrowing from Western science and political ideas. It had a few proponents in Sri Lanka at that time, who combined modernisation with attempts to "purify" local Islam from later traditions. A historian writes that: "what the activists attempted to accomplish was the cleansing of the religion of practices which were perceived to be objectionable not only in terms of the orthodox beliefs but also within the context of the times they lived".[111] A main target was the dowry system, which is still viewed as un-Islamic but persists in Muslim communities.

In modern times Salafi ideas have increasingly come under the influence of Wahhabi orthodoxy and lost most of the modernising instincts of the early intellectuals. The first such group, strongly influenced by Wahhabism, emerged in Sri Lanka in the late 1940s, when Abdul Hamid Al-Bakri returned from studying Islamic theology in Saudi Arabia. His organisation, Jamiyyathu Ansaris Sunnathul Mohammatiyya, based in Paragahadeniya (Kurunegala district), still runs one of the country's largest Islamic colleges.[112]

Although Salafi views are also shared by many radical Islamist groups in the Muslim world, it is important to distinguish the kind of Salafism represented by Tawhid

groups from "jihadi" philosophies.[113] A leader in Kattankudi emphasises that: "I tell young people jihad is impossible in Sri Lanka. We try and control them as much as possible".[114] They are not divorced from political life in the way that Tabligh have become, but their involvement in electoral politics seems limited. Though some religious leaders are linked to a political figure at election time, Tawhid leaders in Kattankudi claim they will not tell their followers how to vote.[115]

Its main mission, like Tabligh, is the Islamic *daawa*, the mission of preaching and conversion. Primarily its preaching concerns what it means to be a good Muslim, defined according to a literalist interpretation of the Koran. Salafi groups in the Middle East have used coercion and violence to promote their version of "correct" Muslim behaviour, and this seems also to be the case in Kattankudi.[116] Preaching has also focused on purging Sri Lankan Islam of what are seen as deviations from the original Islam of the Arabian peninsula, resulting from contact with Buddhism and Hinduism.[117] Popular targets for publications and sermons include superstition and magic and the traditions of local Sufi sects. These theological tensions have sometimes resulted in violent clashes.

Anti-Tamil rhetoric is sometimes more strident in conversation with eastern Salafi leaders than with mainstream Muslims. Although their views on correct Islamic behaviour are influenced primarily by their theology, some of their actions have an added resonance because they serve to differentiate Muslims from Tamils. Attacks on issues such as dowries – a borrowing from Tamil culture that is viewed as contrary to Islamic tenets – can be seen in this way. Both in the late nineteenth century and today, the attacks on "un-Islamic" activity can be viewed not only as a result of trends in global Islam but also as part of the self-definition of Muslims vis-à-vis Tamils. Similarly, the increasing use of the *abaya* by women in some parts of the east is undoubtedly largely a result of changes in Islamic beliefs. However, it also serves as a marker of difference, distinguishing the clothing of Muslim women for the first time from that of their Tamil neighbours.

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[108] Nuhman, op. cit., pp. 176-177.
[109] Tawhid refers to the Islamic concept of the unity of Allah and is a central feature of Salafism; it is particularly stressed in opposition to the Sufi veneration of saints.
[110] For further background, see Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report N°37, *Understanding Islamism*, 2 March 2005.
[111] Vijaya Samaraweera, "Aspects of the Muslim Revivalist Movement in late 19th century Sri Lanka", in *Muslims of Sri Lanka*, op. cit., p. 376.
[112] Nuhman, op. cit., p. 181.

[113] See "Understanding Islamism", op. cit.; and Crisis Group Asia Report N°83, *Indonesia Backgrounder: Why Salafism and Terrorism Mostly Don't Mix*, 13 September 2004.
[114] Crisis Group interview, Tawhid leader, Kattankudi, March 2007.
[115] Crisis Group interview, Kattankudi, April 2007.
[116] See Crisis Group Report, *Understanding Islamism*, op. cit., p. 12; P. K. Balchandran, "Wahhabi-Sufi conflict gets ugly", *Hindustan Times,* 26 April 2007.
[117] Crisis Group interview, Tawhid leader, Kattankudi, March 2007.

These groups now have mosques across the island but particularly in Colombo and parts of the east. In Akkaraipattu they are viewed with some suspicion but claim to have six mosques and an Islamic college for women.[118] In Kattankudi they have a mosque, which they say attracts 3,000 people for Friday prayers, a large congregation in a town of some 50,000.[119]

Sri Lankan Tawhid groups are also part of a broader international network of Wahhabi and Salafi communities, with particular links to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. Recordings of sermons by Indian Tawhid preacher P. Jainulabdeen are popular. This global context has had a political impact: in videos and print LTTE attacks are now sometimes placed in the wider context of Muslim suffering.

These religious trends have not developed into radical anti-Western views among most Muslims, although there are strong negative opinions on Western policy towards the Middle East in particular, and generally most conservative Muslims in the country are wary of increased Western influence. The immediate threats, however, both to Muslim security in general and to their view of Muslim orthodoxy in particular, are much closer to home.

B. ANTI-SUFI VIOLENCE

Destroyed buildings are a common sight in Muslim areas on the east coast, where the 2004 tsunami wreaked havoc. But a huge minaret lying destroyed on the Kattankudi seafront was not the result of a natural disaster but of an upsurge of violence by ultra-orthodox Muslims against a Sufi movement led by M. S. M. Abdullah (popularly known as Payilvan). The interior of the adjacent mosque has been vandalised, two graves inside have been desecrated, and the walls are covered with graffiti: "Payilvan – Lazy Dog" is one of the less inflammatory.

This extravagant mosque, with a minaret attached, was constructed as the headquarters of Payilvan's sect, the All Ceylon Thareekathul Mufliheen (ACTM). When he died in December 2006 and was buried there, Kattankudi was paralysed by several days of rioting and an indefinite *hartal*. Young men with guns appeared on the streets, houses belonging to Payilvan's supporters were badly damaged and another Sufi mosque was attacked with grenades. The minaret of the building was destroyed following a court decision that it violated planning

restrictions.[120] Payilvan supporters claim his body was dug up and burnt. Sufi supporters fled the town after receiving death threats. A local businessman arranged transfers for several staff after they claimed their lives were threatened by extremist groups.[121] Some former Sufis who remained in the town said they were forced to renounce Sufi beliefs.[122]

This December 2006 incident was the most violent in several years of confrontation between Sufis and orthodox Muslims in the area. There were traditionally many Sufis in Kattankudi but the growth in ultra-orthodox Muslim groups has led to increasing trouble. In 1998 a local Sufi leader was killed, and there was frequent tension between Salafi groups and two major Sufi leaders, Abdur Rauf Maulavi and Payilvan.[123] There was further violence in October 2004, when a Sufi mosque was destroyed, allegedly by Islamic extremists. Salafis protested against and sometimes disrupted Sufi practices, particularly *kanduri* feast celebrations in honour of saints.[124] These disputes descended into renewed violence in October 2006, after Salafi groups tried to stop traditional Sufi rituals.

This type of violence is a concern but must be placed in context. The real causes are very complex, with religious beliefs, local politics and the particular history and identity of Kattankudi all playing a role. There is clearly an escalation in intra-faith tension among Muslims but it has not provoked this level of violence in other parts of the island, although there have been tensions between Sufis and Salafis elsewhere. Nor is this a completely new phenomenon. In 1948 a criminal case was brought against the founder of Tawhid groups in Sri Lanka, Abdul Hameed, after he destroyed Sufi shrines in his village. A

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[118] Crisis Group interview, Tawhid leader, Akkaraipattu, March 2007.
[119] Crisis Group interview, Tawhid leader, Kattankudi, March 2007.

[120] This appears to have been simply a compromise solution to prevent its destruction by protestors and to reassert some control by the local authorities and a veneer of legality to the proceedings.
[121] Crisis Group interview, Batticaloa, March 2007.
[122] Crisis Group interviews, Kattankudi, March 2007.
[123] Abdur Rauf Maulavi was reputed to have a following of some 3,000 in Kattankudi but was forced to flee the area after the December 2006 events. His supporters were thought to include many influential businesspeople. Payilvan had a few hundred followers and was seen by local Muslims as more unorthodox than most Sufis. His followers did not pray in the ordained manner and chanted religious songs over loudspeakers, much to the distress of local orthodox Muslims.
[124] These celebrations – known as *urs* – begin with the ritualistic hoisting of a flag and end with the kanduri feast and lowering of the flag. Many are more than 100 years old but they are opposed by many Salafi groups; orthodox Muslims have limited some of the traditional activities, such as supplications to the saints, asserting that they are un-Islamic. Asiff Hussein, op. cit., pp. 180-183.

debate between Tawhid and Sufi representatives in Kalmunai ended in violence in 1951.[125]

Local leaders claim the conflict is over, and the town is united behind orthodox Islam. Many Sufi supporters are supposed to have given up their beliefs, but this appears to have occurred under duress. Under the surface there is still discontent. "These kids go to Saudi Arabia and come back and tell us how to be Muslims", grumbled a trader. "If they attacked the dowry system that might be good. But they attack small things, like the *kanduri* feast that we have celebrated for years".[126]

C.   JIHADI GROUPS?

The use of guns and grenades in Kattankudi was an alarming sign of the broader presence of arms in the Muslim community. In a sense, this is not surprising. Arms have become increasingly easy to obtain, particularly after the split in the LTTE in 2004, when many Karuna followers were reported to have sold weapons to local residents. But their use in internecine disputes and linkage to Islamic activist movements has alarmed some Muslim political leaders.

Since the 1980s there have been rumours and sketchy reports of armed Muslim groups with an Islamist ideology, variously named as "jihadi". Many of these reports have come from the LTTE, which has used them as a weak justification for some of its attacks on Muslims. There is, however, very little reliable information on such groups.

In some cases small groups of Muslims with access to weapons are organised as armed gangs, either to engage in criminal activity or disputes with fellow Muslims as in Kattankudi or to guard against LTTE attacks. Other groups with arms include the bodyguards and henchmen of various politicians. Reports from the Eastern province suggest that there have been armed groups in Mutur, with different ones controlling the key economic areas of town, the jetty and the market. An "Osama group" was also reported, although it appears to have disappeared after the death of its leader. A similar group was reportedly operating in Kalmunai, although in early 2007 local politicians suggested it was no longer functioning.[127] None of these groups were large or very powerful; they mostly focused on semi-criminal activities and racketeering, as well as some attacks on the LTTE. But some Tamils are clearly fearful of their potential growth.[128]

Muslim leaders insist there is no organised jihadi formation in the east, while admitting there are small groups of armed young men.[129] While arguing that the threat of radical groups emerging is exaggerated, leaders such as Rauf Hakeem admit to concerns that continued conflict and ethnic tension could lead to wider radicalisation.[130]

The LTTE has used the spectre of Muslim radicalism to justify some of its actions against the Muslim community. Most of its allegations seem largely baseless, even if some of the elements of growing radicalisation are present. It is not certain why the LTTE has used this canard so frequently but its appearance after 2001 suggests it may be based on a belief that the international community will give them more support if they are believed to be fighting Islamic fundamentalism. The LTTE view of Islamic radicalism is backed by a few other commentators, mostly from India, who are concerned about possible links between the Muslim community and Pakistani intelligence. There is no evidence, however, for allegations that the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (military intelligence, ISI) funds jihadi groups in eastern Sri Lanka.

It is easy to sensationalise developments in Islam, particularly in eastern Sri Lanka, where there is some radicalisation of youth and some danger that armed gangs may become more active. These developments must be placed in the context of the broader conflict and the rise of nationalism and religious intolerance among the Sinhalese and Tamils. Some Sinhalese Buddhists have become increasingly fundamentalist in their attitudes in the past decades and have shown considerable intolerance of other religions, as evidenced by a campaign to outlaw conversions from Buddhism in 2005. In 2003-2004 several Christian churches were attacked by Sinhalese groups.

In this context of rising nationalism and a constant search for identity and differentiation, the growth among Muslims of ultra-orthodox groups is not surprising. Yet, for the most part, Muslims remain moderate in their views and tolerant of difference. Many were shocked by the violence in Kattankudi. Some of the radicalisation of Muslims has local causes, and the best way to encourage the moderate mainstream would be to end the conflict that has done so much to fuel more radical views among the young.

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[125] Nuhman, op. cit., p. 181.
[126] Crisis Group interview, Kattankudi, March 2007.
[127] Crisis Group interview, Colombo, March 2007.
[128] Crisis Group interviews, Tamil community leaders, Trincomalee, April 2007.

[129] Crisis Group interview, M. L. A. M. Hisbullah, former parliamentarian, Colombo, 27 February 2007.
[130] Crisis Group interview, Rauf Hakeem, SLMC leader, Colombo, December 2006.

VIII. THE MUSLIM SEARCH FOR A POLITICAL SOLUTION

Muslim political leaders have responded to a history of insecurity and lack of political representation with demands for political and constitutional solutions for their grievances, notably various schemes for autonomous government in the east. These ideas initially emerged in the early years of the SLMC, when Ashraff was one of the main proponents of a separate district for Muslims in the Ampara district where they are a majority. The failure of Tamil nationalists to come to terms with the Muslim issue has spurred more claims for autonomy, particularly if a Tamil autonomous area is granted in the north east.

Muslim discussion of a possible autonomous area was particularly active during the ceasefire period, when it seemed possible that a peace agreement might produce LTTE-controlled Tamil autonomy. The LTTE did little to assuage Muslim fears of Tamil domination in any federal or confederal arrangement. An observer said:

> [O]ver this peace process the LTTE has not responded in a consistent and adequate manner to address the basic fears of the Muslim Community. The LTTE has seamlessly shifted from confidence-building measures to harassment and human rights abuses; local LTTE leaders and cadres are given the freedom to carry out repressive policies in contravention of guarantees given by the LTTE leader while the LTTE leadership speaks of assurances and mutual coexistence.[131]

LTTE activities during the peace process had a significant impact on how Muslims viewed the possibility of co-existence with some kind of Tamil autonomy but in the environment of 2007 there are different calculations. The first issue is the de-merger of the Northern and Eastern provinces ordered by the Supreme Court in December 2006. Muslims are in two minds about this. A few leaders, such as the parliamentarian Athaulla, are strong supporters, while most are more ambivalent. The complex equation includes the problems of northern Muslims and the possibility of a peace settlement. Given that even moderate Tamil parties support a merger of the provinces, it seems unlikely that a political settlement can be achieved without some kind of recognition of a north-east entity. Eastern Muslim leader M. L. A. M. Hisbullah suggests that a merger will still be necessary if a peace settlement is to be reached but that Muslim support for it

will be conditional on Muslims in the east being granted a large share of autonomy.[132]

Muslim demands for autonomy now face a very different political environment. Discussions during the ceasefire period presumed that some kind of federal arrangement would emerge in which Muslims would be dominated by a predominantly Tamil administration. In the present climate, Muslims are more fearful of domination by a government that has demonstrated little appreciation of the problems facing minority groups.

The proposals the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) published in early May 2007 included almost no significant concessions to minorities. They were based primarily on enhanced powers for village authorities and some devolution to the district level. There were no details on resource distribution or taxation, however, without which such units would be completely dependent on the centre. There were few concessions to Muslim advocates of autonomy. With the government strongly rejecting a federal solution to the conflict, Muslim ideas of autonomy seem unlikely to be considered in the near future.

Though autonomous areas for Muslims is still a primary demand of the SLMC and the Muslim Peace Secretariat, the concept needs considerable development. Roughly, there are three identifiable positions within the community:

❑ An autonomous Muslim region consisting of all non-contiguous majority-Muslim areas in the east. This proposal, supported by the Peace Secretariat, would group all areas of majority Muslim population in the Eastern province into one devolved region, governed by an elected body based in Ampara district. Such a region would have practical problems, since these Muslim areas are not geographically contiguous. Supporters point to India's Pondicherry region as an example of how it might work, although Pondicherry has had none of the ethnic conflicts of the east and emerged in an entirely different political environment.

❑ An autonomous Muslim region, consisting of non-contiguous areas in the east and the north. This would add additional non-contiguous regions of Muslim settlement in Musali and Mannar in the Northern province, which prior to the expulsions had significant Muslim populations. This has limited support among some northern Muslims, who feel it would be not be feasible in practice.

[131] Mirak Raheem, "A betrayal of a community", *The South Asian*, 4 September 2006, at www.thesouthasian.org/archives/2006/a_betrayal_of_a_community.html.

[132] Crisis Group interview, M. L. A. M. Hisbullah, former parliamentarian, Colombo, 27 February 2007.

❑ An autonomous Muslim region in Ampara district without non-contiguous areas. This would group territories in Ampara district around Kalmunai and down as far as Pottuvil into one compact area. Although it would not encompass all Muslim areas, supporters claim it would provide a safe haven and avoid the practical problems of governing non-contiguous areas.

These main variations are most popular among politicians from the Eastern province. They have less support in the south, where some Muslims fear any autonomous area in the east would have a negative impact on relations with the Sinhalese. Some northern Muslims are also suspicious of such plans, expecting they would not satisfy their desire to return to homes. In any case, discussion of ethnic enclaves does not really address the potential needs of northern Muslims, since they only formed a majority of the population in one small DS division, in Musali, Mannar district.

Muslim ideas of autonomy have not been fully developed, and there has been insufficient thought on many aspects, such as how the rights of Tamil and Sinhalese minorities would be protected. Many Tamils in the east would be concerned at inclusion in a Muslim autonomous area, just as some already chaff at being part of Muslim-majority local government areas.[133] Nevertheless, some Tamil activists do support the principle of Muslim devolution. "We are seeking a separate region", says a Tamil nationalist, "so why shouldn't they have one too?".[134]

Not all eastern Muslims support an autonomous area. Some claim it would be impractical and not address their key concerns. Others point out that the problems of distinct areas such as Mutur and Pottuvil are very different and require local solutions. Some Muslim villages and towns may not necessarily want their strong local identities submerged in a broader autonomous area.

Further transfer of powers to the lowest tiers of government, coupled with a devolution package for the provincial level in which each community has a role in power sharing could provide short-term stability. This would not preclude, of course, a long-term political settlement, which seems likely to need some kind of merged north east province to meet Tamil aspirations. But any proposals that would satisfy Tamils and Muslims in the east would impose severe restrictions on central government's ability to intervene in the region. Even these limited power-sharing arrangements seem to be contrary to present government policy, which shows no willingness to devolve any significant authority to provinces. As a result, there is little likelihood the present government will meet Muslim demands for autonomy or develop a more creative solution based on power sharing.

Many Muslims in the east would be happy just to be left alone – by militants, the government, colonisation schemes and extremist Buddhists. Most are only sure what they oppose. "I don't know what would be better really", a community leader said, "but one thing we all know: we will never agree to live under an LTTE government". [135]

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[133] Rohan Abeywardena, "Pottuvil's pot pouri simmers", *Sunday Times*, 29 April 2007.
[134] Crisis Group interview, Eastern province, April 2007.

[135] Crisis Group interview, Nintevur, December 2006.

IX. CONCLUSION

The Muslims are the forgotten party in the Sri Lankan conflict. They have never resorted to violence to achieve their aims and so have never been properly consulted on how to end the conflict. With the new war in the east, they again are caught in the crossfire. Any initial support for the government's offensive is waning as the TMVP replaces the LTTE as a threat, and Muslims once more face serious insecurity and concerns about Sinhalese nationalism.

The government needs to address the Muslim issue more directly, instead of merely manipulating their concerns for political advantage. However, that requires a comprehensive plan to develop a political settlement to the conflict, which at present is a very distant possibility. Government actions on the ground indicate an unwillingness to accommodate any significant devolution; early indications suggest that an even more centralised form of rule seems to be developing in the Eastern province.

The LTTE missed a significant opportunity during the ceasefire to address Muslim historical grievances seriously and right past wrongs. As a result, there is almost complete mistrust of the rebels, making any settlement in the east in which the LTTE is a stakeholder extremely difficult. Long-standing tensions between Muslims and Tamils remain a serious stumbling block to any political resolution, and the situation is being made worse by the TMVP.

In a more conducive environment, Muslims could be proactive in helping to find a settlement. In the present context, however, few are willing to speak out. "Parliamentarians are afraid to speak in parliament, let alone to the media or in public", says an activist. "I'm afraid myself".[136] This climate of fear – stemming from the human rights abuses of the past year – makes discussion of political solutions to the conflict extremely problematic. Without the freedom to discuss difficult problems and address the reality of the situation on the ground, there can be no lasting settlement of Muslim grievances.

In the absence of serious attention to Muslim concerns from either Tamil militant leaders or the government, Muslim communities will continue their own efforts to maintain security and political stability with little assistance from outside. For the most part, through community cohesiveness and good local leadership, these have been successful in the past. However, growing

frustration among young people, some of whom are increasingly attracted to a fusion of politics with Islamic ideas, poses a potential threat. The best way to deal with these tensions is for the government to demonstrate a serious commitment to a political solution that for once would include the very genuine concerns of Sri Lanka's Muslims.

Colombo/Brussels, 29 May 2007

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[136] Crisis Group interview, Colombo, April 2007.

APPENDIX A

MAP OF SRI LANKA

SRI LANKA

- ⊛ National capital
- ⊙ Provincial capital
- ○ Town, village
- —·— Provincial boundary
- — Main road
- — Secondary road
- ┼┼ Railroad
- ✈ Airport

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.
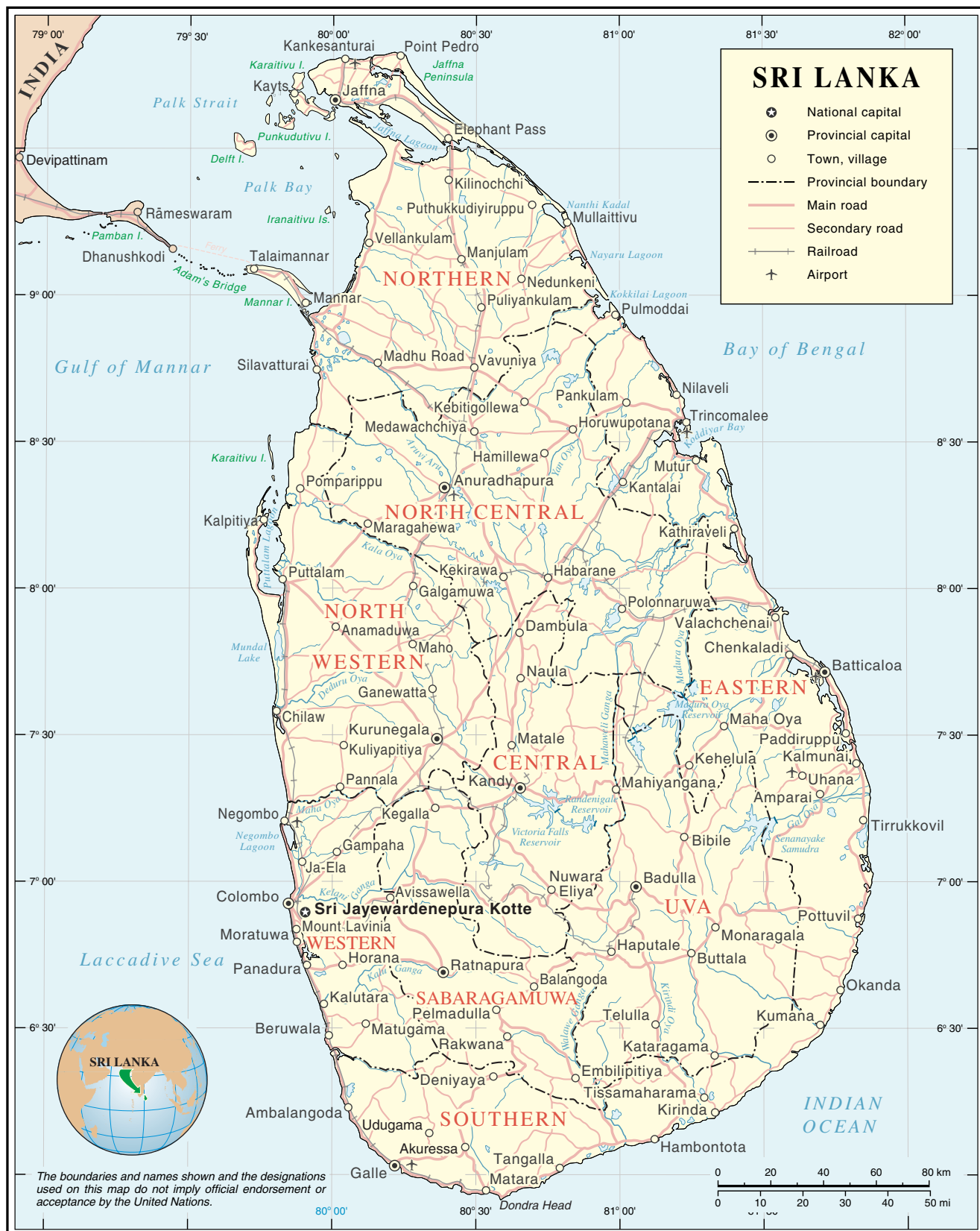
Map No. 4172 Rev. 2   UNITED NATIONS
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APPENDIX B

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 130 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and printed copy to officials in foreign ministries and international organisations and made available simultaneously on the website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by the former European Commissioner for External Relations Christopher Patten and former U.S. Ambassador Thomas Pickering. Its President and Chief Executive since January 2000 has been former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans.

Crisis Group's international headquarters are in Brussels, with advocacy offices in Washington DC (where it is based as a legal entity), New York, London and Moscow. The organisation currently operates twelve regional offices (in Amman, Bishkek, Bogotá, Cairo, Dakar, Islamabad, Istanbul, Jakarta, Nairobi, Pristina, Seoul and Tbilisi) and has local field representation in sixteen additional locations (Abuja, Baku, Beirut, Belgrade, Colombo, Damascus, Dili, Dushanbe, Jerusalem, Kabul, Kampala, Kathmandu, Kinshasa, Port-au-Prince, Pretoria and Yerevan). Crisis Group currently covers nearly 60 areas of actual or potential conflict across four continents. In Africa, this includes Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia,

Guinea, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda, Western Sahara and Zimbabwe; in Asia, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Kashmir, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar/Burma, Nepal, North Korea, Pakistan, Phillipines, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan; in Europe, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus, Georgia, Kosovo and Serbia; in the Middle East, the whole region from North Africa to Iran; and in Latin America, Colombia, the rest of the Andean region and Haiti.

May 2007

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