



REFLECTING ON PEACE PRACTICE PROJECT

Case Study

The Inter-religious Peace Foundation: Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus — Addressing the conflict in Sri Lanka

This case study is one of 26 cases developed as part of the Reflecting on Peace Practice Project (RPP). The RPP cases were not written as evaluations; rather, they were written to allow for the identification of cross-cutting issues and themes across the range of cases. Each case represents the views and perspectives of a variety of people—the case writer, agencies, project participants, and observers—at the point it was written. RPP would like to acknowledge the generosity of the agencies involved in donating their time and experience for these case studies, as well as their willingness to share their experience with the worldwide community of peace practitioners.

The Reflecting on Peace Practice Project is directed by the Collaborative for Development Action, Inc. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA), in cooperation with the Life and Peace Institute (Uppsala, Sweden) and Diakonia (Stockholm, Sweden). RPP has been funded by the government development agencies of Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, Germany, Australia, and the United Kingdom, along with contributions from participating agencies.

Alex Bilodeau

October 2000

Foreword

After briefly outlining the setting, the history and the particular role religion has played in the Sri Lankan conflict, this case will examine the work of the Inter-Religious Peace Foundation (IRPF) from its inception in 1993 to today. The purpose of this case is to understand the impact the foundation's community-based and inter-religious approach to peace-building has had on both the long-standing conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities and the war between the Sri Lankan state and Tamil guerrilla groups led by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Part I: The Conflict Setting

1. Setting the scene...

The Island of Sri Lanka or Ceylon, as it was named until 1972,¹ also known as the *Pearl of the East*² and the *Island of Tears*,³ is home to approximately 19,239,000 Sri Lankans of diverse ethnic, linguistic and religious backgrounds.⁴

Tables 1 & 2: Ethnic and Religious Composition of Sri Lanka's Population in 1999

Group	1999 estimate	Percentage of total population
Sinhalese	14,237,000	74%
Ceylon or Sri Lankan Tamils	2,309,000	12%
Indian or plantation Tamils	1,154,000	6%
Moors	1,347,000	7%
Burghers, Malay & Vedda	192,000	1%
Total	19,239,000	100%

Group	1999 estimate	Percentage of total population
Buddhists	13,371,000	69.5%
Hindus	2,790,000	14.5%
Christians	1,539,000	8%
Muslims	1,347,000	7%
Other	192,000	1%
Total	19,239,000	100%

Source: CIA Factbook 1999

Sri Lanka is located at the south-eastern tip of the Indian subcontinent and has been subjected, throughout its history, to the dominance of India and several colonial powers such as Portugal, the Netherlands and Britain. It regained its independence from the United Kingdom (UK) in 1948 through a constitutional agreement, thus ending over four centuries of European rule and plunging the country into what is often labelled as an ethnic conflict between the country's Sinhalese majority state and the Tamil national movement.

¹ The European name *Ceylon*, a corruption of the Sinhalese *Sihala Dveepa*, which means the whole island, was changed the year the amended Constitution of the Republic of Sri Lanka was adopted and enacted by the Constituent Assembly of the People of Sri Lanka. Perera, N., "Colonialism and National Space," ed. Gamage, S., and I. B. Watson, *Conflict and Community in Contemporary Sri Lanka*, p. 25.

² The island was romantically named the *Pearl of the East* during the European colonial era because of its refined cultural assets, its profitable resources and its idyllic landscapes and climate.

³ Sri Lanka was renamed the *Island of Tears* during the 1980s in the midst of the civil war, because of the island's shape and the suffering of its people.

⁴ See Tables 1 and 2 for details.

However, it seems that the long-standing strife between the two communities stems in fact from a problem of political representation or “democratic malpractice” which has manifested itself by the systematic marginalisation, discrimination and subordination of the Tamil nation by the state. In addition, ethnic, linguistic, economic, cultural and religious tensions have gradually been grafted to the conflict since independence. Today, this evolving process of division along ethnic and religious lines has resulted in the political and social exclusion of the country’s Tamil minority and in the militarization of its struggle for self-determination. The 17-year armed conflict raging between the Sri Lankan state and militant Tamil guerrilla groups has been fuelled by the state’s interests to preserve its territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence. In sum, it appears that the conflict is the violent manifestation of the Sinhalese Buddhist state’s failure to provide a political system representative of all communities without prejudice or discrimination in any degree or form.⁵

Although Sri Lanka enjoys an exclusive maritime economic zone that extends over an area of 517,400 square kilometres and a relatively attractive position at the northern end of the Indian Ocean, rich in living and non-living resources, the Island has remained of limited strategic concern to superpowers and other larger nations during the Cold War,⁶ aside from India who has maintained a close relation with the independent state in order to ensure regional stability.⁷ However, since the outbreak of war between the Sri Lankan army and separatist Tamil guerrillas led by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1983, the Island has attracted or renewed the attention of several countries such as Canada, the UK, Norway and Australia among others, because of the growing number of refugees reaching their borders in search of political asylum. It is in fact estimated that over 600,000⁸ Sri Lankan Tamils and Sinhalese have left the island in search of refuge abroad, of which 40,000 are reported living in camps in South India.⁹ A more difficult approximation to make is regarding the internally displaced population. A 1998 Christian Aid report estimates the number of individuals living in camps located in the Jaffna peninsula and along the *de facto* border that separates government and LTTE held areas at well over one million.¹⁰ It is also reported that the conflict has resulted in over 65,000¹¹ casualties and that there were over 12,000 unresolved cases of disappearances in 1998.¹²

⁵ Rupesinghe, A., “Presentation on the Sri Lankan crisis and its current conjuncture,” Colombo, June 2000.

⁶ However Sri Lanka presented a certain strategic value to the great powers prior to the Cold War. The British established their south-east Asian command headquarters here during the second world war. Control of and access to the Trincomalee harbour has been coveted by the US, UK and India because it is one of the largest deep water natural harbours in Asia and girdles the Indian ocean sea-lanes.

⁷ India has sought to defend the civil and political rights of the Sri Lankan Tamils through varied and sometimes contradictory methods in order to prevent Tamil nationalist aspirations in the Indian State of Tamil Nadu (across the Palk Strait) from being exacerbated by Tamil separatism in Sri Lanka.

⁸ “Joint Statement and Call for Action by Non-Governmental Organisations: The Humanitarian Crisis in Sri Lanka,” Human Rights Solidarity, June 2000, Volume 10 No. 6 (Asian Human Rights Commission: Hong Kong, 2000).

⁹ CIA Factbook 1999.

¹⁰ “Health crisis forgotten as Prince Charles visits Sri Lanka,” Christian Aid Press Release PR 92/98, (Christian Aid: London, 1998).

¹¹ See note 6.

¹² UN Commission on Human Rights, “Report of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances,” E/CN.4/1998/43 (Human Rights Internet 1998).

The following historical account will examine the evolution of this conflict focussing on the socio-political divisions that emerged after the end of colonialism and how they gradually evolved into an armed conflict which has been raging for the past 17 years.

2. Historical background

From ancient history to colonialism

Deeply imbedded in the ancient *Dharma Deepa*¹³ philosophy lies the belief that the Sinhalese people are the chosen defenders of the Buddhist faith and that the island of Sri Lanka belongs to them by decree from Lord Buddha himself. The story claims in fact that, as Lord Buddha was attaining enlightenment, the Aryan prince Vijaya and his party landed on the shores of *Lanka*,¹⁴ thus establishing the first Sinhalese kingdom and receiving the mission to uphold and protect Buddhism throughout the island.

Although this myth is highly controversial and historically flawed, it has served and is still often used as a justification for Sinhalese Buddhist supremacy in Sri Lanka. It bestows on the Sinhalese people the status of the sole true indigenous people of the island, hence relegating all other communities to the category of migrants or mere interlopers. A quick browse through the several websites made available today on the internet by either Sinhalese or Tamil extremist groups, shows that the controversy is still alive in the documents describing the understanding each side has of the historical roots of the conflict.¹⁵ Paradoxically however, more reliable and objective historical sources tend to agree that there were only few if no clashes at all between the Sinhalese Buddhist and Tamil Hindu communities in Ceylon before the early twentieth century. It seems in fact that throughout the country's long history of struggle against Indian invasions and European colonial rule, which spanned from the 2nd century B.C. to February 4th 1948, the two communities remained relatively isolated from one another — the Sinhalese Kandyan and Low country kingdoms in the south-west of the island and the Jaffna Tamil kingdom in the North — until they were brought together by the British in 1833¹⁶ under a single administration ruled from the colonial port city of Colombo by the office of a Crown appointed Governor.

Post-colonial political negotiations

Arguably, the disproportionate advantages Tamils received within the British colonial administration and the fact that thousands of Indian Tamils were brought over from India to work as estate-labour in the large tea and rubber plantations under colonial exploitation, led the Sinhalese majority to forge strong nationalist feelings against the perceived instruments of their domination. Combined with the historical myth of Sinhalese supremacy, this strong anti-colonial and anti-Tamil sentiment crystallised, after Ceylon gained its independence on February 4th 1948, into actual political and legislative measures aimed at re-establishing Sinhalese pre-

¹³ The controversial Sinhala Buddhist myth which can be identified as the one of the roots of Sinhala claims of supremacy in Sri Lanka.

¹⁴ Meaning *the beautiful*, as the island was known in India.

¹⁵ Visit www.tamilresearch.com and www.sinhale.org for an striking example of this ongoing historical debate.

¹⁶ The British unified the island based on the recommendations of the Colebrook-Cameron commission report of 24 Dec. 1931. The redrawing of province boundaries was primarily aimed at reducing the isolation of the Kandyan Sinhala kingdom in order to accelerate the creation of a homogenous nation under a unified system of administration. There was hardly any resistance from the Northern Tamils against the unification of the national polity and the centralisation of power presumably because Tamil élites were given assurances as to privileges they would obtain within the new administrative framework.

eminence over the island. The newly established democratic state enabled in fact the majority Sinhalese community to enact through its elected representatives discriminatory legislation such as the 1948 Ceylon citizenship Act,¹⁷ intended to deprive the Indian Tamil community of their rights to citizenship, and the 1956 Official Language Act,¹⁸ establishing Sinhala as the sole official language of the State.

Hence, the use of the democratic electoral system to ensure Sinhalese domination over the State administration initiated the polarisation process of Sri Lankan society along ethnic lines. The minorities' constitutional guarantees against ethnic and religious discrimination were gradually wiped away from the country's 1947 constitution,¹⁹ triggering strong reactions on behalf of indigenous Tamils and violent "state-sponsored" Sinhala-Tamil riots throughout the nation in 1958.²⁰ Earlier that year, a federal solution²¹ to the growing conflict had been reached between Prime Minister Bandanaraike of the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) and the leader of the Tamil Federal Party (FP), S. J. V. Chevalnayagam, but was abrogated within a week by the Sinhalese politician because of heavy pressure from the opposition party — the United National Party (UNP) — and elements of the Buddhist clergy. The mobilisation power of the *Sangha*²² and the dedication of certain monks to preserve the unitary and centralised character of the state and the territorial integrity of the island, proved in fact to be political forces with an important role in state affairs, particularly after Bandanaraike's assassination by an extremist monk in 1959.

A similar agreement was subsequently reached between the UNP's leader and the FP in 1965 but was also abandoned due to opposition from the SLFP, the Buddhist clergy and UNP backbenchers.

From political negotiation to violent struggle

Hence, by 1972, Tamil demands for a quasi-federal constitution, equal recognition of both Sinhalese and Tamil as official state languages and a stop to Sinhalese settlements in Tamil areas had been formally rejected on numerous occasions because of party politics and the growing interference of Buddhist monks in state affairs. The 1972 Republican constitution was passed in Parliament despite the boycott and rejection of the new document by the main Tamil parties.²³ Buddhism was accorded the "foremost place" in the Sri Lankan state thus clearly putting an end

¹⁷ A very large number of Tamil estate workers of Indian origin lost the right to vote under the Indian-Pakistani Citizenship act which was presented in 1948. The Tamil parties reacted by stating that this was done not only to reduce the representation of the Tamil speaking people in Parliament but also to deprive them of their civil rights. Source: "Some important stages in the history of the national conflict in Sri Lanka," National Peace Council, Sri Lanka, 1996.

¹⁸ The Tamil parties also opposed this act as it greatly affected not only the Tamils' right to transact business with the government in their own language, but also matters such as education and access to employment which are directly related to language policy. Source: "Some important stages in the history of the national conflict in Sri Lanka," National Peace Council, Sri Lanka, 1996.

¹⁹ Also known as the Soulbury Constitution.

²⁰ These riots, also known as the "Sri Riots," were directly related to the government's implementation of the 1956 Sinhala Only Act.

²¹ This early proposal took the form of a limited linguistic autonomy to the Tamil community.

²² Sri Lankan Buddhist clergy.

²³ Despite the withdrawal from the Constituent Assembly of the Federal Party and certain Tamil Congress members, the new constitution was ratified by Parliament on May 22nd 1972.

to the spirit of the Soulbury Constitution of 1947 in which special provisions were included in order to protect ethnic and religious minorities. This event clearly marked an increase in the level of hostilities between the two parties to the conflict.

The marginalisation of the Tamil community following the formalisation of Sinhalese Buddhist hegemony through the 1972 constitution seems in fact to have triggered the chain of events which lead to the outbreak of war in 1983. In the years following the enactment of the new constitution, the Tamil community expressed its opposition to Sinhalese Buddhist hegemony by mobilising on several fronts. An organisation named the Tamil United Front (TUF) comprising the main Tamil political organisations was established in order to strengthen the political struggle for self-determination, whereas the Tamil New Tigers (TNT), a small youth group from the northern city of Jaffna led by 17-year-old student Velupillai Pirabhakaran, was established with the clear objective of using armed struggle as a means of asserting Tamil rights. The TNT claimed in fact responsibility for the 1975 assassination of the mayor of Jaffna (he had been charged with complicity in the death of seven participants in the international Tamil literary congress held in Jaffna in 1974) and was renamed the LTTE in 1976. That same year, for fear of being marginalised by the violent and revolutionary approach of the TNT, the TUF was renamed the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) and mobilised all major Tamil political organisations who unanimously adopted the Vaddukoddai resolution²⁴ in favour of a separate Tamil state.

However, the TULF's success in pursuing the struggle for self-determination through political means was short-lived. Despite winning an overwhelming majority of Tamil votes in the northern and the eastern provinces during the 1977 election and becoming the major opposition party in parliament, the TULF began to fade into political oblivion as early as 1983 following strong anti-Tamil reactions in Sinhalese-majority areas. In fact despite limited successes in obtaining a certain amount of power devolution to the regions such as the establishment of District Development Councils,²⁵ the TULF fell victim to the growing Sinhalese nationalist sentiment and therefore failed to maintain the Tamil struggle within the realm of non-violence. The growing number and intensity of anti-Tamil pogroms from 1979 to 1983 indicated in fact that any type of compromise the Sinhalese government was willing to grant to the Tamil opposition party was met by popular upheaval. Ironically, in obtaining positive responses to its demands, the TULF was in fact triggering violent reactions among the Sinhalese population and hence feeding the rationale put forward by the LTTE and other militant groups, according to which the only means of obtaining the recognition of the Tamil people's rights was the violent struggle against the Colombo-oriented Sinhalese Buddhist state. Consequently, the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) was enacted in 1979, outlawing all militant organisations, and a state of emergency was declared in the north as a measure of control over popular violence.

Hence, following intense inter-ethnic clashes in 1983 during which approximately 3,000 Tamils were killed, Tamil militant organisations started gaining the support of thousands of youth as well as aid (such as military training and weapons) from the Indian government increasingly

²⁴ Vaddukoddai Resolution Unanimously adopted at the First National Convention of the Tamil United Liberation Front held at Vaddukoddai on 14-5-1976. For full text of resolution visit: <http://www.eelam.com/introduction/vaddukoddai.html>

²⁵ The District Development Councils were established in 1981 as an attempt by the UNP government led by President Jayawardena to devolve power to the regions and meet Tamil demands.

preoccupied by the restive mood of the Indian Tamil people of Tamil Nadu. The idea of a political struggle had clearly been defeated by the wish for an armed conflict on both sides of the national divide thus plunging the country in what would become a protracted civil war.

Acts of war and peace talks

By mid-1985 Tamil militant groups effectively led by the LTTE had taken control of the Jaffna peninsula and several areas in the eastern provinces. A *de facto* state was being drawn along the line separating government forces and Tamil guerrillas in which the Tamil civilian population soon became hostage to its own cause, suffering from attacks and constant displacement. Although the Indian government supported the militants out of a fear of fuelling separatist tendencies in the southern state of Tamil Nadu if it didn't, it did not however share Tamil objectives of a separate state which would have dire consequences for its own national integrity. Therefore in an attempt to broker a favourable settlement and assert its regional geo-political ambitions, India used its leverage with both the Tamil militants and the Sri Lankan government to organise and mediate a round of peace talks. Almost two years after the outbreak of violence, the LTTE and all other major Tamil militant and political organisations willingly entered into negotiations with the government in Thimpu, Bhutan, under the auspices of the Indian government in the summer of 1985. Although the talks failed because of the continuing gap between what the Sri Lankan government was prepared to offer by way of a political solution and the minimum demand of the Tamils, the Thimpu talks led to the clear and direct formulation of principles which are still today at the base of Tamil separatists' and others'²⁶ understanding of a political solution to the conflict.²⁷

Despite its failure, the meeting clearly enabled the LTTE to gain deeper recognition and perceived legitimacy among the Tamil community. The small youth group had become an equal interlocutor of the Sri Lankan government and the dominant guerrilla group among the Tamil liberation movement, effectively leading the battle against government forces and taking control of the Jaffna peninsula, home to the future capital of an independent Tamil state called *Eelam*. Stories about the ruthlessness of the organisation's leader, Pirabhakaran, were also emerging as the LTTE developed its guerrilla warfare skills and its repression of rival militant groups such as the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO) and Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) who were apparently used by the Indian government to decimate the Tigers. The war continued its violent course until July 1987, at which time, partially out of concern for its own national stability, the Indian government signed the Indo-Lanka Accord with its Sri Lankan counterpart, offering a new system of devolution in the form of provincial councils and giving Tamil the official

²⁶ Several Sri Lankan peace organisations have today accepted that a political settlement to the conflict will have to be based on Tamil demands imbedded in the Thimpu principles if longstanding peace is to be reached.

²⁷ *The Thimpu Declaration*, "Joint statement made by the Tamil Delegation on the concluding day of Phase I of the Thimpu talks on the 13th of July 1985." Excerpt: "It is our considered view that any meaningful solution to the Tamil national question must be based on the following four cardinal principles:

1. recognition of the Tamils of Ceylon as a nation
2. recognition of the existence of an identified homeland for the Tamils in Ceylon
3. recognition of the right of self determination of the Tamil nation
4. recognition of the right to citizenship and the fundamental rights of all Tamils in Ceylon"

For full text visit: <http://www.tamilnation.org/thimpu/thimpu10.htm>

language status but also expediting the deployment of tens of thousands of Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) to enforce the cessation of hostilities and the surrender of arms.²⁸

Although the agreement was backed by concrete measures of action and substantial considerations for Tamil demands, it did not include the LTTE nor address the Thimpu principles and consequently failed to improve the situation in the least. On the contrary, the intervention of the IPKF led to a significant escalation of violence both on the military and the civilian levels. In the north, the LTTE, who had been excluded from the agreement and who had never consented to a cessation of hostilities on the basis of the provisions included in the accord, started fighting the IPKF, while in the south, Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism was once again exacerbated and provoked a large scale nationalist insurrection led by Janata Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP, the People's Liberation Front), a group of educated Sinhalese youth frustrated by limited economic opportunities and mobilised around fears of Indian imperialism. The group, which had been active in the 1971 anti-Tamil pogroms, was successful in mobilising civilians to perpetrate acts of violence against their perceived threats.

Hence while the conflict intensified in the north after the arrival of the IPKF in July 1987, it reached unimaginable heights of violence in Sinhalese-majority areas of the south. In fact, within months of the IPKF's arrival, the JVP managed "to destabilise the entire south of the island, assassinating scores of government representatives [including socialist leader and fervent peace advocate Vijaya Kumaratunge] and [other] more moderate political rivals."²⁹ Once again the national conflict had fallen out of the inter-ethnic category and had reached proportions of social chaos. The government forces' ensuing repression of the 1988 insurrection was one of the most violent recorded offensive attacks of the war and it opposed Sinhalese military forces to Sinhalese civilians. By 1989, the newly elected President Premadasa (killed in 1994 by a suicide bomber) of the UNP, overwhelmed by the failure of the Indo-Lanka Accord requested the IPKF troops to withdraw from the island but pursued nonetheless the repression of the JVP and its southern supporters, perpetrating serious human rights abuses such as random killings and disappearances. In an unexpected turn of events, Premadasa even went as far as providing the LTTE with weapons in order to expel the IPKF.

The following period was characterised by the departure of the IPKF, and the LTTE's efforts to de-escalate the hostilities seemed somewhat uneventful in light of the intensification of violence witnessed in the late eighties. However, the "less-war no-peace" situation was very much unstable and provided the backdrop of the creation of the IRPF in 1993.

However, soon after the organisation's establishment, a window of opportunity appeared after the 1994 election of the People's Alliance party (PA) and its leader Chandrika Bandanaraike Kumaratunge as President. Chandrika, the daughter of the former SLFP leader S. W. R. D. Bandanaraike who supported a federal solution to the crisis in the 50s, and the widow of socialist leader Vijaya Kumaratunge presumably assassinated by the JVP in 1988, was in fact perceived as an ideal candidate for reaching a negotiated settlement to the conflict. In addition to her

²⁸ Nissan, E., "Historical Context," *Demanding Sacrifice: War and Negotiation in Sri Lanka*, Accord, Issue 4 / August 1998, pp. 10-19.

²⁹ Armon, J., and L. Philipson, eds., "Key Actors," *Demanding Sacrifice: War and Negotiation in Sri Lanka*, Accord, Issue 4 / August 1998 (Conciliation Resources: London).

personal connection to two Sinhalese politicians who had acknowledged in one form or another the Tamils' rights to self-determination, Chandrika was elected on a platform of peace, signalling to the Tamil militants who were now in control of the Jaffna peninsula and most of the North-eastern province, that popular support for the war was ailing among the Sinhalese population and that the time was opportune to enter into negotiations.

The LTTE therefore declared a ceasefire in 1994 and entered into negotiations with the newly appointed parliamentary select committee on constitutional reform. By 1995 a cessation of hostilities was formally agreed and welcomed by Sinhalese and Tamil communities nation-wide. However the truce was short lived and talks broke down for reasons which are still relatively controversial. According to some analysts, the LTTE felt that Chandrika and her government were not acting in good faith, using the cessation of hostilities as an opportunity to "strengthen and consolidate the military capacity of the armed forces."³⁰ Others argue, however, that hostilities resumed because the LTTE was not willing to compromise on issues pertaining to the embargo imposed on Jaffna and the fishing restrictions which had a direct impact on the Tamil civilian population in the north.

Nonetheless, regardless of the reasons for a breakdown of negotiations, fighting resumed in 1995 and the government launched a massive offensive regaining the symbolic city of Jaffna after five months of fierce fighting between the two sides. Tens of thousands of troops were stationed in Jaffna as the local population felt that the old regime of occupation was simply being replaced by a new one. Hundreds of Tamils "disappeared" while in detention, government structures were re-established and thousands of returnees regained their homes or fell under the auspices of state controlled camps in the Wannu region. Subsequently, the government launched several major offensives to regain control of the main road linking Jaffna to the rest of the island, leading to record high casualties on both sides as the war regained its pre-1995 intensity. Ironically, however, the parliamentary select committee on constitutional reform continued its manoeuvring to put together a devolution package susceptible of resolving the conflict with Tamil militants but has repeatedly failed to even reach a consensus among Sinhalese politicians in the past few years. A 1997 proposal which was watered down in order to appease Sinhalese Buddhist resentment failed to be officially presented in parliament due to fear it would not obtain a two third majority necessary for its enactment, as has a more recent effort in August this year.

In parallel, it seems that the LTTE has hardened its position on negotiations in the past few years. The Tigers have in fact declared themselves, following the 1995 talks, to be willing to engage in future negotiations only if a neutral third party is involved. Furthermore, in a clear effort to provoke Sinhalese sensitivities and undermine the constitutional debate on devolution, the LTTE planned a bomb attack on Sri Lanka's holiest Buddhist shrine in 1998. The bomb targeted at the Temple of the Tooth³¹ relic has brought about a formal ban on the LTTE³² and has

³⁰ Pirabhakaran, V., "Letter to President Chandrika Kumaratunge, 18 April 1995," in Armon, J., and L. Philipson, eds., *Demanding Sacrifice: War and Negotiation in Sri Lanka*, Accord, Issue 4 / August 1998 (Conciliation Resources: London).

³¹ It is believed by Sri Lankan Buddhists that the relic enshrined in the temple is the piece of tooth belonging to Lord Buddha himself. The temple has always been regarded as the holiest shrine of the island by Sri Lankans of Buddhist faith.

³² The previous year the US had declared the LTTE an illegal terrorist organisation and had banned its American arms from collecting funds, thus mounting international pressure on foreign governments to do the same in their

radicalised the position of an important part of the Sinhalese Buddhists community and of the Buddhist clergy. It was in fact reported after the bombing that monks had volunteered to join the armed forces in order to pursue the war against Tamil terrorists and the perceived threat to Buddhist hegemony. Apparently this phenomenon has continued as a part of Buddhist extremists' efforts to diffuse popular support for any constitutional reform which changes the privileged position granted Buddhism in the 1972 Republican constitution. This new phenomenon has deepened the divide between Sinhalese Buddhist moderates and extremists and made the prospect of a parliamentary agreement on a constitutional reform unforeseeable in the near future. Furthermore, the re-election of President Chandrika Kumaratunge on "war for peace" platforms earlier this year, seems to be an additional indication that both sides are resolved to gain the upper hand through force rather than negotiations.

Finally, it should be reported that at the time of this study, the LTTE had taken over key government military camps at the entrance of the Jaffna peninsula, also known as the Elephant Pass. The attack occurred in mid-May and has somewhat transformed the possibilities of a negotiated solution. In the weeks following the attack, certain analysts believed that the situation on the ground gave a favourable position to the LTTE to enter into talks: 40 to 50 thousand government troops were in fact cornered in Jaffna for several weeks uncertain as to whether the LTTE would push its advance further into town, leaving no route to escape. However, as the situation reached a relative stall, others argued that the LTTE did not have the military strength to pursue the offensive and that the government, aware of this fact, would not be willing to sit at the negotiating table following such an important military and strategic defeat. Activity in the summer has shown in fact that the government has been involved in an important international campaign to foster arms deals in order to respond to the advance with force rather than talks.

In addition, as a result of the LTTE's May offensive, the government imposed a series of emergency regulations with serious limitations to the media and basic human rights for all Sri Lankan citizens, arguing that the country was once again on a "war footing." These measures and the dangerous situation in which approximately half a million citizens of Jaffna find themselves at the moment, are clear signs that the civilians are once again the principal victims of the conflict. Although the situation is far from being resolved, it seems that the renewal of violence has raised the profile of the war in Sri Lanka around the world and that this could in turn lead to a more comprehensive approach to resolving the conflict. However, it seems also obvious, given the nature and the history of the conflict as it has been outlined here, that a negotiated settlement to the conflict will not be sufficient to address the deeply rooted divisions that have emerged in the Sri Lankan society. These should require profound democratic change as well as sustained processes of inter-ethnic and inter-religious reconciliation.

3. The Role of Religion

"The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster Buddhism while assuring to all religions the rights granted by section 18 (1) (d)," Chapter II, Buddhism.

countries. It seems that the Sri Lankan government has used this precedent to launch an international campaign against the LTTE. Canada and the UK are the most important targets of this campaign considering the volume of LTE fundraising activities conducted in the two countries.

“In the Republic of Sri Lanka every citizen shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and the freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching,” Art. 18 (1) (d).

The Constitution of the Republic of Sri Lanka (Ceylon) adopted and enacted by the Constituent Assembly of the People of Sri Lanka on the 22nd of May 1972.

Although there is no definite answer as to whether religion has been and still is a root cause of violence in the 17-year civil war raging in Sri Lanka between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, it is essential for the purpose of this case study to examine certain implications related to this issue in order to understand the mission and purpose of the Inter-Religious Peace Foundation (IRPF) as well as the impact the organisation’s peace work has had on the overall conflict between the country’s two main ethnic communities. In fact, one’s analysis of the role religion plays in this long-standing conflict is a determining factor in understanding the IRPF’s approach to peace practice not only because the foundation is religious in nature but also because this approach, which distinguishes the IRPF from other Sri Lankan NGOs working for national peace and reconciliation, is based on a particular analysis of the role religion plays in the conflict.³³

Most of the contention regarding the role of religion in the conflict can be explained by the different definitions analysts use when addressing the issue. Religion is in fact either understood as an organised set of rules and practices evolving in a social and historical environment, or described as the embodiment of a doctrine which constitutes the fundamental system of thoughts or teachings of that particular religion. The first definition refers to religion’s institutional and timely aspect, whereas the latter relates to its moral and, arguably, universal dimension. Practically speaking, however, these definitions are obviously of little or no concern to individuals and communities that have been affected by violent conflict. Nonetheless, they do provide a useful framework for understanding certain behaviours or — as it is intended in this case study — the impact of the IRPF’s work on the conflict.

Buddhism

For example, by limiting the definition of religion to its historical and institutional dimension, it is rather easy to argue that Buddhism and the Buddhist clergy in particular have played a major role in building Sinhalese opposition to the Tamil community’s claims to self-determination and therefore that religion has fuelled national divisions and deepened the conflict. Historically, the *Sangha* has in fact used its office and the state’s recognition of its special status, following the 1972 constitution, as a means to mobilise Sinhalese nationalists against possible concessions to Tamil demands. In extreme cases, monks have even been known to endorse violent action, killing Prime Minister Bandanaraiké in 1959 after he had negotiated a federal solution to the crisis with Tamil leaders, siding with JVP extremists, participating in anti-Tamil insurrections or

³³ In order to maintain some sense of suspense in the case study, I will not disclose this particular analysis until later on, also so that the reader can make its own mind on the issue before sharing the view of the IRPF.

even accepting to take up arms in the government forces to fight Tamil militants. These occurrences are a clear manifestation of the rift that has appeared between Buddhist practice — as it is advocated by radical or extreme members of the clergy — and the fundamental tenants of Buddhism as such.

In fact, according to Lord Buddha's teaching of *Vassetta Suthra*, which rejects all divisions between human beings, Buddhists in general and monks in particular, should not condone or take part in violent action. But according P. Liyanage, "committed Sinhala Buddhist ideologues [. . . argue that . . .] violence can be justified to counter the threat posed by the Indo-Lanka Accord to the unity of the land, race and religion in Sri Lanka."³⁴ This blatant disregard for a basic tenant of the Buddhist philosophy can therefore be seen as a clear example of how the religion's fundamental system of beliefs can be manipulated by its historical and institutional practice. Furthermore, in the particular case of Buddhism, this manipulation is perhaps even more possible than it is in Christianity for example, because of the institutional setup of the clergy in Sri Lanka. The *Sangha* is in fact extremely decentralised and local monks who are supported by their local constituencies have often little if any accountability to a superior authority who could regulate or dictate their behaviour and endorsement of violent action for example.

On the other hand, however, this relative freedom can also be seen as an asset considering that it would be difficult for an authority figure of the *Sangha* to impose a particular set of religious tenants and practices on the members of the clergy. In sum, it can be argued that the limited rules of accountability within the institutional establishment of Buddhism in Sri Lanka can lead to different or even contradictory interpretations of the teachings of Lord Buddha and therefore to behaviour which can act either as an incentive to violence or to peace.

Hinduism

Hinduism, as it is practiced in Sri Lanka, is perhaps even less structured than Buddhism. It has in fact no formal clergy, and its authority figures are referred to as "intellectuals." It is difficult to assess whether institutional Hinduism has in fact directly participated in the escalation of the conflict considering that Hinduism is also a religion of peace and non-violence. However, just like Buddhism is the dominant faith among Sinhalese, Hinduism is the dominant faith among Tamils and can therefore be also be looked upon as an element of identification, division and exclusion between the two communities. During a visit to a Hindu temple in Vavuniya in the north of the country I met with a Tamil man who told me that practicing Hindus had sometimes felt compelled to support militant guerrilla groups because of the limitation they felt Colombo was imposing on their religious practice and way of life. He made reference to certain rules and legislation passed by the State limiting the number of religious holidays Hindus could have or that the State would officially recognise (this was unclear) but I have been unable to confirm this information.

³⁴ Liyanage, P., "Popular Buddhism, Politics and the Ethnic Problem," *Demanding Sacrifice: War and Negotiation in Sri Lanka*, Accord, Issue 4 / August 1998, pp. 65-69.

Nonetheless, despite active Hindu militancy for the Tamils' rights to self determination, it is clear that practicing Hindus and Hindu leaders have not played a role as visible or as significant as the Buddhist clergy and Buddhist extremists in the escalation of the conflict or the deepening of the rift between Sinhalese and Tamils.

Christianity

Although Christians constitute only 8% of the entire Sri Lankan population, Christianity as such has the advantage of a particular position which is not shared by any other religion practiced in the country. Christians are in fact approximately 50% Sinhalese and 50% Tamil which bestows upon them a favourable position as agents of mediation and reconciliation between the two ethnic groups. However, it seems that this vantage point has been mostly overshadowed by the fact that most church authorities — apart from the Roman Catholics — are located in Colombo and that the church authorities have often sided with the State in the conflict against Tamil militants.

Additionally, because the Christian clergy operates within a more controlled hierarchy than do Hindu leaders for example, it can be argued that local church representatives would more likely take a stand on issues affecting the church in the context of the conflict but also that they would be limited in their personal initiatives as well. An institutional decision from the leading authorities of the churches would in fact have to be implemented by local church representatives even though a local priest or minister might not agree with it. For example, certain churches have been involved in conversions and the issue has been raised by Buddhist extremists and has deeply heightened their sense of threat. In sum, although the basic tenants of Christianity talk of peace and reconciliation it might not be the prerogative of the churches in the Sri Lankan context to strictly adhere to such a set of beliefs.

Islam

Although Islam and Muslims have not been directly mentioned in the brief historical account of the conflict, it is important to state that the Muslim community has deeply suffered from the conflict because it is mostly located in the Eastern province, in villages and towns often in the line of fire between Tamil guerrillas and government forces. In an effort to create a Tamil peninsula around Jaffna, Muslims have been expelled from the northern town during the 1980s despite the fact that the two communities share, among other cultural traits, the same language.

The Muslim minority has been active in parliament by either supporting or opposing government devolution proposals to the Tamil community. It seems in fact that despite its organised structure, Islam (as it is represented in Sri Lanka) and Sri Lankan Muslims have not taken a clear and unanimous position regarding the conflict. However, unlike the Tamil and Sinhalese communities, Sri Lankan Muslims do not distinguish between their religion and their ethnic identity. In this sense the Muslim minority constitutes a much more homogenous group than the Christian minority and therefore has a more profound impact on the conflict although the two groups are approximately of the same size.

In sum it can be argued that religion and its authorities have had an impact on the conflict but that it is difficult to determine whether this particular role has deepened the conflict or not. Arguably, however, the Muslim community has added to the complexity of the conflict because

it brings to the Sinhalese-Tamil and State-LTTE dualities an additional dimension which undoubtedly increases the complexity of the Sri Lankan conflict.

Part II: The Inter-Religious Peace Foundation (IRPF)

1. The organisation

History

Although it is accepted that the official establishment of the IRPF was in 1993, the actual story of the creation of the IRPF is a hard one to tell, not only because there are no written records of events leading to its foundation, but also because the organisation seems to be the brainchild of a group of individuals who came together during several encounters that occurred from 1991 to 1993. The “founding fathers”³⁵ of the IRPF, Rev. Rienzie Perera, Father Oswald Firth and Venerable Pandit Madampagama Assaji Thero are three members of the Sri Lankan clergy — two Anglicans, a Roman-Catholic and a Buddhist — who were each involved at the time in isolated peace activities through their own ministries, organisations and temples. Additionally, all four “founding fathers” had participated in visits to the north during the 1980s, either as signs of solidarity with the Tamil community hostage to the conflict or as open efforts to initiate a dialogue with the LTTE. They were also all approached, within their own constituencies, by individuals and families seeking help in retrieving “disappeared” relatives or friends. These common experiences brought them together and helped them crystallise a common vision for the IRPF.

In the early 1990s, the war between the government and Tamil militants had been raging for close to 10 years and was showing no signs of relenting. Hence, concerned by the prevailing situation, the failure of the Indo-Lanka Accord and the devastating social impact of IPKF’s intervention on all communities, they started to build personal relationships during a series of meetings and consultations convened either upon their own initiative or by their organisations. Quickly they identified from the issues being discussed and the questions being raised by participants a need for an inter-religious and community-based approach to peace building in the country. The inexistence of any type of dialogue at the time between the government and the LTTE heightened their concern and prompted them to act outside the limited channels of their own religious institutions. Their feeling was that the religious voices actually addressing the conflict were speaking in rigid value terms thus casting upon the possibility of peace mutually exclusive or zero sum issues anathema to the idea of peaceful coexistence (and very similar to the government-LTTE dichotomy). This discourse, particularly common to extremist members of the Buddhist *Sangha* and certain Christian authorities who often sided with the government in the conflict, went against their own understanding of the role of religion in promoting peace and hence highlighted the need for an alternative religious voice, one of inter-religious dialogue and inter-communal solidarity.

³⁵ I feel the nickname is relevant not only because they are the actual founders of the organisation but also because most of them are ordained priests who often call each other Father. I have participated in several discussions with them during which the mutual exchange of “Fathers” was quite comical and confusing.

The 1992 ARTI meeting

The most significant of these meetings was held in 1992 at the Agricultural Research Training Institute (ARTI). It was called by Rev. Rienzie Perera, General Secretary of the National Christian Council at the time and was organised in collaboration with a group of Buddhist monks dedicated to the protection of the environment in which Ven. Assaji was involved. The event brought together 60 to 70 Christian priests and Buddhist monks from most districts (some from the north and eastern provinces were unable to get the proper authorisations to attend), as well as several members of laity, in order for them to talk about the prevailing situation in the country and the responsibilities of each of them in addressing the issues of peace and the environment. Strangely enough, for several participants this was the first time they had the opportunity to interact with members of another faith and discuss actual needs and strategies related to issues of conflict and peace.

The idea of holding an event on peace and environmental issues may have appeared to be quite strange from a strict conflict-transformation point of view, but because the issues are closely linked in Buddhist philosophy, the approach was welcomed by participants and laid down, in a sense, the foundation of the IRPF's comprehensive approach to peace work. The underlying belief imbedded in the Buddhist philosophy is that harmony with one's self and one's environment is an essential step towards the achievement of sustainable peace.

According to the ARTI meeting participants I interviewed, the novelty of such an approach was welcome because it addressed one of the root causes of the conflict (i.e. the suspicion and divisions that existed between conflicting communities) and was at the same time closely related to their religious beliefs. It was also felt, however, that the dialogue and collaboration needed to be extended to all major religious communities of Sri Lanka, including Buddhists, Hindus, Christians and Muslims. In sum, although the meeting did not lead to any formal decision, statement or plan of action, it provided an assessment of the need for inter-religious collaboration in peace building efforts and consolidated the ideological foundations of the IRPF.

Objectives

The IRPF was formally established on July 24th 1993 as a non-profit and non-governmental organisation dedicated to:

- fostering fellowship, unity and harmony among conflicting communities and others through inter-religious dialogue,
- promoting a culture of peace in Sri Lanka through peace education and advocacy,
- and developing a democratic state and social order based on principles of equality, solidarity, dignity, autonomy, security and freedom for all communities.

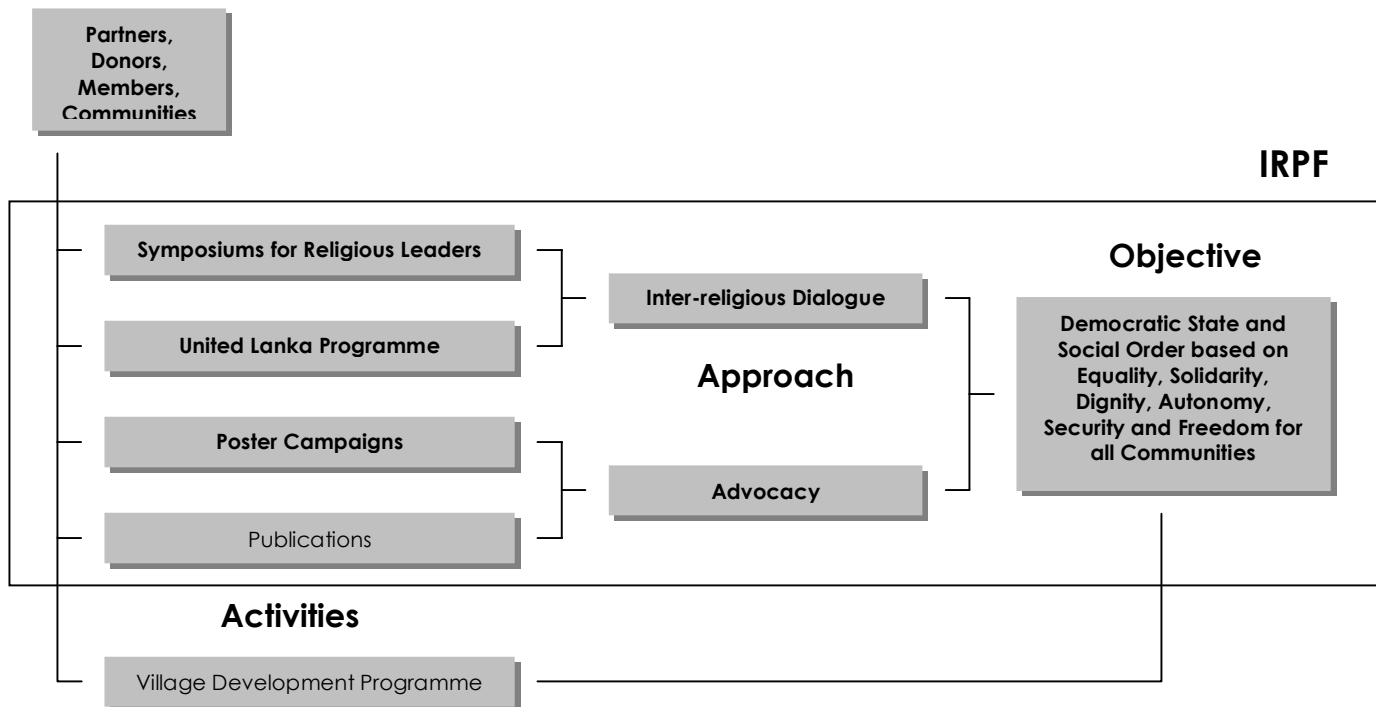
Approach

The IRPF is value-based but does not espouse the particular practices or system of beliefs of one religion over another. However, the organisation strongly believes that religiosity can act as a unifying factor because it offers the possibility to surpass the different sets of rules and practices specific to each religion practiced in Sri Lanka. The organisation's approach also posits that diversity is inherent to human life and religion, but that it need not imply division and exclusion.

This approach is also based on the assumption that religious feelings and beliefs are common denominators between people of faith and that they can provide a common ground for peaceful dialogue. In addition, according to Ajit Rupesinghe, the IRPF’s approach is particularly relevant to the Sri Lankan context and conflict because of three basic considerations:

1. The inter-religious identity of the organisation is original and clearly distinguishes it from other Sri Lankan peace NGOs who are often one sided and/or Sinhalese in character. This enables the IRPF to consolidate its credibility on either side of the conflict and engage in a truly nation-wide approach to peace building.
2. Religion has always occupied an important part of life for a majority of Sri Lankans, regardless of their faith and ethnicity. Religion is in fact a defining element of each individual’s identity, so much so that Sri Lankan Muslims are referred to and refer to themselves only as Muslims, thus entirely mixing religious and ethnic identities. This allows the IRPF to deepen the commitment of its members and supporters and foster ownership by appealing to deeply imbedded belief and values.
3. Religious leaders of all levels—albeit not always out of concern for peace—have a long history of successful involvement in national affairs. In this sense, the members of the IRPF often use their different religious statures to gain access to areas, people or institutions which would usually be inaccessible to members of laity, and therefore often manage to have an impact on the conflict which evades other peace NGOs.

Resources



Analysis and resolution of the conflict

Furthermore, the IRPF has been consistent since its inception with the objective of promoting a political settlement to the war based on the recognition of the Tamils’ democratic rights. Although this objective is not stated as the primary aim of the IRPF, it is directly linked to the

organisation's long-term commitment to transform Sri Lankan mentalities and behaviours from the bottom upwards, in order to attain sustainable peace.

In fact, the organisation's understanding of the conflict is based on the belief that the war between the government forces and the LTTE is a manifestation of a deeper social conflict rooted in individual mentalities. However, it seems the IRPF also believes that mentalities have been polarised because of the structures of the Sri Lankan state as it was established after independence. In other words, although the IRPF recognises that the root causes of the conflict are imbedded within the oppressive and hegemonic structures of the Sinhalese Buddhist state and its perpetual denial of the Tamils' rights to self-determination, the organisation believes that this conflict can only be resolved by a due process of democratisation which begins with strengthening civil society and hence transforming duelling mentalities.

This interpretation of the conflict, which stems from the ideas of the IRPF's religious, grassroots and intellectual members, implies that a political settlement to the war is necessary but not sufficient to address the social dimension of the conflict. It also implies that religiosity, which is at the centre of the IRPF's strategy, can act as a unifying factor among individuals and communities of different religious and ethnic backgrounds.

Hence, based on its analysis of the conflict, the IRPF must operate on several levels from the grassroots to government and separatist leaders in order to attain its institutional goal. The organisation's focus, however, remains on members of civil society in an effort to develop an extensive web of relations among civic actors across the ethnic and religious borders of the conflict. This focus consolidates in fact the organisation's legitimacy and enables its leaders to apply a certain amount of pressure on key actors to the conflict. The IRPF's membership, which has grown slowly but steadily since 1993,³⁶ has also provided the organisation with the local support it requires to conduct its activities throughout the island. Overtime, the IRPF has managed to appoint local representatives in all districts and establish a network of members from all religious and ethnic backgrounds. New members must be proposed by current members and are eligible for a position in the Executive Committee if they are nominated by active member of the committee after at least two years of involvement in the IRPF's activities. Members must pay an annual fee of LKR 120-150 (USD 1.50-2.00) and therefore provide the organisation with a limited but steady annual income to conduct certain activities.

Funding

For additional funding the organisation will apply to various local organisations, international NGOs or local representatives of foreign governments. However, it seems that all funds received so far have been related to specific activities and have never provided the IRPF with a sustained financial support for maintaining a permanent office or secretarial staff. Apart from funds received from the World Council of Churches³⁷ and more recently from international churches and the Inter-Church Organisation for Development Cooperation (ICCO) through the Life and Peace Institute (LPI) for specific parts of its programme, the IRP has not been the recipient of

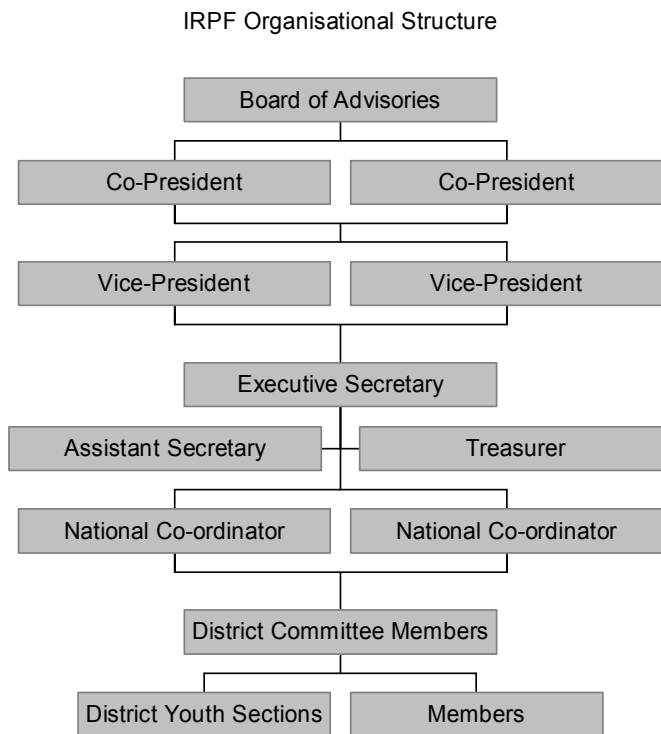
³⁶ According to Ven. Assaji, former IRPF President and current National Organiser, there are now approximately 150 to 160 permanent registered IRPF members.

³⁷ Further information regarding this grant has been difficult to obtain. It seems that the WCC staff member responsible for allocating this grant (apparently in 1998) to the IRPF is no longer with the WCC.

any substantial grant and therefore seems to operate on a very limited budget which in turn limits the extent of its activities to an *ad hoc* availability of funds.

Organisational structure

Finally, the IRPF operates within a structure established on principles of transparency and equal participation of all religions. In fact, as the result of a conscious effort to establish inter-religious dialogue within the organisation itself, most of the positions of responsibility have been duplicated with the intent of appointing — as far as possible — representatives of different religions with similar responsibilities. As a result, the organisation seems to be burdened by a heavy and inefficient structure, but in reality this frame has been put into operation with a certain amount of flexibility which also seems to be a guiding principle of the IRPF. The fact that the organisation does not employ any permanent staff members and that everyone is involved on a voluntary basis seems to justify this internal need for flexibility. However, members of the Executive Committee (ExCom) meet regularly in order to monitor activities and determine on the basis of developments in the districts and in the conflict, new strategies and activity plans.



2. Activities

The IRPF's programme of activities has developed since 1993 to meet the ideological and principled tenants set forth in its mission. However, as outlined earlier in the section detailing the organisation's funding, activities seem to be implemented and perhaps even developed on the basis of available funds. Arguably, however, this difficult financial situation has bestowed upon each activity a relative importance and dedication on behalf of the organisation's ExCom and active members.

Inter-religious dialogue: Symposium for Religious Leaders (SRL)

The SRL consists of one- to two-day meetings aimed at providing various religious leaders and intellectuals the opportunity to discuss issues related to religion and peace, as part of an inter-religious panel, and to be challenged and questioned by an invited audience of civil society representatives. SRL meetings, which are carefully organised and facilitated by members of the IRPF in collaboration with their district representatives, are intended to provide participants with an appropriate forum for engaging in constructive dialogue with religious leaders of other faiths and ethnic background. At the same time the IRPF aims to highlight the commonalities of the discourses held by the different religions as concrete examples of the common grounds on which peace and coexistence can be achieved. Again, the structure of the events is fairly flexible and is often adapted to particular topics important to those present. Issues discussed can therefore address things as varied as the rights to celebrate religious holidays, the historical roots of the conflict, the role played by religion, the problems of power devolution, the constitution, the problem of disappearances, the hardships of local communities affected by the war, etc.

As of June 2000, SRL meetings had been held in 12 districts out of a total of 23 in the country. Most of these meetings had in turn led to the establishment of district committees responsible for the implementation of various local activities related to the issues and needs raised during the symposiums.

Reported impact

It seems that the most significant impact of SRL meetings is related to the feeling of empowerment they have provided members of local communities. The fact that the war is being fought on a level that is not within the realm of influence of individual members of civil society has created a deep sense of helplessness and exclusion. In addition, this feeling of powerlessness has been enhanced by the fact that the war is kept to north-eastern regions and the metropolitan area of Colombo³⁸ thus completely isolating communities indirectly affected by the routine acts of violence in other parts of the country. This isolation is also the result of the limited flow of information which has been the norm during the war. The media is mostly controlled from Colombo, and government measures have often put gags on the press in times of increased violence, as was the case at the time I was conducting interviews in June this year. Hence, SRL meetings offer members of civil society throughout the country the opportunity to address the prevailing war or the longstanding conflict in a legitimate and semi-formal setting, which creates enthusiasm and eagerness to get involved. The turnout at the meetings, the growing number of IRPF memberships, the burgeoning of local peace initiatives launched after SRL meetings and the comments I have gathered from participants I have interviewed, are clear signs of the positive

³⁸ The recurrent suicide bomb attacks orchestrated by the LTTE have turned Colombo into a strange but very real battlefield where life goes on despite the ongoing threat of violence.

impact the IRPF's work has had in this regard. However, limited follow-up due to the lack of resources and limited support to concrete activities have in some cases created hope but no real process to make things happen.

On the other hand, SRL meetings have also participated in raising the mutual understanding of the conflicting communities' religions and identities. The language barrier is in fact often a disincentive for people of different ethnic backgrounds to discuss — even casually — their beliefs and practices and hence nurtures a general feeling of ignorance and distrust among less educated and developed communities for example. In this sense, SRL meetings often provide an opportunity for individuals of Tamil and Sinhalese origins to interact and discuss with the help of translators. However, this process is not always without difficulty.

I can cite as an example a meeting I attended in November 1999 in Kandy, in the central part of the country in a Sinhalese majority area, which was held as part of a series of consultations LPI is organising in collaboration with the IRPF. This first event adopted the format of a SRL meeting and gathered members of civil society from all around the country, including Jaffna, Mullativu and Trincomalee effectively in the “war zone.” Headphones were available for English, Tamil and Sinhalese translations on the first two days of the consultation, but on the morning of the closing day, a Sunday, the meeting room, which also served as a church, was reorganised in order for the regular Catholic service to be held and the translation devices were disconnected. Hence, during the session that followed, those of us not fluent in Sinhalese (most speakers were Sinhalese that morning and throughout the meeting) had to gather in the back of the room to listen closely to the translators' voices. The scene was clearly illustrative of the difficulties one must face when attempting to develop inter-religious and inter-communal dialogue in Sri Lanka. The meeting, aimed at bringing communities together, had effectively divided the group according to ethno-linguistic and therefore religious lines, with the Sinhalese participants sitting up front and the Tamil participants crunched in the back of the room. Although I feel this particular incident did not have significant negative effects on the conflict situation, it did nonetheless accentuate the risks of the IRPF being too much of a Sinhalese organisation, a criticism which is often thrown at Colombo-based peace organisations. When questioned about this particular problem, members of the IRPF clearly indicated the importance of sustaining efforts to make the organisation truly representative of the diversity it claims to represent. One step in this direction was to appoint a Tamil Hindu as president of the organisation earlier this year.

Another impact has been the marginalisation of Sinhalese Buddhist extremists, particularly in the south. In fact, following the manifestation of civil violence in ethnic pogroms during the late 80s and early 90s, Sinhalese Buddhist extremist groups such as the JVP and extremist monks from the *Sangha* have cast upon local communities a feeling of fear and control which was instrumental in perpetrating anti-Tamil violence on these occasions.

Ven. Weligama Dammissara helped organise a SRL meeting in the Matara district in 1997. As the local representative of the IRPF, he was responsible for sending out invitations to religious dignitaries and scholars of different faiths and setting up the meeting venue and overseeing other local logistics. However, after certain powerful monks had been informed of the meeting and the participation of Christian religious figures, a strong public demonstration was organised in

Weligama in order to stop the meeting. Monks and key representatives of the lay community who supported the extremists' views, distributed leaflets to chief incumbents of local temples as well as local political leaders two days prior to the SRL meeting. Their underlying argument was that Christians would use this meeting as an opportunity to force conversions upon Buddhists in the area. Nonetheless, despite the open intimidation and threats of harassment, Ven. Dammissara and the IRPF decided to hold the meeting as scheduled.

The successful turnout and the impact of the theories of religious brotherhood and mutual respect being discussed and put into practice by a panel of leaders of different religions broke, in a sense, the exclusivity the extremists' voice had enjoyed in the past. The alternatives of peace and cohabitation being presented were in fact welcome and have been sustained in the area through a growing number of IRPF activities ever since. However, the meeting seems to have also led to a polarisation of the community. According to Ven. Dammissara who was deeply affected by the turn of events,³⁹ in the months following the SRL meeting most members of the local community showed signs of having stronger convictions, some in favour of an inter-religious dialogue others more deeply opposed to collaboration with the Christian community. However, the ramifications of this local incident all the way to the Ministry for Buddhist Affairs and the Chief *Sanghannaika* of Amarapura⁴⁰ forced religious authorities to take a stand on delicate issues raised by the IRPF's work. Although the tacit support that was given to Ven. Dammissara during this crisis was not sufficient to prevent him from leaving the country in order for things to cool down, it still managed to undermine the extremists' position in the region. Their opposition to the meeting was not met by official sanctions or support and therefore exposed the limits of their influence. Additionally, in order to maintain its local presence and credibility the IRPF pursued its work in the area by introducing several of its programmes such as the support programme for families seeking "disappeared" individuals, as well as the village development and United Lanka programmes.

Peace education: Ekamuthu Lanka (United Lanka Programme)

The United Lanka Programme (ULP), which has now been held more than once in almost every district of the country, consists of a one day workshop held in local schools in collaboration with teachers and students. The aim of the workshop is again to engage participants in an open dialogue on issues of peace and conflict in an inter-religious and inter-communal environment. Presentations by religious leaders and intellectuals are immediately followed by group work which revolves around drawings, poetry writing, short plays, etc. Students between the ages of 12 and 18 are given the opportunity to understand and address issues which they have limited opportunities to discuss otherwise.

This programme is directly related to the IRPF's efforts to establish a culture of peace in Sri Lanka. The 17-year war has in fact led to the militarization of the national culture and has led to generations of children being educated in a polarised context of war and confrontation. The ULP

³⁹ The mounting pressure of extremist monks led to an exchange of letters and the involvement of the Ministry of Buddhist Affairs who was asked to bring the matter to court but who after investigation took no decisive action regarding the accusations being thrown at Ven. Dammissara. However, feeling the pressure and the discomfort of the head incumbent of his local temple, Ven. Dammissara chose to leave the country and has only just recently returned.

⁴⁰ There are several Buddhist sects within the country. This sect was established after class divisions had limited the access of certain people to the *Sangha* in the main sect.

therefore aims to demystify the conflict by introducing the youth to an alternative culture of peace and coexistence between religions and ethnic groups.

I have had the opportunity to go through several of the posters that have come out these workshops and interview a few participants. According to the students I interviewed, this was the first time they were given the forum to speak out and question the myths about the “other” they had been taught to believe. Some of them also said that they were surprised to see panels of Buddhist, Hindus, Christians and Muslims address them with a common voice based on inter-religious dialogue.

Ultimately, the ULP’s aim is to establish local youth sections of the IRPF under the supervision of district representatives. So far such a committee has only been established in the Trincomalee district in the north east of the island. However more workshops and youth sections are planned pending the availability of funds.

Reported impact

Trincomalee is an unusual town even for the Sri Lankan context because it is composed of approximately three equal groups of Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims which are reflected by a balanced proportion of Buddhists, Hindus and Christians. In sum, the town seems to present the ideal conditions for inter-religious activities and particularly the ULP because it is located in an area which has been regularly affected by fighting. However, according to Ven. Ananda Mytree, the IRPF’s Trincomalee representative, the programme was difficult to conduct because of the lack of collaboration of local schools.

In fact two separate events had to be held — one in Tamil, the other in Sinhalese — and other difficulties emerged when attempts were made to get students from Muslim schools to participate in the events as well. Although Anoshan,⁴¹ the President of the IRPF Youth Section in Trincomalee, feels that one meeting would have been better to communicate the differences in views, it seems that the programme has managed to initiate substantial dialogue and interaction between students of different religious and ethnic backgrounds.

When I asked what he thought the most significant impact of the ULP was, he pointed at the other members of the Youth section sitting with us and told me that he now had Muslim and Hindu friends which he didn’t have before! He also admits that collaborating with his friends in organising events has allowed him to overcome feelings of suspicion and doubt he nurtured before for no other reason than the fact that he did not know them better.

Advocacy: Campaigns and publications

Throughout its seven years of existence, the IRPF has participated in several poster campaigns as part of its advocacy role. Poster campaigns offer the IRPF the opportunity to quickly react to developments in the conflict and also complement its educational activities by reaching a wider

⁴¹ A. M. P. Anoshan has been the president of the IRPF Trincomalee Youth Section since 1999 and has participated in two UBL workshops. He has also helped establish the first IRPF Youth section and has organised with other members of the group a seminar on constitutional reform in February 2000. Over 75 students interacted with intellectuals of the IRPF who were invited to introduce the constitutional challenges of the conflict. Anoshan is a Sinhalese Christian who speaks English and who is dedicated to pursuing the goals of the IRPF in Trincomalee.

audience with clear and bold slogans. Posters can also be used as direct means of response to posters and slogans published by extremist groups, the government or militants. These campaigns usually run nationwide and are made possible by the collaboration of local IRPF representatives who usually post them up at night. The poster format has apparently been used because it is relatively cheap to produce and display, but also it constitutes an important means of communicating political and social messages in Sri Lanka and is in some instances far more reaching than television and radio. The IRPF has also made it a prerogative to clearly identify its posters by displaying symbols of all four major religions, such as the wheel, the cross, the trident, the crescent moon and star.

The IRPF has also been involved in signature campaigns, conscientising masses in the streets by asking them to support specific issues related to peace. For example, the IRPF has led the International Campaign to Ban Landmines in Sri Lanka, obtaining over one million signatures of individuals requesting the government, the LTTE and other militant groups to stop using landmines.

Additionally, the IRPF also produces a regular newsletter in both Sinhalese and Tamil called “Hundred Petals”⁴² which is distributed nationwide to members or local peace advocates. The newsletter contains articles on current events and development in the conflict as well as reports on IRPF activities. The newsletter clearly aims to provide an alternative voice to state controlled or other ethnically biased publications. However, the IRPF also releases press statements which are now more frequently published in the mainstream press.

Reported impact

Although it has been extremely difficult to assess the impact of the IRPF’s posters from interviews and conversations, it seems nonetheless important to mention the organisation’s latest campaign as an example of how an IRPF initiative has actually helped mobilise most of the Colombo-based peace community in the latest crisis. The campaign was in fact initiated soon after the government proclaimed special regulations in order to increase its control over the national situation following the LTTE’s offensive on camps located at the neck of the Jaffna peninsula in April this year. The emergency regulations passed on May 3rd,⁴³ which were misunderstood and somewhat mystified in the few weeks following their promulgation, led to a self-imposed freeze on most peace organisations at a time when the conflict between the government and the LTTE had reached new levels of violence. Amidst the relative chaos the sudden turn of events had created, the IRPF took the initiative of calling a meeting of peace NGOs based in Colombo in order to reflect and gain a better understanding of the situation at hand. The meeting held on May 27th was attended by almost thirty organisations and led to a joint national poster campaign under the auspices of the IRPF. The poster included symbols of all four religions and addressed the issues which participants at the meeting had felt crucial at

⁴² *Siyapatha* in Sinhalese and *Kamalam* in Tamil.

⁴³ On 3 May 2000, the President of Sri Lanka, acting under section 5 of the Public Security Ordinance (Chapter 40), promulgated the Emergency (Miscellaneous Provisions and Powers) Regulation (No. 1 of 2000). In particular, Regulation 14 imposed a number of restrictions on publishing and broadcasting for the protection of national security and public order.

that juncture. The poster read (rough translation from Sinhalese and Tamil): “What we require is a society where justice and equality prevail and a country that is united!”⁴⁴

15,000 copies of the poster were published but before it could get posted, the approval of the government was needed as stated in the emergency regulations. Hence, using once again their privileged position as religious figures, executive members of the IRPF got the slogan sanctioned by the government and launched the campaign. However, critics soon emerged proclaiming that because the poster had received an official approval, the IRPF had to be manipulated by the government. In reality, it seems the slogan was somewhat uncontroversial in regards to the government’s official position. The “war for peace” platform on which the current government was elected vaguely aimed to achieve the same goals as those stated on the poster. However, the presence of symbols of all religions clearly distinguished the poster from any government initiative and has kept the alternative voice of the IRPF alive throughout the crisis. The campaign also had a significant media impact. The statement issued as a result of the meeting was in fact published by the *Sunday Observer*, a daily paper with one of the highest distribution quotas in the country.

Village development: Ruhuna Praja Kendraya (RPK)

Although the RPK is not an IRPF activity as such, it is deeply mixed with the organisation’s history (the initiative was launched by Rev. Rienzie Perera while he was superintending missionary in the south) and current programme. RPK is in fact a self-help scheme established to help poor villages develop income generation activities and hold events aimed at improving their living conditions and is therefore an essential complement of the IRPF’s peace programme given the organisation’s comprehensive approach to peace. It is in fact clear from the commitment IRPF members have shown for RPK initiatives that it is regarded as the natural continuation of the foundation’s peace work. The RPK structure provides a sound basis for conducting other IRPF activities in rural areas, particularly in parts of the country where inter-religious interaction is limited because of the geographical isolation of the communities living there.

The programme has received help from several international development donors and has enabled members of the IRPF to gain experience in other fields of action. It is currently being introduced to dozens of villages in the south of the country and efforts are being made to reach more villages in the north-east as well.

Reported impact

Although I have had only a limited contact with people participating in the RPK programme, I did manage to visit the village of Nivithiwalbokka in the southern district of Matara where RPK activities have been conducted for several years. The Women’s Branch of the RPK is active in the village and has launched among other things informal education for adults, nutrition advice and support for pregnant women, environmental education, sewing courses, sweet production, small libraries, sporting events with neighbouring villages, etc. These activities have apparently empowered local women to take greater control of their income and have reasserted the importance of their struggle for recognition as members of a lower Sinhalese Buddhist class.

⁴⁴ The text apparently refers to terms and issues debated in the media following the LTTE’s attack.

The success of RPK initiatives and the relationship of trust that has been established between local villagers and members of the programme (who are also members of the IRPF), has led villagers to request the IRPF to introduce peace related programmes to the area. In sum, a strong interest for understanding the nature of the conflict and the particular role religion plays can be felt among those involved in RPK activities. An event on the role of women in peace building was being planned during my visit in June, and apparently several more elements of the IRPF's programme are expected to be introduced to the area provided, once again, that funds are available.

Part III: Lessons from the IRPF's experience in Sri Lanka

1. The importance of personalities and personal relationships

Assessing the importance of individuals when trying to assess the impact of peace work, particularly in the case of an organisation like the IRPF which is dedicated to creating relationships and dialogue among people, is crucial in order to understand what works and what doesn't in any given context. Although they may not be efficient criteria, I feel that charisma, empathy, simplicity, dedication and inter-personnel skills such as listening and understanding, are key elements of the impact the IRPF's peace work has had on the Sri Lankan conflict. I would argue in fact that beyond the cloaks, robes and other religious garments that enable members of the IRPF to garner support and legitimacy, it is the particular personalities of those people involved in the organisation that have made an impact on the conflict.

Members, for example, are recruited or drawn to the IRPF not because of its name or fame, but because each individual is introduced and met personally by one of the organisation's ExCom members. This personal recruitment process which is in fact formalised in the IRPF's guidelines, has of course limited the number of members joining the organisation over the years, however it has preserved the religious approach each of the founders has practiced within his own constituency. The one on one, almost confessional method of recruiting members has therefore reinforced the IRPF's religious identity and its commitment to personal relationships, thus distinguishing it from other peace organisations which do not insist on building such strong links with their supporters. In sum, if based only on numbers, the IRPF's recruiting impact may appear limited but the extent of dedication and commitment of all its members seems to indicate the opposite.

Whether monks, ministers or priests, the members of the IRPF have made true personal commitments and taken clear risks in order to implement their activities. Father Firth and Rev. Perera for example have provided and still provide as much support as they can to the IRPF through the organisations they have worked with, such as the NCC of Sri Lanka, SEDEC (Caritas Sri Lanka), CSR and the LPI, whether logistical or financial. While Ven. Assaji and other monks such as Ven. Dammissara and Ven. Pallekande have often received threats and have been labelled as "Christian monks" because of their closeness to Christians in IRPF activities, they maintained their involvement in order to achieve the organisation's goals. These individuals and others' volunteer commitment has certainly been the driving force behind the IRPF and perhaps one of the most significant reasons I have been given in interviews for the impact of the organisation's peace work.

2. The difficulty to assess the impact of dialogue

The IRPF's efforts to foster inter-religious dialogue has apparently been substantial on both pragmatic and ideological levels. However, although it is rather easy to assess this impact in terms of numbers of individuals involved,⁴⁵ it is almost impossible to evaluate the ideological impact of the inter-religious dialogue that has been sustained throughout the organisation's existence, because of the lack of clear and easy-to-use indicators. When questioned on the issue of impact assessment and indicators, it seems that most members of the IRPF are in agreement. There is a serious lack of tools for them to measure the impact of their efforts but they remain convinced that the work affects local realities positively. Three basic assumptions seem to lead them to this conclusion:

1. IRPF fora allow individuals speaking different languages to interact through translators, which means that the IRPF brings together individuals who would probably have no opportunity to interact otherwise.
2. The sustained level of participation and the eagerness of members of local communities to participate in future events signals that the dialogue being created responds to a real need, which is in turn a sign that one of the root causes of the conflict is being addressed,
3. Based on personal accounts of participants questioned by the IRPF, it is possible to conclude that the opportunity dialogue provided manages to affect perceptions of the other and of each group's role in resolving the conflict at least within individuals.
4. Finally, based on these considerations, it can be expected that participants are likely to create a reverberated impact on their surroundings, either by attempting to initiate dialogue with individuals usually avoided or by challenging views about the other usually accepted as given.

However, despite these assumptions, members of the IRPF seem concerned by the fact that the dialogues they help establish in their meetings or workshops are not supported by adequate follow-up, partly because they lack the resources to do so, partly because they do not feel they have the appropriate tools to assess how their efforts can be improved. In sum, concerted efforts to improve this aspect of the IRPF's work are likely to increase the extent and level of impact the organisation's work has on local communities and the conflict.

3. The organisational need for professionalism does not always meet the needs of the resolving the conflict

Despite the success of the IRPF in sustaining its efforts and activities for the last seven years, it seems that the organisation has now reached a turning point. At several times during my informal meetings with IRPF members, the issue of stability came up. It seems that everyone involved feels that the organisation has reached the extent of the impact it can expect to reach without establishing a more permanent secretariat or office, synonymous with stability and donor

⁴⁵ Considering that the IRPF has been conducting SRL and ULP workshops in almost every district in the country (in some cases more than once) and that each event gathered between 40 and 60 participants, it is safe to say that over the years, the organisation has provided several thousands of Sri Lankans of all religious and ethnic backgrounds with an appropriate forum for dialogue with members of the other community.

“friendliness.” (Whether this is true or not is of course arguable but it is nonetheless the way in which IRPF members formulate their needs.)

IRPF meetings are currently being held either in members’ homes, temples or workplaces such as the Centre for Society and Religion (CSR) in Colombo where Father Oswald Firth works. The general administration is being conducted from Ven. Assaji’s home office at his temple, also in Colombo. Jokingly, the members of ExCom with whom I travelled often referred to the minivan, which we were using, as the mobile office of the IRPF. The van, which technically belongs to Ven. Assaji’s temple, is in fact one of the essential tools of his work as National Coordinator and an important part of the IRPF’s organisational capacity. He is very often on the road, visiting with District Representatives and members in all parts of the country in order to coordinate activities.

Furthermore, in addition to these logistical problems, the IRPF seems to be affected by strategic difficulties as well. The fact that the organisation’s stated goals and objectives are rather wide ranging and in some cases abstract, has made the implementation of a strategic plan of action rather cumbersome. According to certain members I have interviewed, activities are implemented more on the basis of available capacity than they are on strategic concerns. Others, however, argue that despite limited resources, activities are being conducted in relation to the organisation’s goals but that because these goals are so broad, the IRPF’s efforts sometimes feel scattered and disconnected. Finally, a third group seems to emerge, arguing that despite limited resources and the difficulties of drawing strategic plans from the organisation’s goals, the IRPF’s activities are implemented on an incremental and *ad hoc* basis which is primarily aimed at responding to needs as they emerge while bearing in mind the importance of personal relations and a comprehensive approach to peace. In sum, although there seems to be no consensus on this particular issue within the IRPF, it is quite clear that the organisation needs to address the problem in order to sustain its work and secure its future.

Arguably, it seems that the organisation’s level of professionalism has to be increased if it is to improve its practice. However, I got the impression from the organisation’s very personal style of peace work and the appreciation people have shown when IRPF ExCom members visited them personally, that part of the success of the organisation in consolidating such an extensive, diversified and dispersed group of supporters has precisely been its lack of a permanent office in Colombo with a permanent professional staff. It seems in fact that the flexible approach to strategic plans and implementation of objectives as it has been practiced by the clerical members of the IRPF has once again allowed it to distinguish itself from other peace NGOs and reach constituencies and individuals otherwise inaccessible. Arguably, such a structure would have eventually led to the centralisation of the organisation and to the reduction of its original character as an NGO truly representative of all faiths and ethnicities and not a Colombo-based Sinhalese peace organisation.

However, regardless of these considerations, it is clear that the IRPF needs to increase its financial support in order to fund its programmes and develop its follow-up activities in regional districts. Project proposals need to be more formal and relations with donors consolidated. This in turn may also imply the need for a fixed office and the appointment of some permanent staff,

but in doing so it seems important that the IRPF maintains its religious character, as that is its true strength.

In conclusion, it can be argued that the positive impact of the IRPF's peace work has been a result of the organisation's flexibility and efforts to extend its activities to individuals of all religious and ethnic background throughout the country. Paradoxically, however, the organisation has also reached the point where it needs to be supported by a more structured and sustained capacity if this positive impact is to be sustained and deepened. This in turn — in the Sri Lankan context, at least — seems to be synonymous with formally centralising activities in Colombo where the organisation risks taking on a Sinhalese Buddhist image and hence clearly denying its inter-religious and inter-ethnic character and therefore limiting its possibility for impact.

In my view, this is one of the main challenges laying ahead for the IRPF and perhaps a key paradox in attempting to determine “which peace practice works in what context.” It seems in fact that the IRPF now finds itself in an apparent catch-22 situation. In fact, in order to sustain its activities, improve its work, assess and increase its impact on peace, the IRPF apparently needs to increase its level of professionalism, clarify its mission and the ways to fulfil it. Arguably this would be a strong incentive for more donors to support the organisation's work. On the other hand, the success of the organisation so far seems to be directly linked to its current personal, somewhat informal and decentralised way of working. This unique approach is in fact the strongest argument used by those interviewed when they attempted to describe why the IRPF was a significant agent of peace in Sri Lanka. Ultimately, however, the two working styles seem to directly contradict one another. Whether the IRPF will manage to find an efficient compromise to this dilemma and continue to successfully address the conflict in Sri Lanka will be interesting to follow.

Appendix 1: Summarised Chronology of the Sri Lankan Conflict

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.

The redrawing of provincial boundaries is aimed at reducing the isolation of the Kandyan Sinhalese and to accelerate the process of integration.

Isolation of the Kandyan Sinhalese is considered an obstacle for the creation of a homogeneous nation and a united system of administration.

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 the Colebrook-Cameron Report.

1912

First elections conducted by the British colonial authority enable educated citizens to elect a representative to the State Legislative Council. A Tamil, Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan, is elected, defeating Sinhalese candidate, Sir. Marcus Fernando, despite the Sinhalese being the majority voting group.

1915

First ethnic conflict recorded in Ceylon's history emerges through clash between Sinhalese and Muslims in Kandy.

1919

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

1921

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

The incident paves the way for ethnically divided politics in Sri Lanka.

1935

Formation of Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) by S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike.

1943

Formation of Communist Party of Ceylon (CP).

1944

Creation of the All Tamil Congress led by G. G. Ponnambalam.

1947

United National Party (UNP) is formed.

Soulbury Constitution is enacted and maintains the unitary state established under colonial rule.

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 S. J. V. Chelvanayagam.

1951

First convention of the Federal Party (FP), declaring its intention to campaign for a federal structure of governance, and for regional autonomy for Tamils living in North and East.

S. W. R. D. 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 as the Official Language Act is passed in parliament.

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 in the North.

The government reacts by sending police and 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 is 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 is signed for the repatriation of stateless plantation workers to India.

1965

UNP's Dudley Senanayake forms a government with the help of FP and other parties.

The Dudley-Chelva agreement, which amounts to a diluted version of the B-C pact, is signed.

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, the People's Liberation Front), a nationalist movement mobilising mostly frustrated Sinhalese educated youth around economic discontent and fears of Indian imperialism, is formed.

1970

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

J. R. 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 continues for six years.

1972

Ceylon becomes a Republic on May 22 and is officially renamed Republic of Sri Lanka.

The United Front government enacts a Sinhalese-supremacist "Republican Constitution" for the country, which makes Buddhism the *de facto* state religion.

Ironically, the architect of this constitution is the same Colvin R. de Silva, who made the famous "one language-two nations" speech, opposing the "Sinhala only" legislation in 1956.

Formation of Tamil United Front (TUF) comprising FP, Tamil Congress (TC) led by G. G. Ponnambalam, and Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) led by Savumiamoorthy Thondaman.

A small youth group named Tamil New Tigers (TNT) 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 the International Tamil Conference. Pirabakharan and the TNT claim responsibility for what will become the group's first political assassination.

Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students (EROS) is formed.

1976

TUF is renamed Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) and passes the "Vaddukoddai 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 (LTTE), with Uma Maheswaran as its leader.

1977

Death of ailing Chelvanayagam.

Appapillai Amirthalingam becomes the leader of Federal Party.

J. R. 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

A second Republican constitution is enacted, creating a powerful executive presidency and granting partial concessions to some Tamil demands.

Jayawardena becomes first Executive President of the country.

Despite the minor concessions, 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 the 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 continues. The 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

J. R. 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 guerrilla 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.

The conflict reaches the proportions of a full-blown civil war.

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, break down with Sri Lankan government's reluctance to devolve power.

However, Tamil parties hand down "five cardinal principles" which remain the basis for any meaningful solution to the conflict. These are commonly known as the Thimpu Principles.

1985-87

State repression and Tamil violence intensify in the North and East resulting in all-out war between the Sri Lankan state and Tamil liberation groups.

LTTE emerges as the dominant guerrilla 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 systematically targeted, firstly by the Sri Lankan armed forces and then by Tamil guerrillas.

1987

The Sri Lankan government launches Operation Liberation to recapture the Jaffna peninsula.

A small float of Indian boats with food and medical supplies for Jaffna peninsula is turned back by the Sri Lankan Navy.

India airdrops food on Jaffna peninsula.

The Indo-Sri Lankan Peace Accord, agreeing on detailed proposals for provincial councils and expediting the immediate deployment of an Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) to enforce a ceasefire, is 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 guerrilla groups.

Seventeen LTTE members, including two leaders, 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

Government forces furiously combat the JVP insurrection. Thousands of youths are killed or "disappeared," causing widespread international protest.

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 withdraw its 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 is 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 is 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 resumes 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 air force killing civilians, including women and children.
Government informally announces a package of devolution proposals, making Sri Lanka a "Union of Regions."
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 ghost town of Jaffna.

1996

An extensively watered down legal draft of the devolution proposals is submitted to the Parliamentary Select Committee for discussion.
As customary, the powerful Buddhist clergy opposes any devolution of power to Tamils in the North-eastern regions.
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 the 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 went to the army camp inquiring about the fate of the girl. Nine soldiers are 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 fishermen 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 to capture a major highway running through Vanni region.

Sri Lankan Deputy Minister of Defence, General Ratwatte promises the capture of the highway linking Jaffna with the south before February 4, 1998, Sri Lanka's 50th anniversary of Independence.

Elections announced for Jaffna and other local government bodies in the peninsula.

1998

At a convention organised in Colombo by the National Peace Council (NPC), over 1,700 participants from all districts, ethnicities and religions renounce the war and call for a "just and honourable peace."

Despite goodwill messages the conference receives from President Kumaratunge, opposition leader Wickremasinghe and LTTE leader Pirabhakaran, the war continues in the north and the LTTE's bombing campaign steps up in the south.

A blast attacking Sri Lankans' holiest Buddhist shrine, the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, outrages Sinhalese sensibilities, brings about a formal ban on the LTTE within Sri Lanka and ends public advocacy for negotiations.

Local elections are held in Jaffna where turnout is surprisingly high considering the attacks on Tamil villages around Trincomalee by police and home guards the very same week.

LTTE later assassinate the popular Brigadier Larry Wijerathne and the newly elected TULF mayor, Sarojini Yogeswaran.

1999

Suicide bomb attack kills MP Dr. Neelam Thiruchelvam.

Opening of supply route from Vavuniya to Wannai.

Killing of PLOTE Deputy Leader and Military Leader Ranjan Manikkadasa in Vavuniya.

In an attempt to gain ground and a limited military victory before the Presidential election, President Bandaranaike launches a limited offensive in the Wannai. Outflanked by the LTTE, government forces suffer severe casualties and political drawback.

Despite this defeat Chandrika Bandaranaike is re-elected on a "war for peace" platform.

2000

In April, LTTE overrun the Elephant Pass military base at the entrance of the Jaffna peninsula as well as ten other camps in the area, killing over a thousand troops and capturing massive amounts of arms and ammunition.

Losses suffered by Sri Lankan military urge government to introduce Emergency regulations in May declaring that the country is in a state of war, thus suspending many fundamental rights of all Sri Lankans.

Concern about the plight of the 500,000 civilians stuck on the peninsula is rising as the situation has reached an uncertain calm.

The Sri Lankan government has renewed its diplomatic relations with Israel in what is an obvious ploy on behalf of the Sri Lankan government to obtain armament from the middle eastern country. Sri Lankan ministers have been reported to be visiting in other countries during the summer in an attempt to broker an arms deal needed to crush the LTTE's latest offensive.

Based on a similar rationale, the LTTE's front organisations in several European and North American countries have recently pushed their fundraising campaigns often leading to violence against the local Tamil populations solicited for funds, particularly in Canada and the UK.

Negotiations for a new devolution package have been renewed in Parliament, but without the inclusion of the LTTE it is believed that the efforts will fail once again.

Appendix 2: Acronyms

CNC	Ceylon National Congress
CP	Communist Party of Ceylon
CWC	Ceylon Workers Congress
DDC	District Development Councils
ENLF	Eelam National Liberation Front (comprising LTTE, ERPLF, EROS and TELO)
EPRLF	Eelam's People Revolutionary Liberation Front
EROS	Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students
FP	Federal Party
JVP	Janata Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front)
IPKF	Indian Peace Keeping Force
IRPF	Inter-Religious Peace Foundation
LSSP	Lanka Sama Samaja Party
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
NCC	National Christian Council
NPC	National Peace Council
PTA	Prevention of Terrorism Act
PLOTE	People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam
RPK	Ruhunu Praja Kendraya (Buddhist-Christian Encounter)
SEDEC	Social and Economic Development Centre (Caritas Sri Lanka)
SLFP	Sri Lanka Freedom Party
TC	Tamil Congress
TELO	Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation
TNT	Tamil New Tigers (renamed in 1976 LTTE)
TUP	Tamil United Front (renamed TULF in 1976)
TULF	Tamil United Liberation Front
UF	United Front (includes SLFP, LSSP and CP)
UNP	United National Party

Appendix 3: Bibliography

Armon, J., and L. Philipson, *Demanding Sacrifice: War and Negotiation in Sri Lanka*, Accord, Issue 4 / August 1998 (Conciliation Resources: London).

Arthey, J., and E. Maybin, "Health crisis forgotten as Prince Charles visits Sri Lanka," Christian Aid Press Release PR 92/98, (Christian Aid: London, 1998).

Balakrishnan, S., *Inter-ethnic Relations in Sri Lanka: Chronology of Events*, paper prepared for the Inter-Religious Peace Foundation, Colombo, 1997.

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

British Refugee Council, *The Sri Lanka Monitor*, Update May 2000.

Carl, A., B. Fernando, C. Fuellkrug-Weitzel, J. Hunt, J. Filochowski, M. A. Young, P. Bowling, and R. Perera, "Joint Statement and Call for Action by Non-Governmental Organisations: The Humanitarian Crisis in Sri Lanka," *Human Rights Solidarity*, June 2000 Volume 10 No. 6 (Asian Human Rights Commission: Hong Kong, 2000).

Gamage, S., I. B. and Watson, eds., *Conflict and Community in Contemporary Sri Lanka*, (Sage Publications: New Dehli, 1999).

Indrajith, S., *Sinhala Buddhist leaders protest to Buddhism in new reforms*, *The Island News*, Colombo, July 18 2000.

IRPF, *The Goals, Objectives, Strategy and Program of the Inter-Religious Peace Foundation*, Colombo, 1993.

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

Rupesinghe, A., Presentation on the current crisis and conjuncture concerning the ethnic conflict given at Life and Peace Institute Annual Board meeting, Colombo, Sri Lanka, June 2000.

SLnet-news (1994-to date).

TamilNet (1995-to date).

Thurfjell, S., *The role of religion in conflict and peace: The war in Sudan*, Life and Peace Institute, Uppsala, June 2000.