

# The Tigers' Roar: Insurgent Violence Against Civilians in Sri Lanka

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This article deals with the question of why insurgents in civil war may choose to target civilian population. In recent years, different insurgent groups around the world have been responsible for a lion's share of violence against civilians. This is puzzling, since the majority of these groups target the very people they allegedly represent, and whose support and allegiance is of utmost importance in the armed struggle. A recent theory by Lisa Hultman suggests that killing of civilians is a conflict strategy, and causally linked to insurgent groups' overall performance in hurting the government. She argues that by targeting civilians, the insurgents are trying to affect the government. Although the focus of analysis in this article is the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, the findings have wider implications for other countries as well. By testing how well Hultman's theory fares in explaining three cases of LTTE violence against civilians, I find that her theory is insufficient in accounting for variance found in LTTE violence. The results of this study imply that by targeting civilians, the LTTE strives to shape the behaviour of *both* the civilian population and the government.

Civil wars tend to display appalling levels of violence, the bulk of which is perpetrated by insurgents in their fight against the government (Eck and Hultman, 2007). This does not make any immediate sense. Why would contestants of the status quo resort to methods which are likely to make them and their cause illegitimate, and alienate the people? All the more puzzling is insurgents' inclination toward the use of violence against their own constituents, the very people they claim to represent. Fighting for an alternative state of affairs, and on behalf of the populace should make violence unnecessary and counterproductive. Yet it happens.

This study aspires to contribute to developing scholarly understanding about why insurgents choose to take up arms against civilians<sup>1</sup>. The focus of analysis is the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) of Sri Lanka. From 1983 until 2009 the LTTE was fighting the Sri Lankan government in the name of the country's Tamil minority population. The case of the LTTE is extremely interesting even in its own right. The Tigers were seasoned separatists, who regularly lashed out at civilian population. They have been one of the most notorious insurgent groups in the world, infamous for the use of suicide bombers, child soldiers and world-wide supporter networks. More importantly, the LTTE has been chosen for this study

because it displays interesting variance both in terms of magnitude and patterns of violence.

Recent theories on civil war violence go against the view that insurgent violence is the product of madness, ideologies or cultures. Instead, it is seen as a collective social process that works on the group level and is often carefully organized rather than wanton. From the perspective of conflict resolution, such considerations beg the question of how violence in civil war can be managed. Contemporary international laws apply to non-state actors only with difficulty. Based on the insights of this study and the notion that insurgent violence is organized collective action, it is necessary to deliberate how incentives for insurgent groups to target civilians can be altered and managed by outside actors.

### **OVER 25 YEARS OF WARFARE IN SRI LANKA**

Depending on the point of departure, it is usually estimated that the armed conflict in Sri Lanka was going on for 27, over 50 or even for more than 500 years. The most conspicuous feature of the war has been the tension between the Sinhala-speaking Buddhist majority and the Tamil-speaking Hindu minority.<sup>2</sup> The Tamil-speaking Muslim minority, too, has at times been caught in between the struggle. The Tamils, who were relatively better off during the English colonial times, became exceedingly disgruntled at chauvinistic Sinhalese policies which have dominated the political landscape in Sri Lanka ever since independence in 1948. Initially enjoying wide support among the Tamil masses as the most prominent Tamil movement against Sinhalese supremacy, the LTTE has arguably lost substantial support among the Tamil population during the course of the conflict due to its increasingly aggressive policies and violent methods (particularly against fellow Tamils). The stated goal of the LTTE has been to create Tamil Eelam, a Tamil homeland in the north and east of the country – a demand that the central government has opposed tooth and nail. The outcome has been protracted suffering for the Sri Lankan people on both sides of the ethnic divide as the government and the LTTE have been ruthless in their efforts at annihilating each other.

There have been three attempts at solving the conflict through negotiations, all of which have failed. The government took instead a different course and crushed the LTTE militarily – a conflict resolution mechanism which has caused a lot of controversy. In late May 2009 the war was declared over as the LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran was captured and killed along with most of his cadres and senior LTTE leadership. Some critics, however, point out that the central government has not done anything to address the root causes of the conflict so far.

### **METHOD**

Two recent theories have particular relevance for the study at hand. Both propose that civil war violence is a social process, a method, which perpetrators employ to further their ends. It is closely linked to conflict dynamics. By resorting to violence,

the perpetrators aim at influencing other actors' behaviour. Violence becomes a means for manipulation. Where the two strands of research differ is in claiming which actor's behaviour insurgents are trying to manipulate. In his seminal work Stathis Kalyvas argues that the ultimate goal to which insurgents employ violence is influencing the civilian population and their behaviour (Kalyvas, 2006). Violence is used as an instrument to coerce civilians into compliance on the one hand, and to deter unwanted behavior on the other. Kalyvas maintains, however, that violence is seldom a simple way to achieve strategic goals, but contingent on the circumstances in which it is carried out. The type of violence (selective or indiscriminate) depends on the levels of territorial control. Control spawns information, which is a pre-requisite for targeting disobedient civilians selectively – on an individual basis. If insurgents are not in control, they are likely to target civilians randomly in the absence of specific information about defectors and wrongdoers (Kalyvas, 2006).

The other theory is developed by Lisa Hultman and is based on her extensive quantitative research<sup>3</sup>. She provides a rationalist explanation for insurgent violence. She proposes that rather than focusing on the people, what insurgent groups are striving to do is to affect the government and its policies. She notes that internal conflicts are often characterized by asymmetry, where insurgents are the weaker parties, sometimes going to extreme lengths to bring about change. Internal conflicts are bargaining processes, wherein insurgents resort to violence against civilians when all other means of hurting the government are frustrated. The government (at least in a democracy) is ultimately responsible for its citizens and their wellbeing; an attack against civilians is an attack against the government. By targeting civilians insurgents compensate for their inability of causing damage to the government on the battlefield. The worse the insurgents fare in hurting the government by conventional means, the higher the number of civilians killed (Hultman, 2007).

There is enough reason to surmise that Hultman's theory might fit the Sri Lankan case. During its nearly 30 year-old struggle, the LTTE has indeed tried pressuring the government into giving the Tamil people self-rule, sometimes peacefully, but mostly through the use of brute force. The effectuation of their dearly held Eelam in its most concrete manifestation (territorial concessions) is contingent on the approval of the government. In addition, the LTTE has indeed been the weaker, illegitimate party to the conflict, and therefore needed to assert itself through radical means. It is, therefore, plausible to assume that the ultimate goal to which LTTE violence (or any of its activities for that matter) is deployed is to affect the Sri Lankan government and its policies.

Ethnic polarization in the country makes the case slightly more complicated, however. Due to linguistic, historical and political reasons, both the government and the LTTE have clearly defined constituencies (Sinhalese and Tamil, respectively). Therefore it is perhaps not surprising that violence, too, has often been perpetrated along ethnic lines<sup>4</sup>. Keeping the polarization aspect in mind, it is likely that in order to maximize the total impact of its violent attacks on the government, the LTTE

might prefer targeting Sinhalese, the government-affiliated group. Victimizing its own Tamil constituents might not have the same effect on the central government, which, to certain extent, has disenfranchised the Tamils altogether. A number of violent attacks against Tamils have, in fact, been attributed to the government through the course of the conflict (UCDP). Inasmuch as the LTTE has aspired to be the sole representative of the Tamil people, the government is seen as exclusively representing Sinhalese interest. In all likelihood, then, Hultman's theory might be better suited to explain violence against the Sinhalese than any other group. Since Tamil-LTTE relations have been a vital life force for the Tigers, Kalyvas's theory, in turn, might better explain the occurrence and nature of violence against the Tamils. In the analysis it is therefore important to check for alternative observations pertaining to relations between the LTTE and the victims (particularly other groups than the Sinhalese); in case they play a role along the lines of Kalyvas's reasoning. Hultman provides a straightforward and testable explanation for why insurgents target civilians. Drawing on her work, the following hypothesis is adopted for the study at hand:

*Hypothesis: Insurgents kill civilians when they are unable to hurt the government by other means.*

For theory testing in social sciences, George and Bennett (2005) advocate the use of both structured, focused comparison and process-tracing, two methods often used in combination. Process-tracing entails an in-depth study of the cases, whereby the author traces the causal chain leading from cause to effect. In structured focused comparison the investigator comes up with questions that reflect the research objective and poses these questions systematically to the cases. Based on a comparison of the observations and outcomes, inferences can be made about the causal mechanisms at play.

Another crucial part of a qualitative study is the selection of cases. Two criteria are of particular importance: the cases must be comparable, yet they need to display at least some variance in the dependent variable (Collier and Mahoney, 1996). Ramifications and assumptions of the theory are another critical rule for case selection. Hultman's theory expects an effect close in time. Following her example, one month is chosen as the unit of analysis. In order to examine the short-term effect of the LTTE's performance on violence against civilians, the independent variable is lagged two months. What this means is that the Tigers' performance is analyzed during the two months preceding the occurrence of violence.

Taken these criteria into consideration, August 1990, May 1995 and February 2007 have been selected as the cases for comparison. These cases are positioned at three separate junctures of the Sri Lankan conflict, each preceded by a promising peace process. In addition to being occasions taking place in the wake of high-profile negotiation processes, what these cases have in common is that the talks between the government and the LTTE have collapsed, and the parties have resumed fighting. In each case the conflict is thereby escalating. Further, the chosen years

(1990, 1995 and 2007) wherein the cases are located, display higher levels of violence in general, most likely due to the fact that talks have failed and fighting has resumed. To ensure variance, on the other hand, these particular months are selected because they show differences in both magnitude and patterns of violence against civilians. In August 1990 a high number of mainly Muslims were indiscriminately attacked in the form of several massacres. In May 1995 a massacre of Sinhalese civilians, as well as a killing of a Buddhist priest were reported, and in February 2007 only one single killing took place,<sup>5</sup> that of a Hindu priest. On average, the LTTE has killed approximately 34 civilians every month whereas the Sri Lankan government has killed about 90 civilians per year.<sup>6</sup> August 1990 with its shockingly high death toll, over 500 civilians killed by the Tigers, is clearly an outlier and makes for an interesting case to look into. May 1995 with around 40 victims (the exact number depends on the sources) lies pretty close to the mean of the LTTE killings. February 2007 is significantly below the mean value with only one single instance. These three cases thereby differ not only in terms of the magnitude, but also in terms of the targets.

Finally, the questions which are posed to the three cases, and which guide the comparison are the following:

### *1. The Position of the LTTE*

- How did the LTTE perform on the battlefield during the two previous months?
- How weak, or strong, was the LTTE? Did it have the military and organizational capacity to hurt the government by conventional means?
- If so, what kinds of other costs was it able to impose on the government?
- How much territory did the LTTE control, and did it enjoy civilian support?
- What was the LTTE stance on the killings?

### *2. The Position of the Government*

- What was the government's policy toward the LTTE? How did they perceive the threat emanating from the LTTE?
- How weak or strong was the government vis-à-vis the LTTE; did they manage to contain the LTTE threat?
- Did the government also target civilians?

### *3. Alternative Observations (relations between the LTTE and the victims)*

- Are there other observations pertaining to the relations between the LTTE and the victims that might throw light on the observed killings?

## **CASE 1: AUGUST 1990**

August 1990 is the single month with the most killings of civilians according to unpublished data from the Uppsala Conflict Database (UCDP). The month is characterized by indiscriminate, violent massacres of Muslims and Sinhalese in the east of the country. Altogether 12 instances are reported in the data with the total of over 500 persons killed.

## **Background**

In order to secure Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the 1987 Indo-Sri Lankan peace accord, the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) was deployed in the island. It was soon dragged into fighting with the LTTE. Ironically, the LTTE's ability to take on the IPKF won some sympathy in Colombo. What united the LTTE and Sinhalese was a common dislike of what had become to be perceived as a 'foreign occupation force' in the country. This common interest brought the Sri Lankan government, headed by the newly elected President Premadasa, and the LTTE representation to open peace talks (Swamy, 1994).

Once the IPKF was out of the country, a common thread between the former enemies had snapped. Distrust started to build up between the government and the LTTE. The LTTE insisted that the provocative behavior of the Sri Lankan army (SLA) led to several violent incidents. The harassment of a Muslim woman at Batticaloa police station is claimed to be the last straw leading to open confrontation between the SLA and the LTTE (Balasingham 2001:260). Premadasa and his delegation, on the other hand, held that the Tigers' newly established amity with the Sri Lankan government was nothing but a strategic truce, which would be relinquished as soon as another window of opportunity for Tamil Eelam would be opened (Swamy, 1994:319). The LTTE indeed renewed its campaign for Eelam with ruthless insurgency and a full-fledged war resumed.

## **Patterns of Violence**

According to the UCDP data, the LTTE killing inferno started on August 3 in Kattankudi in the eastern coastal district of Batticaloa. On this Friday evening, as usual, some 300 Muslim men and boys were praying at the Meera Jummi mosque in Kattankudi. Around 8 o'clock in the evening some LTTE cadres drove to the spot, locked the mosque doors to prevent escape, and began firing at the praying people inside (ICG, 2007:7). 140 people died as a response. This occasion is relatively well reported since it unsettled the Sri Lankan Muslim community, and is considered as a watershed in collective military action against them (McGilvray and Raheem, 2007). The Kattankudi massacre was followed by several weeks of attacks on the Muslim community. On August 5, some 30 Muslims were killed as the LTTE attacked them on a paddy field (UCDP data). A week later, on August 12, a similar attack on another paddy field in Samanthurai took place with the death toll of 4 people. On the same day in Eravur, near Batticaloa town, some LTTE cadres went through several Muslim areas, brutally killing 120 persons throughout the night (ICG, 2007:7).

Several attacks against the Sinhalese population in the east also occurred during this period. Between August 5 to August 13, up to 200 Sinhalese villagers, farmers and fishermen were killed. These attacks seem to have taken place while the victims were at work on paddy fields or tending their daily catches; some of the killings are characterized by extreme brutality (UCDP data).

### **The Position of the LTTE**

With the departure of the IPKF, the LTTE was well under way in asserting its control of the northeast. By the looks of it, the LTTE was almost able to march into vacated territories and seize power in the area. Within weeks from the resumption of violence, the LTTE had control over almost the entire Jaffna peninsula, substantial parts of Killinochchi, Vavuniya, Mullaitivu and Mannar districts in the north (all of which were Tamil areas). The government forces quickly started heavy artillery shelling and aerial bombardment of Jaffna town, which by summer 1990 was under virtual LTTE control, the ongoing battles notwithstanding. It is reported that the surge by the SLA in the north mainly took the form of aerial bombing, and that the brunt of losses as a response to these indiscriminate attacks were suffered by Tamil civilians in Jaffna. LTTE cadres and vehicles were said to almost always get out of the way and suffer minimal losses due to good bunkers and infrastructure (UTHR(J), 1991b).

The LTTE presence seemed to have been less formidable in the east of the country. The Tigers were able to carry out attacks there too, but were far from controlling it the way they did in the north (Singer 1991:4). Whereas in the east the LTTE seemed to have been confined to rural hinterlands, jungles and its occasional camps, in the north they were clearly masters in their own house. Slowly but surely the LTTE managed to consolidate its control in the north and create a 'shadow' administration to monitor and supervise the functions of its 'state within a state' (Balasingham 2001: 274).

Ground battles were rare during June and July it seems, with a few exceptions. The battle for the Jaffna fort, which lasted for over 100 days, started in June. The LTTE was determined to take control of this strategic and symbolic monument. Finally in September the LTTE prevailed (ibid: 265-266). Additionally, in early July the Tigers attacked the Talladi army camp in Mannar district, northwest of the country. As a response, SLA shells were fired at random from navy vessels, apparently missing their target but disturbing fishers at the sea (UTHR(J), 1991b).

### **The Position of the Government**

Human rights reports accuse the SLA of committing mainly indiscriminate attacks against Tamil civilians during its onslaught in the east. These reports describe various instances in the east when the Sri Lankan troops have killed Tamil civilians in large numbers, occasionally assisted by Sinhalese hoodlums, or gangs of local

Muslims. This method backfired, however, as it turned many local Tamils into LTTE supporters and many of their youth into LTTE recruits (UTHR(J), 1992).

The SLA did not control ground in the north, and for this reason, needed to rely mainly on aerial bombing of the area, most of which the civilian population bore the brunt (Singer, 1991:4). Electricity and telecommunications were cut off and a tough economic blockade was imposed on the north by the government (Balasingham, 2001:264). This, too, seemed to have played in the hands of the LTTE. The Jaffna offensive, mass flight of its population, their widely acknowledged suffering and plight, all angered ordinary Tamils inducing many of them to enlist and sacrifice their lives for the LTTE cause (Swamy, 1994:346).

The government view at the time was that the humiliation around the collapse of the talks notwithstanding, it had many factors going for it. President Premadasa believed he had the momentum to destroy the LTTE once and for all, and for this reason, did not shun away from harsh tactics. Moreover, whereas previously the Indian government had barred the government from using means that would mount to high numbers of (Tamil) casualties, in summer 1990 the Indian government did nothing about it (Singer, 1991:4-5).<sup>7</sup>

### **Alternative Observations**

Alternative observations of the killings in August 1990 focus solely on violence against the Muslims. Two forthcoming explanations trace their reasoning to the history of these two communities, Muslim and Tamil, and to the dilemmas the Muslims have faced in choosing which side to take in the conflict predominantly taking place between the Tamil minority and the Sinhalese majority.

From the early days of the armed conflict, the Sinhalese state has been accused of trying its best to drive a wedge between the Tamils and the Muslims. Eventually, it came up with a policy to provide Muslims with training in order to establish a community-defense force against emerging Tamil militancy. Consequently, some Muslims became spies and informants for the government in the northeast (McGilvray and Raheem, 2007; Hoole, 2001). The government continuously used these Muslim 'home guards' in violence against Tamils, particularly when responding to LTTE attacks. Reprisal attacks spiraled. Once an LTTE attack was over, home guards would take reprisals on the nearest Tamil village, which in turn enabled the LTTE to cash in on the anger of the Tamils (UTHR(J), 1992). Prior to the Kattankudi and Eravur massacres, a large number of Tamil boys had been killed or went missing in Batticaloa, Kalmunai and Karaitivu towns. Muslim home guards were widely blamed for the happened, and the massacres in August were seen as reprisals for the violence against these Tamil boys. Moreover, the leading Muslim party, Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC) had been publicly campaigning for an autonomous region for Muslims, clearly undermining the LTTE strive for total political control in the area (ICG, 2007:9). It should, however, be noted that Tamil-Muslim relations have at times been cordial, too. Some Muslims took part in early

Tamil militant campaigns against the state, joined Tamil political parties and some even enlisted in the LTTE, still being members at the time of the massacres (Haniffa, 2007:1).

## **CASE 2: MAY 1995**

The death toll for the LTTE killings in May, 43 people, lays relatively close to the mean value of all LTTE monthly killings (UCDP data). Two instances are reported in the data: a massacre in a Sinhalese fishing village, and a killing of a Buddhist priest, a long-time critic of the LTTE. The UCDP data claims that both occasions took place on the same day.

### **Background**

People's Alliance (PA) candidate Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga won a landslide victory on a peace mandate in Sri Lanka's presidential poll in November 1994. She was immensely popular throughout the country and highly committed to bringing peace by talking unconditionally to the LTTE (Schaffer, 1995:1). The government view was that it was going to great lengths in order to accommodate the LTTE.

The process began to fray however, as the LTTE issued a deadline for its participation at the talks. The Tiger representatives claimed that some of their key demands were not sufficiently met and that the government was dragging its feet (Balasingham, 2000:145). Shortly after the fourth meeting between the delegates, the LTTE called an end to the truce. On the following day, on April 19<sup>th</sup>, it blew up two navy boats at the Sri Lankan Navy's Trincomalee base in the east, killing at least 12 navy personnel (Amnesty, 1995). Mutual distrust from the start was a noticeable factor destructing the negotiations (Höglund, 2004: 174-175).

### **Patterns of Violence**

The first attack on civilians since the resumption of fighting in April took place in Kallarawa, a small fishing village north of Trincomalee in the east of the country in the night of May 25. According to the UCDP data, the attack signaled a change in the LTTE's strategy toward civilian targets. Attack in Kallarawa village was the first major assault against civilians since 1992; in the meantime the LTTE had focused on targeting security personnel and politicians (UCDP data). According to eyewitness testimonies, between 200 and 300 LTTE cadres approached Kallarawa at 9:30 on Friday night. Cadres first attacked a small army camp in the village. The camp was empty however, as soldiers had reportedly gone out on operations. One eyewitness reports that the cadres then walked into the village and knocked on the doors. People were shot immediately as they opened. The LTTE continued in such a manner until the early hours of the following day, finishing off by ransacking the

houses and setting them on fire. It is reported that among those killed were at least 12 women and six children (Amnesty, 1996: 21-22).

Reportedly on the same day, some 40 kilometers south of Kallarawa, unidentified gunmen also shot dead Kithalagama Siri Seelalankara, a well known Buddhist priest (UCDP data). The LTTE has been widely blamed for the killing since Seelalankara, or commonly known as Dimbulagala Priest, was an outspoken critic of the LTTE. He had received a number of threats for up to nine years from the LTTE. It is reported that he was killed along with his driver on his way to pay respect to the surviving family members in Kallarawa.

### **The Position of the LTTE**

By 1995 the LTTE had grown into a formidable force in Sri Lanka. It had consolidated its power, and for about five years had been running a de facto state within a state. The LTTE was in control of one-third of the country's land mass, had its own civil administration, police, jails, courts and visa system. Moreover, its army had a daunting reputation. The Tigers had managed to transform themselves from a guerilla force of estimated 3000 cadres in 1987, to an army of at least 10 000 fighters in 1995. On top of this, the LTTE was running sophisticated propaganda machinery, which, coupled with the charisma of the leader Prabhakaran, ensured that there was a large reservoir to draw more zealous recruits from (Swamy, 1994: 340). According to some, a series of LTTE military victories since 1990 had created a situation of military parity with the government (Stokke, 2006).

After the collapse of the peace talks in April, the Tigers managed to wreak havoc on the Sri Lankan government. Blowing up of the two ships in Trincomalee harbor on April 19 was shortly followed by a massive LTTE offensive against the Sri Lankan military, not in the form of direct frontal assaults, but merely as hit-and-run attacks. In no time, nearly a quarter of the Sri Lankan navy was sunk, police stations and army camps in Trincomalee were hit, several planes were destroyed and a number of military personnel were killed.

### **The Position of the Government**

The government was caught unawares as the events unfolded in the wake of the collapsed talks. For about two whole months since the end of the talks, the SLA was forced into a defensive position. This was somewhat embarrassing both at home and abroad, and ruled out any further effort at a settlement, at least in the short term (Schaffer, 1996:3). Regardless of the initial embarrassment, the government soon came to enjoy widespread diplomatic support from abroad, as the LTTE was seen as the intransigent party and responsible for the breakdown of the talks (Swamy, 1994:342). No ground battles between the LTTE and the SLA have been reported in April-May 1995.

Throughout the talks the government had hoped to bypass the LTTE and reach out to common Tamil people and moderates by its rhetoric of peace and devolution of

state power. Such constitutional reforms were widely welcomed in Sri Lanka, India and elsewhere (Bose, 1995). Thanks to the widespread backing and approval it now was enjoying, the government faced no objections when it announced a 'war for peace' on May 18<sup>th</sup>. The state of emergency, which had been briefly lifted at the time of the elections in 1994 and re-imposed in the north and east as well as in the capital Colombo right after the killing of a presidential candidate in October 1994,<sup>8</sup> was now slowly extended to other parts of the country (Amnesty, 1995: 5-6).

Further means aimed at enhancing security were also taken. The government stepped up its efforts at arming more home guards in the east; they were also given formal training in the use of weapons. At the latest by now the home guards seemed to have become legitimized as they were serving under the authority of local police or alongside the SLA. Their functions were supposed to be strictly defensive however (ibid).

### **Alternative Observations**

An interesting correspondence between the LTTE and Amnesty International bears witness to the complexities of relations between the Tigers and their victims. The LTTE engaged in exchange of letters with Amnesty in order to justify its position to the Kallarawa massacre and the killing of the Dimbulagala priest. The latter issued an Urgent Action Appeal on the killings, expressing concern that the incidents may have marked the beginning of renewed attacks on civilians. The LTTE answered by stating that Amnesty clearly had failed in taking the background of Sinhalese settlers into account, and is wrong in presuming that the victims were civilians, i.e. 'persons taking no active part in hostilities' as stated in the Geneva Conventions of 1949. Akin to its rationale for the massacres of the Sinhalese in 1990, in the letter addressed to Amnesty, the LTTE representative argues: "The ugly fact is that the Sri Lanka government has for a number of years used 'Sinhala settlements' in the east, sometimes as a buffer, sometimes as a cutting edge, in its war of aggression against the Tamil nation. The Sri Lanka government has armed these settlers -some of them ex-convicts- and often uses them to attack Tamil villages in the surrounding areas" (Tamilnation, 1995).

As for the killing of the Dimbulagala priest, the LTTE regrets that Amnesty had failed to understand his part in the settlement scheme. The LTTE claims that the priest in fact was nothing but a warlord, a zealous Sinhalese nationalist, who played a pivotal role in the government's 'war for land' policy by giving land and weapons to Sinhalese settlers in the east. Consequently, the LTTE view of these killings is that the victims, Sinhalese villagers, as well as the 'warlord priest', were legitimate targets of war (ibid).

### **CASE 3: FEBRUARY 2007**

Only one incident is reported for February 2007 in the UCDP data, the killing of a Hindu priest in the eastern Batticaloa district. The LTTE has vehemently denied involvement in the killing, but various sources claim that they are guilty.

## **Background**

As a response to Sinhalese nationalist lobby, hardliner Mahinda Rajapakse of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) won the presidential election in 2005. Violence broke out as a response. It seemed that the LTTE was deliberately trying to provoke the government to resume the war (ICG, 2006:10). The SLA responded in kind, making some momentous inroads into the north and east. Despite the fighting and unrest, both parties agreed to new rounds of talks in Geneva, which were facilitated by international stakeholders and took place twice during 2006. Although the parties were claiming adherence to the recent Ceasefire Agreement (CFA), by July 2006 it effectively had collapsed (ICG, 2008). In his Heroes' Day<sup>9</sup> speech in November 2006, Prabhakaran is accusing Rajapakse of intensifying the war effort and of rejecting the LTTE's calls for a settlement. He also explicitly declares a final war for Eelam, (Prabhakaran, 2006).

In the beginning of 2007, fighting was intensifying in the east and neither side steered clear of civilian targets. UN representatives in the country bleakly noted that both parties had violated 'all fundamental rights' as indiscriminate attacks on civilians continued (ICG, 2007b).

## **Patterns of Violence**

Only one killing is coded in the UCDP data for February 2007; that of a Tamil Hindu priest Selliah Parameshwarak Kurukkal. He was the main priest at the Siddhi Vinayagar temple at Santhiveli in Eravur division of the eastern Batticaloa district. At the time the area was under SLA occupation. Parameshwarak was shot dead on Wednesday night February 7, at the back of his house in Santhiveli.

On Saturday February 3, President Rajapakse made an unannounced surprise visit to nearby Vaakarai, an area which the government lately had conquered. The President wanted to see for himself the 'liberated' people in the area, set free from the clutches of the LTTE. Priest Parameshwarak was asked by the army officials to perform a Hindu rite and to invoke blessings on the President as part of his visit to the area. This was controversial, since most Tamils in the east were of the opinion that the government's policies toward them amounted to ethnic cleansing. Whatever his reservations about blessing the President were, the priest presumably had no other choice than to comply. He was even requested to garland the President, and to place *pottu*, the Hindu dot, on his forehead. A couple of days later, on Wednesday evening around 8 o'clock, three youths arrived at Parameshwarak's

house. They wanted to discuss the matter with the priest at the back of the house. A few moments later shots rang out and Parameshwarak was killed. Later his body was found in a ditch, a spot away from his home where he was last seen discussing with the youths (Jeyaraj, 2007).

### **The Position of the LTTE**

By the turn of the year 2006-2007 the LTTE was eager to confront the SLA. It is baffling since during autumn 2006 the SLA had made significant headway, for instance by 'liberating' the Sampur district, which had been a strategic LTTE base for nine years. This was considered a heavy loss for the LTTE. By the end of 2006, the LTTE was still in control of the north, but to a much lesser degree than before. It had, for instance, lost the important Jaffna peninsula in 1995. In the east it controlled some pockets, and had strongholds still both in Trincomalee and Batticaloa (Stokke, 2006).

Throughout December 2006 and January 2007, heavy fighting took place mainly in the east between the LTTE and the government forces. During this period the LTTE evidently did not engage in frontal assaults with the SLA, but employed several hit-and-run attacks to retaliate for government victories. Its overall (short term and long term) military performance did not live up to what was envisioned by Prabhakaran in his Heroes' speech, not even close. The LTTE kept losing while the government forces were progressing. The number of Tamil refugees and trapped civilians was mounting in the east, but the LTTE was not able to give protection to them, and for this reason, kept losing popular support (UTHR(J), 2007).

On December 18 the LTTE issued a warning, stating that if the SLA goes ahead with its plan of pushing the LTTE out of the east, it will resort to pre-emptive strikes. These were said to be confined to the battlefield, but as it turned out, civilian population, instead of SLA soldiers, became the target of the LTTE onslaught (Reuters, 2006). In the beginning of January 2007 the Tigers exploded two buses in the southeast of the country and were blamed to have caused damage to a power substation (MCNS, 2007). These were small incidents however, and did not stop the government from driving the Tigers out of the east.

Customarily, the LTTE denied all charges and blamed the government of the killing of the Hindu priest. A pro-Tiger news site reports that Parameshwarak, "a Hindu priest who had been *forcefully taken* to Vakarai from Santhiveli by the Sri Lankan army [...], was shot and killed by armed men who are allegedly attached to SLA military intelligence" (my italics, Tamilnet, 2007). The LTTE sources claim that the priest was grumbling about being forcibly taken to garland the President and was killed because of his resistance. Other LTTE-supporters postulate that the killing of the priest was just another way of blame the Tigers and tarnish their name (Jeyaraj, 2007).

## **The Position of the Government**

Ever since July 2006 the Sri Lankan government was arguing that it is engaging in a “humanitarian campaign to liberate the innocent and miserable masses of the north [and east] who are in grave and imminent danger at the hands of the LTTE” (ICG, 2008:3). By the end of 2006 the government was determined to wipe out the LTTE from the east, and to place a wedge between its strongholds in Trincomalee and Batticaloa (ICG, 2007b). It seems that the goal of the government with regard to the Eastern Province was to permanently drive the LTTE out and to hold elections to an Eastern Provincial Council (UTHR(J), 2007).

By mid-December 2006 the government forces had hemmed the LTTE into a 22 km strip of coastline in Vakarai, and had already driven the Tigers out of territory near the strategic Trincomalee port (Reuters, 2006). A month later the SLA had advanced significantly crossing the LTTE defense lines in Batticaloa region (MCNS, 2007b). Further, the battle for the Tiger-held town of Vakarai itself in the Batticaloa district had already begun several weeks ago. For 11 years Vakarai had been under the control of the LTTE serving as a main bastion and important coastal town. It had belonged to the LTTE under the terms of the CFA. On January 19 it finally fell to the SLA. Consequently, the Tigers pulled out of the area in the face of the military advance (AFP, 2007). This has been seen as an important symbolic victory boosting the morale of ordinary SLA fighters and army commanders alike (Husain, 2007).

Military advancement notwithstanding, a Tamil human rights group accuses the government of inflicting massive suffering on the people in the east during its victorious onslaught. Security forces allegedly have taken reprisals by publicly executing innocent Tamil students on Trincomalee’s beachfront in the northeast in January. According to a Tamil human rights source, flows of people displaced by the fighting kept fleeing from one place to another as there were not enough refugee camps or other facilities around (UTHR(J), 2007).

## **Alternative Observations**

Some suggest that the killing of the Hindu priest was a highly symbolic gesture by the LTTE. The act of invoking blessings and garlanding the President was ‘wrong’ in the LTTE view, even if the priest had no choice in the matter. Garlanding someone amounts to hailing them victor, and from an LTTE perspective it seemed like an open endorsement of Rajapakse and his policies. Similar symbolic incidents are said to have taken place in the past too, resulting in punishment by death (Jeyaraj, 2007).

## **RESULTS**

### **Comparing Observations across Cases**

Most of the observed killings were indiscriminate. Killings of a large number of Muslims in 1990, and Sinhalese villagers both in 1990 and 1995, reputedly took place because the victims were indirectly associated with government-sponsored home guards or 'settler-militias'. The two priests, in turn, were targeted selectively. The reported rationale for both of these killings was to deliver a retribution for deeds which went against the LTTE interest. The Tigers have relentlessly denied any involvement with the killing of the Hindu priest, whereas the Buddhist priest allegedly was a legitimate target of war. All the killings, massacres and assassinations alike, were carried out in the eastern Batticaloa and Trincomalee districts, where the LTTE was not in full control, but confined to its bases and hinterlands. Interestingly, most of the killings took place at a time when the LTTE seemed to have been relatively well off vis-à-vis the government and its forces.

The observations from the first case are particularly interesting as the value of the dependent variable is extreme (512 people killed). From the point of view of the hypothesis, this would entail that the performance of the LTTE during the previous months had been extremely poor – otherwise there would not have been any need for the LTTE to resort to such a terrifying vendetta. What the observations from the first case demonstrate, however, is that the LTTE indiscriminately massacred a large number of people when it 1) was able to avert losses for itself on the battlefield, and, to a lesser extent, impose costs on the government, 2) had started gaining territorial control, and managed to retain it despite attacks by the SLA, 3) had a relatively strong infrastructure and organizational capacity to carry out operations, and 4) enjoyed (Tamil) civilian support.

By 1995 the LTTE was all the more powerful. It managed to catch the government unawares, creating havoc while the SLA was watching by. Damages to the government notwithstanding, the LTTE went on slaughtering around 40 people in the east. This is a significantly lower number than what is recorded for August 1990, yet it is slightly above the mean value of all LTTE killings. Thus, the LTTE killed an 'average' number of people when it 1) was able to impose costs on the government by attacking it unilaterally, without suffering reprisals, 2) enjoyed substantial territorial control, 3) had a formidable fighting force and a strong organizational capacity, and 4) enjoyed, although to a lesser degree by now, (Tamil) civilian support.

The third case significantly differs in terms of magnitude. For February 2007, only one single selective killing is coded in the UCDP data, that of a Hindu priest. The hypothesis takes it to mean that the LTTE had been very successful in imposing costs on the government during the two previous months. This incident, too, took place in the east where the Tigers by now were increasingly losing control. Contrary to what the hypothesis is predicting, this attack comes at a time when 1) the LTTE was not able to impose any noticeable costs on the government, and was neither doing well on the battlefield, 2) was losing territorial control as the government forces were making significant conquests, 3) its organizational capacity (although

still quite impressive) had suffered blows, and, 4) its popular support had waxed and waned.

In sum, the observations demonstrate that the evidence for the hypothesis is feeble. The first case shows that the LTTE resorted to mass killing despite the fact that it managed to endure, avert own losses and gain territory. The significant decrease in the number of casualties between the first and the second case correlates with an increase in the LTTE's performance, and therefore can potentially be explained by the hypothesis: the LTTE killed a significantly lower number of civilians when it emerged as the undisputed victor by unilaterally wreaking havoc on the government. The third case nonetheless contradicts this. The observations from 2007 demonstrate that the LTTE *did not* resort to mass killing when it was unable to impose other costs on the government, uphold territory and perform well on the battlefield.

### **Ethnically Motivated Violence: Additional Observations**

Additional observations of the cases suggest that magnitude and patterns appear to be two distinct aspects of LTTE violence. With regard to patterns, some characteristics of the cases indeed point out that (as postulated in the beginning of the article) it is feasible to analytically differentiate between violence against Sinhalese, Muslims and Tamils, respectively.

The Sinhalese seem to be overrepresented among the casualties in the cases. For the Tigers, the Sinhalese settlers in the east represent the enemy, the supremacist, ethno-nationalist Sinhalese state, and for this reason have no place in Tamil homeland (Kantha, 2008). They are reportedly targeted because the justification for their residency in the east, which the LTTE considers as part of Tamil Eelam, is disputed. For the Muslims the case is somewhat more complex. Whether they are considered legitimate settlers in the Tamil homeland, and whether the LTTE is willing to accommodate them is less clear than the fact that (for the LTTE) their existence seems to be more agreeable than that of the Sinhalese. After all, the Muslims speak Tamil, and the relations between the LTTE and them have been cordial at times (McGilvray and Rakeem, 2007). If we accept that the reported reason for the attacks against the Muslims is a collective punishment for disobedience, then the logical inference from this argument would be that the LTTE was apt to accommodate the Muslims, on the condition that they co-operate.

The Tamils, on the other hand, are the reputed LTTE constituency in whose name the Tigers have carried out their armed struggle. The LTTE has relentlessly claimed to be the sole representative of the Sri Lankan Tamils, whose co-operation and obedience is of utmost importance for the realization of Tamil Eelam. Nonetheless, many Tamils are extremely critical of the LTTE and have disowned the militants altogether. To ensure their constituents' support, the LTTE has resorted to both non-violent and violent methods, of which passive coercion methods seem to predominate (Lilja, 2009:4). Against this background, it is no surprise that the LTTE

has vehemently denied killing the Hindu priest, who, all other things being equal, was a Tamil. Killing one's own kind is bad publicity indeed. He is believed to have been killed because he symbolically endorsed the *primus inter pares* of all LTTE enemies; the Sri Lankan president.

### **Theory Development**

It should be pointed out that Hultman is mainly concerned with *magnitude* of violence; her point of departure is sheer numbers. Her theory does not account for differences in patterns, such as who is killed by whom, where and how. Hence, her theory cannot be expected to account for the qualitative variance found in the cases; it simply falls outside the scope of her work. It can be, however, concluded that her theory is able to account for the drastic decrease in the number of (Sinhalese) civilians killed between the first and the second case. Furthermore, her theory indeed seems to be able to explain the killings of the Sinhalese, the government-affiliated group, in general. The observations point out that the rationale for targeting the Sinhalese was in fact to influence the government and its settlement policies in particular.

As pointed out earlier in this article, Stathis Kalyvas suggests that the interaction of interest in civil war violence is that between insurgents and civilians. By targeting civilians, insurgents seek to deter unwanted behavior, such as defection to the enemy's camp. Violence varies with the degree of territorial control, and can be divided into selective and indiscriminate kinds. The higher the level of insurgents' control, the less likely it is that they will resort to violence; they simply do not need to use violence to ensure popular support and obedience if they are in full control. Conversely, the lower the level of insurgents' control, the less likely it is that they will resort to selective violence, and the more likely that their violence will be indiscriminate. Under fragmented control violence tends to be indiscriminate (Kalyvas, 2006: 204). Kalyvas proposes that "both selective and indiscriminate violence are, in principle, instrumental forms of violence aiming to generate collaboration via deterrence" (Kalyvas, 2006:142). As opposed to Hultman, Kalyvas's theory is largely concerned with *patterns* of violence, and suggests that the impetus for violence is to affect the behavior of civilians.

What Kalyvas is suggesting seems to fit some aspects of the cases reasonably well. Observations from the cases point out that by resorting to violence, the LTTE was in fact trying to shape the behavior particularly of its *own* constituents. It strove to punish and deter behavior it saw as wrong, and would not tolerate in its homeland. All the killings took place in the east of the country, under fragmented sovereignty, where neither the SLA nor the LTTE was fully in control. Despite declaring it as an integral part of Tamil Eelam, in the Eastern Province the Tigers were mainly confined to their own bases and rural hinterlands. The LTTE did not have sufficient control over the population in the east. Lacking in organizational infrastructure there, information about defection was hard to come by, resulting in the salience of

indiscriminate massacres. Revealingly, none of the reported incidents took place in the north, where the LTTE managed to retain its full control. The two priests were targeted selectively, however. This is interesting, since these attacks, too, took place in the east under fragmented control, where selective killings are rare according to Kalyvas. The relative ease at which the LTTE was able to identify the 'wrongdoers' and deliver their punishments is most likely explained with the fact that both priests were renowned and prominent members of their communities. Their identities, opinions and deeds were widely known (Jeyaraj, 2007; Tamilnation, 1995).

## DISCUSSION

One of the key findings of this study is the analytical separateness of magnitude and patterns of violence. Both these features have invoked different kinds of observations, dynamics and motivations. So have the theories, too. Instead of being competing, Hultman and Kalyvas's theories explain different aspects of the cases, and therefore can potentially be combined. Both these scholars argue that violence is a social phenomenon, worth analyzing in its own right. Kalyvas is mainly set to explain patterns, whereas Hultman is more concerned with magnitude.

Another interesting observation is the role ethnicity plays in LTTE violence. Strategic considerations underpinning violence are diverse, and vary according to which ethnic group and individual is victimized. An interesting conclusion derived from such observations is that when the LTTE is targeting fellow Tamils and Muslims (i.e. Tamil speakers), its aim is not to affect the Sri Lankan government, but rather these constituents' behavior. Conversely, by targeting Sinhalese (the government constituency), the LTTE is most likely aiming at affecting the government. Hence, Hultman's theory is better suited to explain the cases of LTTE violence against the Sinhalese than against any other ethnic group. Kalyvas, in his turn, seems to be better positioned to explain the killings of the Muslims and Tamils, as well as the politico-geographical location of the incidents.

By combining the propositions of both Kalyvas and Hultman, this study acknowledges that violence is used for multiple purposes, and varies not only according to conflict intensity but also according to relations between civilians and insurgents. Violence differs and transforms itself in accordance with the political geography of the conflict, and is contingent on the levels of control. Moreover, in a society where ethnic identities have become politicized, the reasons for and patterns which violence takes may differ depending on the targets' perceived ethnic affiliation. What this study has found is that by resorting to violence, the insurgents might strive to affect *both* the government *and* the civilian population. A look at the forms which violence takes reveal which actor(s) is believed to be affected.

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