

The Sri Lankan Civil War: Notes for UPSC Exam

The war in Sri Lanka between the separatist Tamil forces and the government was a heavy one with a death toll of over 150000 from both sides including civilians. Starting in 1983 as a minor insurgency, it took almost 26 years for the government to finally suppress the bloody civil war.

This article will give details of the event which in turn will be of immense use for candidates attempting their IAS exams this year.

Causes of the Sri Lankan Civil War

The majority of Sri Lankans are ethnic Sinhalese, a group of Indo-European peoples that had migrated to the island from northern India in the BC 500s. The Sinhalese had contacts with the Tamils who were settled in the southern part of the Indian subcontinent. Major migration of the Tamils occurred between the 7th and the 11th centuries CE.

When the British started ruling the country in 1815, the approximate population of the Sinhalese was roughly 3 million and the Tamils numbered up to 300,000. Apart from the ethnicities, the two groups also differed in their religious affiliations. The Sinhalese were predominantly Buddhist and the Tamils were mostly Hindu. The British ruled over Sri Lanka from 1815 to 1948. During this time, they brought nearly a million Tamils to work in the coffee, tea and rubber plantations to the island-nation. The British also set up good educational and other infrastructure in the northern part of the country, which was where the Tamils were in a majority. They also favoured the Tamils in the civil service. All this, naturally fostered ill-feeling among the Sinhalese.

After attaining independence, the new government initiated many laws that discriminated against the Tamils. Sinhalese was declared the sole official language which effectively eliminated the Tamils from government service. A law was also passed which simply barred Indian Tamils from getting citizenship. The Tamils started demanding equal rights in their homeland. Their demands were just and their methods peaceful.

However, ethnic tension was rising in the country and the successive Sinhalese governments did nothing to provide equal rights and opportunities to the Tamil people. They were even targets of sectarian violence.

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

The LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) was formed in 1976 by Prabhakaran with the intention of acquiring a homeland for the Tamils in Sri Lanka in the north and east parts of the island.

The group first struck in July 1983 when they attacked an army patrol at Tirunelveli in Jaffna. 13 army men were killed which prompted violence on civilian Tamils by the majority community. The initial days of the LTTE was focused on fighting other Tamil factions and consolidating power as the sole representative of the Sri Lankan Tamils. This was achieved by 1986, the same year it captured Jaffna.

There were many skirmishes between the government and the insurgents in which civilians were also affected. Many Tamils left their homes for the eastern part of the country.

Indian Intervention in the Sri Lankan Civil War

In 1987, Rajiv Gandhi decided to intervene in the situation mainly because of separatism issues in Tamil Nadu and also to avoid the potential swarm of refugees from Sri Lanka to Indian shores, setting a new stage for the India-Sri Lanka relations

Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) was sent to the island in the hope of bringing about peace. This move proved to be a terrible disaster. Instead of negotiating a settlement between both parties, the Indian troops ended up fighting the Eelam group. About 1200 Indian men died in the war. Rajiv Gandhi was also a victim of the LTTE when in 1991, he was assassinated by a human bomb at an election rally in Sriperumbudur in Tamil Nadu.

After the IPKF had withdrawn in 1990, the fighting continued more intensely. Sri Lankan president Premadasa was also killed by the LTTE in 1993 in a human bomb.

The LTTE, at its height, was a full-fledged militia with even an air force of its own. It employed women and even children in their activities.

The war went on with numerous counts of atrocities and brutalities perpetrated by both sides. The civilians also suffered terribly. Lakhs of people were displaced in the protracted war.

Ceasefire was declared a few times by the LTTE, only to resume fighting later. Peace talks were also held with the intervention of international actors, particularly Norway. Nothing came to any avail.

Results of the Sri Lankan Civil War

Finally, the Rajapaksa government decided to come hard on the LTTE in an extreme offensive starting in 2007. There was intense fighting between the government forces and the LTTE in which thousands of civilians were caught in the line of fire. The government was also accused of targeting civilians and destroying entire villages.

International and United Nations observers describe the events that led to the defeat of the LTTE in 2009 as a 'bloodbath'.

On 19th May, the president of the country declared to the parliament that the LTTE leader Prabhakaran was killed and that the war had been won by the government forces. Many heaved a sigh of relief as the bloody war had proved far too costly. However, there have been speculations that the army had killed many Tamil leaders after they had surrendered.

It is suggested that in the final days of the war, about 40,000 people had lost lives. The Sri Lankan government faced a huge task of providing relief and aid to the displaced and injured. The total cost of the 26-year war is estimated to be USD 200 billion.