

A Flashback at the Tamil Eelam Liberation Struggle: A Chronology of Events

1505

- Portuguese arrive in Ceylon during the existence of three sovereign kingdoms, one tamil based in Jaffna, and two sinhalese based in Kotte and Kandy.

1619

- Tamil sovereignty ends when Portuguese defeats the tamil king and annex the Jaffna kingdom.

1656

- Dutch arrive in Ceylon.

1796

- British arrive in Ceylon.

1802

- Ceylon becomes a British Crown Colony.

1815

- Fall of Kandyan kingdom, the last holdout against colonial occupation.

1833

- For the first time in over 2,500 years of its recorded history, the entire island of Ceylon is brought under a single administration based on the recommendations of Colebrook-Cameron Report.

1919

- Ceylon National Congress (CNC), the first full-fledged "nationalist" political party is formed by Ponnambalam Arunachalam.

1921

- Arunachalam quits CNC, denouncing it as a party representing mainly a section of the Sinhalese.

1935

- Formation of Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP).

1943

- Formation of Communist Party of Ceylon (CP).

1947

- United National Party (UNP) is formed.

1948

- The British leave and Ceylon becomes a self-governing dominion with a government dominated by the Sinhalese elite assuming power.
- Passage of the Citizenship Act that makes more than a million tamil plantation workers of Indian origin disenfranchised and stateless.

1949

- Formation of the Tamil Federal Party under the leadership of SJV Chelvanayagam.

1951

- First convention of the Federal Party, declaring its intention to campaign for a federal structure of governance, and for regional autonomy for Tamils living in North and East.
- SWRD Bandaranaike breaks away from UNP and forms Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

1956

- UNP ousted from power in the general elections by SLFP, riding on the wave of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism with strong anti-Tamil overtones.
- Sinhalese is proclaimed as the sole official language of Ceylon.
- Colvin R. de Silva speaks out against "Sinhala Only", warning it will divide the country along ethnic lines.
- FP establishes itself as the major representative party of Ceylon Tamils.
- The outbreak of first post-colonial anti-Tamil riots.

1958

- Prime Minister Bandaranaike and FP leader Chelvanayagam sign a historic agreement (the B-C Pact) on a federal solution, devolving wide-ranging powers to the Tamil-majority North and East Provinces.
- Barely a week later, the pact is unilaterally abrogated by Bandaranaike under pressure from UNP and the Buddhist clergy.
- A **non-violent** civil disobedience campaign is launched by FP.
- The government reacts **violently** by sending Police and the military forces to Jaffna to suppress the agitation.
- A major anti-Tamil pogrom breaks out in Sinhala-majority areas, killing hundreds of Tamils and making thousands of Tamils homeless.

1959

- Prime Minister Bandaranaike assassinated by a buddhist monk.

1960

- Srimavo Bandaranaike, widow of Solomon Bandaranaike becomes the first woman Prime Minister in the world.

1964

- Sirimavo-Shashtri pact was signed for the repatriation of stateless plantation workers to India.

1965

- UNP's Dudley Senanayake forms government with the help of FP and other parties.
- Dudley-Chelva agreement, which amounts to a diluted version of the B-C pact.
- The agreement is abandoned without being implemented due to opposition from the SLFP, the buddhist clergy, and UNP backbenchers.
- FP's Tiruchelvam, Minister of Local Government, resigns from the cabinet.

1967

- Janata Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP-People's Liberation Front) is formed.

1970

- Mrs Bandaranaike becomes Prime Minister, as the United Front (a coalition of SLFP, LSSP, and CP) gains two-thirds majority.
- JR Jayewardena becomes the leader of opposition.

1971

- Armed insurrection of JVP is brutally put down, with thousands of Sinhalese youth being killed.
- A state of emergency is declared, which was to continue for six long years.

1972

- Ceylon becomes a Republic on May 22.
- The United Front government enacts a Sinhalese-supremacist "Republican Constitution" for the country, which made Buddhism as the de facto state religion.
- Ironically, the architect of this constitution was the same Colvin R. de Silva, who made the famous "one language-two nations" speech, opposing the "Sinhala only" legislation in 1956.
- Ceylon is officially renamed Republic of Sri Lanka.
- Formation of Tamil United Front (TUF) comprising FP, Tamil Congress (TC) led by GG Ponnambalam, and Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) led by Savumiamoorthy Thondaman.
- A small youth group named Tamil New Tigers is formed in the Jaffna peninsula to fight for tamil rights by a 17-year old high school student from Valvettiturai, named Velupillai Pirabhakaran.

1974

- Unprovoked attack on attendees of a prestigious International Tamil Cultural conference in Jaffna by Sinhalese police leaves nine civilians dead.
- State discrimination against Tamil students' admission to universities reaches a peak with the introduction of "standardisation".
- Formation of Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO).

1975

- Jaffna mayor and SLFP organiser Alfred Duraiyappah assassinated, apparently in retaliation for the attack on International Tamil Conference.
- Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students (EROS) is formed.

1976

- TUF is renamed Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) and passes the "Vaddukkoddai resolution" to restore a "free, sovereign, secular, socialist State of Tamil Eelam based on the right to self-determination" to safeguard the very existence of the Tamil nation in the country.
- TNT is renamed and reorganized as Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, with Uma Maheswaran as its leader.

1977

- Death of ailing Chelvanayagam.
- Appapillai Amirthalingam becomes the leader of Federal Party.
- JR Jayewardena becomes Prime Minister when UNP routs SLFP in the general elections to come back to power with a thumping five-sixths majority in parliament.
- TULF, contesting on a platform of seeking a mandate for a sovereign Tamil Eelam, wins overwhelmingly in the North and does very well in Tamil-dominated areas of East, and becomes the major opposition party in parliament.
- Severe anti-Tamil riots occur immediately after elections in Sinhalese-majority areas, killing hundreds of tamils.

1978

- New constitution is enacted and Jayawardena becomes first Executive President of the country.
- Armed activities of tamil militant organisations increase, with attacks on police stations and robberies of banks.

1979

- Uma Maheswaran is expelled from LTTE and forms People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE).
- Government enacts a Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), banning tamil militant organizations.
- Jaffna peninsula is effectively under martial law.
- More anti-Tamil riots in Sinhalese-majority areas.

1980

- Formation of the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF).

1981

- Elections for District Development Councils (DDC) as an attempt to devolve power.

- Further anti-Tamil riots. Increased military repression in the north, as Tamil violence continue.
- The invaluable Jaffna Public Library is burnt down by the Sri Lankan armed forces, allegedly under the direction of two government ministers, Gamini Dissanayake and Cyril Mathew.

1982

- JR Jayewardena defeats Hector Kobbekaduwa in the first-ever Presidential election of the country.

1983

- Major anti-Tamil pogrom takes place in the entire country.
- More than 3,000 tamils killed and over 150,000 become refugees, many fleeing the country to India and the West.
- With increasingly restive mood of people of Tamil Nadu, the Indian government comes out in support of the Tamil cause.
- LTTE and other guerilla organizations set up training camps in India, with direct and indirect support from various state agencies.
- Thousands of youth join the militant organizations, with TULF beginning to fade into political oblivion.

1985

- LTTE, EPRLF, EROS, and TELO form Eelam National Liberation Front (ENLF) to coordinate the "revolutionary struggle for national independence".
- Peace talks mediated by India in Thimpu, Bhutan, breaks down with Sri Lankan government's reluctance to devolve power.

1985-87

- State repression and Tamil violence intensify in the North and East resulting in all-out war between the Sri Lankan state and the Tamils.
- LTTE emerges as the dominant guerilla group and effectively takes control of Jaffna peninsula and other northern areas.
- Thousands, mostly Tamils, die as fighting turns brutal, with non-combatants from both sides are systematically targeted, firstly by the Sri Lankan armed forces and then by Tamil guerillas.

1987

- Sri Lankan government launches Operation Liberation to recapture Jaffna peninsula.
- A floatilla of Indian boats with food and medical supplies for Jaffna peninsula was turned back by Sri Lankan Navy.
- India airdrops food on Jaffna peninsula.
- Indo-Sri Lankan Peace Accord signed without consulting the tamil parties.
- Tens of thousands of Indian troops arrive in Northeastern Sri Lanka as "Indian Peace Keeping Force" (IPKF).
- Initial surrender of arms by Tamil guerilla groups.

- Seventeen LTTE members, including two leaders, were arrested by Sri Lankan Navy in violation of the Peace Accord, and commit suicide.
- Fighting breaks out between LTTE and IPKF.
- Jaffna falls to IPKF, but fighting continues throughout the Tamil region.
- Rise of Sinhala nationalist insurrection by JVP.

1988

- Assassination of Vijaya Kumaratunge, leader of United Socialist Alliance (USA), allegedly by the JVP.
- EPRLF assumes power in the Northeastern Provincial Council.
- Ranasinghe Premadasa of UNP wins the presidential election defeating Srimavo Bandaranaike of SLFP.

1989

- Sri Lankan President Premadasa requests the Indian government to withdraw their troops from Sri Lanka.
- JVP insurrection is brutally put down by the Government.

1990

- Withdrawal of IPKF from Sri Lanka and the collapse of the Northeastern Provincial government.
- Hostilities break out again between Sri Lankan forces and LTTE.

1991

- Assassination of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in Tamil Nadu by suspected LTTE suicide bomber.

1993

- Top opposition politician and former National Security minister Lalith Athulathmudali assassinated.
- A week later, President Premadasa is killed in a suicide bomb attack.
- D.B Wijetunge assumes Presidency.
- LTTE leader calls for unconditional talks with the government, with a commitment to the federalisation of Sri Lanka, which is rejected by President Wijetunge.

1994

- People's Alliance led by Chandrika Kumaratunge wins Parliamentary elections.
- LTTE unilaterally announces a temporary ceasefire to welcome the change of government.
- PA Government begins peace talks with LTTE in Jaffna.
- UNP's Presidential candidate Gamini Dissanayake assassinated at an election rally.
- Kumaratunge wins Presidential election with a landslide on a platform of "**ending the war and bringing peace**".

1995

- Government and LTTE sign cessation of hostilities agreement.
- More rounds of talks in Jaffna.
- Government announces lifting of economic embargo on most items, but armed forces at the border checkpoints continue to enforce the embargo.
- LTTE issues two-week ultimatum in March to the government to implement their requests, which is later extended by another 3 weeks to April 19th.
- Government ignores the ultimatum and LTTE calls off the peace talks and resume hostilities.
- Government begins major offensive in July in parts of Jaffna peninsula after imposing press censorship. A church and its premises, functioning as a safe place for refugees away from the battle zone are repeatedly bombed by Sri Lankan Airforce killing 67 civilians, including women and children.
- Government informally announces a package of devolution proposals, making Sri Lanka a "Union of Regions".
- Sri Lankan Air Force bombs school premises in Nagarkovil in Vadamadachi region, killing 25 school children.
- Another major offensive by the government in October results in the capture of Valigamam division and the city of Jaffna, but more than 400,000 civilians escape to LTTE controlled Vadamadachi, Thenmaradchi divisions of the peninsula and to Vanni district in the mainland, virtually leaving a peopleless land for the Sri Lankan army, including a ghosttown of Jaffna.

1996

- An extensively watered down legal draft of the devolution proposals is submitted to the Parliamentary Select Committee for discussion.
- As customary, powerful buddhist clergy opposes any devolution of power.
- Government launches another offensive and captures the entire Jaffna peninsula. The armed forces also succeed in preventing a large number of people from escaping to LTTE controlled territory by sealing off the Jaffna lagoon. Yet, nearly half a million people are displaced from their homes and live in the LTTE controlled Vanni region in the mainland.
- Despite government's claim of the peninsula fast returning to normal life, neutral news reporters are still barred from entering the region.
- LTTE announces its willingness to negotiate peace if mediated by a neutral country, which is rejected by the Sri Lankan government.
- LTTE launches a daring attack and overruns the army camp at Mullaitheevu, capturing large quantities of arms and military hardware, and killing more than 1,200 soldiers.
- Sri Lankan armed forces launch another offensive and captures Killinochchi, relocated headquarters of the LTTE.
- Human rights violations by the army, including rape and disappearances increase in the Jaffna peninsula. This fact is brought to light by the revelation of the rape and killing of Krishanthi Kumaraswamy, a tamil schoolgirl. The girl's mother, brother, and a neighbor were also killed when they go to the army camp, inquiring about the fate of the girl. Nine soldiers were charged with the crime.
- Death of former Sri Lankan President Junius Richard Jayawardena at the age of 90, who played a major role in sowing the seeds for the conflict and later in its escalation.

- LTTE releases 16 Sinhalese fisherman captured earlier as a goodwill gesture for Christmas/New Year.
- President Kumaratunge goes on a private holiday to India, raising speculations and hopes of impending peace talks with LTTE with foreign mediation.

1997

- The LTTE overruns a Special Task Force camp near Batticaloa in the Eastern Province.
- The LTTE launches simultaneous attacks on Sri Lanka's army camps in Paranthan and Elephant Pass, and overruns the Paranthan camp.
- Sri Lankan forces begin another major offensive in the Northern border town of Vavuniya
- Sri Lankan forces begin a major offensive to capture a major highway running through Vanni
- Sri Lankan Deputy Minister of Defence, General Ratwatte promises the capture of the highway and linking Jaffna with the south before February 04, 1998, Sri Lanka's 50th anniversary of Independence.
- Elections announced for Jaffna and other local government bodies in the peninsula.
- And the problem continues with no apparent end of war in foreseeable future.

Sources

Bose, S. (1994). *States, Nations, Sovereignty: Sri Lanka, India and the Tamil Eelam Movement*. New Delhi, India: Sage Publications.

O'Ballance, E. (1989). *The Cyanide War: Tamil Insurrection in Sri Lanka 1973-88*. London: Brassey's.

SLnet-news. (1994-to date).

TamilNet. (1995-to date).

Disclaimer: The views expressed herein are that of the author. The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee does not endorse these views in any way.

Return to [Shan Sivakumaran's Homepage](#)