



Humanitarian Agenda 2015 (HA2015) is a policy research project aimed at equipping the humanitarian enterprise to more effectively address emerging challenges around four major themes: **universality, terrorism and counter terrorism, coherence, and security.**

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Humanitarian Agenda 2015 Sri Lanka Country Study

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Acronyms

ACT	Action Contre La Faim
CFA	Ceasefire Agreement
GoSL	Government of Sri Lanka
GWOT	Global War on Terror
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
IPKF	Indian Peace Keeping Force
JVP	Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front)
JHU	Jathika Hela Urumaya
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (aka Tamil Tigers)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PTOMS	Post-Tsunami Operational Mechanism
SLMM	Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission
TMVP	Tamileela Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (Tamileela People's Liberation Tigers) aka Karuna Faction

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Executive Summary

This study contributes to the Humanitarian Agenda 2015 (HA2015) country paper series by examining the issues of universality, terrorism, coherence and security in relation to the humanitarian enterprise in Sri Lanka. Through individual interviews, focal group discussions and questionnaires this study analyses the responses from 245 respondents comprising aid workers, aid recipients, non-recipients and observers of assistance in Colombo and the districts of Galle, Trincomalle, Kandy and Anuradhapura. The study's four themes and the shaping of the respondents' perceptions are framed against descriptions of four key periods: the first conflict period (1983-2001) between the forces of the secessionist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL); the post-ceasefire agreement period (2002-2005); the post-tsunami period (2005-2007) and, the overlapping emergence of a second conflict phase (2004-2007). Universality was found not to be significantly challenged in Sri Lanka. Western involvement, as long as it avoided clashing with local culture and religion, was both welcomed and expected. However, the humanitarian community is widely regarded as a self-serving enterprise. The suspicion that agencies were using humanitarian action to pursue other agendas, especially pro-LTTE leanings, was found to be particularly prevalent. Aid agencies were identified as being ineffective in communicating their mandates. This failure of communications enables local political interests to construct populist interpretations of humanitarianism.

Local political interests relating to the prosecution of the war between the LTTE and the GoSL were found to inform popular perceptions of the relationship between terrorism and international humanitarian involvement. Whilst the GoSL has been influenced by the GWOT in adopting the rhetoric of humanitarian intervention in wresting back territory occupied by the LTTE, the international community has struggled against allegations of internal meddling and support for the LTTE when advocating a return to the peace process and the observance of human rights.

The negative local political construction of the humanitarian enterprise was shown to have hampered the delivery and effectiveness of assistance. It has also endangered the lives of aid workers.

The report concludes that humanitarian engagement in Sri Lanka is likely to become increasingly difficult and dangerous unless international actors become more aware about how they are being politically manipulated and can better communicate their mission to a wider local audience so as to counter the dominant negative view of their motives that has been constructed and repeatedly reinforced in furthering local interests.

Introduction



A war damaged hospital building.

Sri Lanka, formerly Ceylon, has experienced almost forty years of violence and disaster. Early promises of prosperity as a role model for south and south-east Asian development were undermined when populist policies pandering to the nationalist post-Independence sentiments of a newly empowered Sinhala Buddhist majority helped lay the foundations for a future of successive political crises. A brutally repressed southern Marxist youth insurrection in the early 1970s was followed by the emergence of militant Tamil nationalist aspirations in the north, which ultimately condemned the island to a protracted secessionist struggle that has continued unabated, save for the brief hiatus of a fragile ceasefire, from 1983 through to this day. During this period of conflict in which some 70,000 people have died and hundreds of thousands been displaced, Sri Lanka has also had to contend with the fiasco of a failed Indian peace-keeping mission, a second southern insurrection and a devastating tsunami disaster which killed over 35,000 people, wrecked almost sixty percent of the coastline and left half a million families homeless.

This is the context into which the international humanitarian enterprise has sought to offer its assistance to Sri Lanka. Focusing initially on emergency relief for conflict victims in the north and east, and longer term development with the poverty-affected communities of the south during the 1980s, the trajectories and interests of international humanitarian engagement in Sri Lanka shifted in the mid-to-late 1990s

to incorporate a broader agenda of human rights reform and peace building as donor policies for conflict affected and fragile states looked for ways of being more effective by working “on” conflict issues instead of merely working “in” areas of conflict. This shift has brought with it many challenges and tensions for the position of the humanitarian enterprise in Sri Lanka.

In exploring popular perceptions relating to the challenges facing the humanitarian enterprise, each of the four themes identified by the policy research project Humanitarian Agenda 2015 (HA2015) — universality, coherence, terrorism/counter-terrorism and security — have relevance in the context of Sri Lanka’s conflict, transient fragile peace and post-tsunami contexts. The evidence-based nature of this study, drawing as it does upon the expressed views of the recipients and observers of humanitarian assistance on the ground, as well as key informants at an agency level, is a method of inquiry that is particularly appropriate to Sri Lanka, a country where questions and criticisms of the humanitarian agenda constantly dominate public and political debate in a highly charged, contested and frequently violent fashion.

This paper begins by outlining the methodological approach and defining the context for the perceptions highlighted by the respondents in the

study through a review of four critical periods that have informed the ways in which humanitarians have engaged with Sri Lanka. It goes on to examine each of the four themes separately, whilst also attempting to reveal the significance of how these themes constantly overlap and interlink in the Sri Lankan context. The paper demonstrates how popular local notions concerning the universality of the humanitarian enterprise applied to Sri Lanka are informed by political and media portrayals of the international community's motives in pursuing a coherent agenda which attempts to connect humanitarian assistance with human rights and peace building. This linkage has implications for way in which the relationship between terrorism and humanitarian action is constructed and portrayed by Sri Lankan political interests, and with it, serious attendant consequences for the security of aid workers.

Methodology

The Sri Lanka study elicited responses from a socially, geographically and ethnically diverse range of 245 respondents (comprising 50% men and 50% women) by dispatching a team of sixteen research assistants to five field locations over a period of two weeks in April and May 2007, during which they conducted one hundred random questionnaires, 55 in-depth interviews and 18 focus group discussions¹.

Data collection was concentrated in the capital, Colombo, and in four of Sri Lanka's twenty-five provincial administrative districts: Galle, Kandy, Anuradhapura and Trincomalee. The four districts were selected to represent a realistic cross section of Sri Lanka's contemporary and historic experience of humanitarian assistance, politics and security, as well as attempting to incorporate its demographic and ethnic diversity.²

Galle is a tsunami-affected district in the south of Sri Lanka with a large Sinhalese majority population. It experienced widespread displacement as a result of the tsunami and was the focus of considerable humanitarian action from a plethora of both local and international agencies engaged in post-tsunami relief, recovery and reconstruction. During the search and rescue and initial relief phase of the tsunami operations Galle also hosted a sizeable number of various foreign military contingents deployed to provide emergency assistance. Galle city has occasionally directly experienced the conflict with LTTE attacks on its naval base and terrorist type bombings of civilian buses.

¹ Special thanks are due to the team of local field researchers (who prefer to remain anonymous in the current political climate) who brought their broad contextual knowledge and skills in field research to professionally conduct the Colombo and district level data collection at extremely short notice during a time that would have normally been a holiday period. Without their enthusiastic involvement this study would not have been possible in the given timeframe.

² Due to a recent escalation in the conflict between the GoSL and LTTE and resulting security concerns for field researchers it was not possible to include districts under the control of the LTTE in this study, nor was it possible to include the eastern district of Batticaloa as had been originally planned.

Kandy is an up-country tea plantation sector-dominated district which was not affected by the tsunami and, apart from the violence of the JVP insurrections, terrorist attacks (including the alleged LTTE bombing of the Temple of the Tooth — the site of Sri Lankan Buddhism's most important relic) has not been directly affected by armed conflict, although sporadic and short-lived village-plantation sector riots along ethnic lines, albeit primarily fuelled by disputes of a non-ethnic nature, are not uncommon. Its population comprises primarily of a Sinhalese majority, large estate Tamil (of Indian origin) and urban Moslem minorities. Many of the estate Tamils live in conditions of absolute poverty. The main focus of humanitarian engagement in this district has been of a social empowerment and long term development nature, by local organizations and a small number of international agencies.

Anuradhapura is located in north-central Sri Lanka. It was not directly affected by the tsunami but borders both tsunami and conflict-affected districts. Anuradhapura has an overwhelmingly Sinhala majority, a large concentration of military personnel and its northern villages bordering LTTE controlled territory have experienced repeated acts of terrorist/rebel violence during the past 23 years. Humanitarian activity in this district has historically been primarily development orientated with periodic emergency response to conflict induced displacement. The numbers of local humanitarian agencies working in this district are less than in the other areas covered by this study. There are also comparatively fewer international organizations.

Trincomalee is a multi-ethnic (Sinhala, Moslem and Tamil) district of eastern Sri Lanka that has been directly and heavily affected by both the conflict and the tsunami. It comprises of both Government and LTTE controlled territory and has witnessed repeated conflict induced displacements since 1983. The town was "occupied" by the Indian Peace Keeping Force in 1988 and 1989 and is today a heavily militarized district experiencing on-going operations. It is serviced by a very large number of both local and international humanitarian agencies. It was in Trincomalee District that 17 local Action Contre La Faim (ACT) staff members were executed during a military engagement between the GoSL and LTTE in August 2006.

Colombo is the only major city in Sri Lanka and is the centre of government and commerce. All diplomatic representation, the UN and most INGO country offices are situated in Colombo. There is a high military presence in the city which has been the site of repeated terrorist-type attacks and assassinations on political and military leaders, as well as civilian and infrastructure targets throughout the conflict period.

Colombo-based research comprises of two focus groups with a) five female "minor staff" government employees working as cleaners, messengers and clerical assistants, and b) five male auto-rickshaw (three-wheeler taxi) drivers; and fifteen individual face-to-face interviews, ten with local civil society or government commentators and observers

(a senior journalist, a Buddhist priest, and eight local and international middle to senior ranking NGO workers), and five with senior foreign humanitarian aid workers employed by international organizations.

In each of the four other districts data collection involved a) 25 randomly selected questionnaire interviews, with members of the public who were identified in public spaces such as markets, bus stations and shopping areas, and approached to participate; b) five individual interviews with local humanitarian aid workers; c) five individual interviews with local civil society observers and key commentators or stakeholders such as religious leaders, a senior government administrator and a senior police officer; d) four focus group discussions, each with five participants comprising i) female recipients of humanitarian assistance; ii) male recipients of humanitarian assistance; iii) female school teachers; and iv) male auto-rickshaw drivers.

The composition of the district level focus groups was designed to elicit a gender balanced perspective of humanitarian issues from both the recipients of assistance, as well as two groups of informed local stakeholders (school teachers and auto-rickshaw drivers), who, in the course of their work interact with a cross section of society but who, in their own sub-sets, represent the educated lower-middle class (teachers) and a frequently politicized, opinionated and contextually aware working class (auto-rickshaw drivers).

HA 2015's questionnaire formats were translated into both of Sri Lanka's national languages, Sinhala and Tamil. Each of the district level interviews and all of focus group discussions in Colombo and the districts were conducted in one of these languages (whichever was appropriate given the linguistic composition of the respondents). The individual interviews in Colombo were mostly conducted in English.

A key observation from the study, with methodological implications, is the extent to which responses on questions of the humanitarian enterprise across nearly all sectors of society — apart from many of those who have directly receive assistance — had been largely informed by seldom unchallenged southern media and political portrayals of humanitarianism, rather than by first hand experience. Although it was not possible given the time and scope constraints of this particular study, to better understand Sri Lankan views of humanitarianism further, research is recommended to examine the ways in which the popular media and key charismatic political figures have influenced public opinions of aid and the extent to which people recognize the limitations of this lens. This would also be valuable in helping donor and aid agencies identify better ways of improving their image in Sri Lanka by challenging the negative stereotypes which impact upon aid effectiveness.

Context

The trajectories of humanitarian assistance and its interface with the political and security agendas of international, national and non-state actors have informed, and been informed by, four distinct yet interconnected periods in Sri Lanka's recent past. These are: a) the first conflict period (1983-2001) between the forces of the secessionist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL); b) the post-ceasefire agreement period (2002-2005); c) the post-tsunami period (2005-2007); and d) the overlapping emergence of a second conflict phase (2004-2007). Each of these periods has also made an indelible mark on shaping dominant popular, and often essentialist, constructions of humanitarianism in Sri Lanka which has defined the lens through which our respondents have viewed the humanitarian enterprise.

1st Conflict Period (1983-2001): During this period the GoSL and the LTTE were involved in a protracted violent secessionist conflict for almost two decades. Throughout this period the LTTE were portrayed by the GoSL as 'terrorists', whilst internationally they were frequently viewed more sympathetically as rebels or freedom fighters. The conflict has often been described as being an ethnic struggle by a suppressed Tamil minority denied access to their human rights and an equitable say in the country's governance, challenging a dominant and oppressive Sinhala Buddhist majority. Although this reading is widely challenged, the conflict has fashioned a deep sense of ethnic polarisation and a narrow construction of the "other" within the country. This division, when juxtaposed with the deployment of humanitarian assistance in conflict-affected areas, has had a profound affect upon the way in aid agencies are perceived.

This conflict period was characterized by both conventional military engagements and the widespread use of terrorism, particularly suicide bombings, by the LTTE against political, military and civilian targets throughout the country. For their part, the LTTE would often similarly describe the governments actions against them, though usually posited as attacks on the "Tamil people", as being acts of terror.

In the middle of this first conflict period Sri Lanka encountered its only experience of a foreign armed peacekeeping mission in the form of the Indian Peace Keeping Mission (IPKF) between 1987 and 1990 at the invitation of the Sri Lanka government under the terms of the Indo-Lanka Accord. Briefly, what started out as a peacekeeping mission aimed at overseeing an early ceasefire agreement between the GoSL and the LTTE, quickly deteriorated into a protracted military engagement by the Indian force against the Tamil Tigers. As the scale of Indian intervention in north and east Sri Lanka increased during the late 1980s, Sinhala nationalist criticism from the south over foreign involvement became one of the key themes underpinning the JVP insurrection (1988-1989). As this study later reveals, there is little popular or political support for the involvement of further international peacekeepers in Sri Lanka. As we shall see,

part of this sentiment relates to the fear that internationally mandated peacekeepers will undermine the integrity of Sri Lanka as a sovereign nation state, whose presence would confer or imply a legitimization of the LTTE's territorial claims and secessionist aspirations.

It was a period in which the LTTE were able to gain, and consolidate, control over large swathes of territory in the north and east of the country. In these areas, particularly the in north, the LTTE pursued a policy of forcibly expelling the non-Tamil populations of areas under their control in order to create an illusion of ethnic homogeneity designed to reinforce their claims for a separate Tamil homeland whilst the GoSL attempted to secure the ethnic integrity of "border" regions by supporting internal Sinhalese settlement to these areas.³ These strategies, together with regular attempts by GoSL forces to re-establish control, resulted in the creation of a large internally displaced population. It was the needs of this conflict-affected constituency that first attracted the involvement of international humanitarian actors to Sri Lanka.

As Goodhand and Lewer (1999) note, many in the international donor community shifted their strategy of engagement with Sri Lanka during this period from working "around" and "in" conflict to working "on" conflict. Whilst the 1980s and early-to-mid 1990s saw both donors and international humanitarian agencies primarily involved in emergency relief and development related activities, the late 1990s witnessed the emergence of western donor government involvement in facilitating a peace process. At the same time the number of international aid agencies, local NGOs and other civil society actors were beginning to engage with issues of conflict sensitivity, and peace building began to burgeon. The domestic political and popular reaction to international actors adopting a more hands-on approach to the issues of peace and conflict has created a lasting and challenging legacy for foreign humanitarian involvement in Sri Lanka.

Post-Ceasefire Agreement (2002-2005): The events leading up to the emergence of the first substantive period of peace talks in the Sri Lanka conflict coincided with a profound shift in the positioning of the West towards the issue of terrorism. 9/11 occurred less than a month after the LTTE attacked Sri Lanka's only international airport and crippled much of the country's national air-carrier capacity resulting in the temporary suspension of foreign flights. These events contributed to an urgent re-thinking of strategy by both the southern polity and the LTTE. The attack on Katunayake Airport signalled to moderate opposition parties, the middle classes and business community in the south, perhaps for the first time, the extent of the risk to their future lives and livelihoods if the dogged pursuance of a military solution continued. At the same time, the international response to 9/11 and the global war

³ The LTTE argue that the manipulation of ethnic demographics to make the north and east appear less homogenously Tamil has been a Government agenda since the large-scale development induced migration of the Mahaweli Scheme since the 1960s.

on terror threatened to isolate the LTTE financially and diplomatically. Although other important factors undoubtedly contributed to bringing the two sides to the negotiation table and the signing of a Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) in 2002, 9/11 and the attack on Katunayake Airport can be considered key catalysts.

The post-ceasefire agreement period witnessed a massive inflow of international peace-related donor funding and a subsequent proliferation of local and international peace-oriented organizations operating in Sri Lanka. This phenomenon has, almost by default, forced the perception of a de facto coherence between the political, peace and humanitarian agendas of international donors. Besides the influx of peace- and conflict-specific organizations, both new and pre-existing international humanitarian agencies operating in Sri Lanka attempted to leverage access to the pool of new funding by integrating peace building and conflict reduction value additions into their development programmes. Similarly, the local partners of these organizations recognized that the inclusion of peace-related components into their projects would enhance their potential to secure funding.

To ensure that the terms of the CFA were observed by both sides, an international monitoring body, the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), was established. The body comprised of nationals from the Scandinavian countries. The SLMM and IPKF have been Sri Lanka's only experiences of direct unarmed peace observation missions and armed peace keeping respectively. As breaches of the CFA became more frequent and the SLMM were asked to adjudicate on the various incidents, their impartiality too was called into question by both sides at different times depending upon their conclusions regarding particular cases.

Within two years the CFA had started to unravel amidst a constitutional crisis and a groundswell of nationalist opposition parties, together with elements of the religious right fearing that proposed federalist solutions for devolved autonomy in the north and east would ostensibly be the precursor to an independent Tamil state. At the same time the LTTE began to lament the lack of progress towards agreement with the GoSL over an interim structure of governance, and suffered a major internal split of their forces in the East with the formation of the breakaway Karuna Faction, once again strengthening the more hawkish lobby of those in the south, favouring a military solution, who claimed the LTTE had been severely weakened by the division. As increasing disquiet over the perceived iniquities of the peace dividend (more funding going towards the north and east than the south) the brief period of relatively uncritical freedom enjoyed by international donors and the humanitarian project from 2002 to 2004 waned once again. By the time the tsunami occurred, international donors were on the verge of pulling out their peace-related pledges and peace-oriented NGOs were again becoming increasingly vilified as agents of a pro-LTTE agenda.



Public tsunami aid collection point in Colombo, organized by the military.

Post-Tsunami Relief and Reconstruction (2005-2007): The local and international response to the tsunami disaster resulted in the rapid congestion of humanitarian space in Sri Lanka (Harris, 2006). The main issues arising from the tsunami response that have helped shape the attitudes and perceptions of the humanitarian enterprise in the four thematic areas amongst the study's respondents have been the a) the notion of the international response as a 'humanitarian circus'; b) sovereignty concerns over the control and accountability of foreign military contingents assisting in the recovery process; and c) international and domestic expectations that the disaster could act as a catalyst for peace and reconciliation.

Within a few weeks after the occurrence of the tsunami, the popular press and commentators were already referring to the influx of aid agencies as a "second tsunami" resonating the concerns of some western analysts over the post-disaster spectacle of a "humanitarian circus" (Rieff, 2005). The perception appears to have been fostered by a combination of aid agency actions, a tendency towards selective and sensationalist reporting of humanitarian issues in parts of the local media and the reconstruction of agency motives, activity or inactivity in order to extract political mileage in support of a range of minority interests.

The conspicuousness of a large concentration of international aid agency personnel in and around the capital Colombo with their white faces and white "landcruisers" evoked a sense that Sri Lanka's tsunami disaster had been appropriated by foreigners, giving rise to notions of helplessness, dependency and conjuring claims of neo-colonialism (Slim, 2007). The sight of humanitarian aid workers visibly frequenting five star hotels and restaurants raised questions in many people's minds about why they had come and what they were actually doing to help. These notions were propagated by media stories focusing upon unrepresentatively negative or quirky examples of foreign assistance such as items of inappropriate clothing (winter coats and stiletto-heeled shoes) and medical supplies (Viagra) as part of a donation resulting from a community collection in a western country. Such examples were then cited by some political commentators to denigrate the motives, quality and effectiveness of aid.

Foreign Military Presence: Many nations offered military assistance to the GoSL and deployed contingents of soldiers and equipment in the affected areas to assist in clearing debris and recovering bodies. U.S. Marines and the deployment of an Indian Navy aircraft carrier to provide helicopter support were amongst the largest of the foreign military deployments. There were also lots of smaller units, sometimes from faraway countries such as Brazil, with no prior historic or trading link

to Sri Lanka. Whilst people in the disaster-affected sites reported that they appreciated the efforts and professionalism of the foreign military, some commentators at the time expressed concern that their presence was undermining the Government's authority and eroding the nation's sovereignty. The perception of a lack of coordination and a disconnect between supply of humanitarian assistance and demand or need, evidenced by the presence of reportedly inactive troops billeted in the capital for long periods, led at least one paper to suggest that their time would be better spent helping to remove the LTTE from the north. This comment, made within a few weeks of the tsunami, reveals the extent of the entrenched attitudes that met the initial post-disaster optimism over the prospects for peace.

The tsunami disaster occurred as the CFA was beginning to unravel. Many local and international observers felt that the shared experience of disaster would establish a common bond between the LTTE controlled areas and the south that could act as a catalyst to re-ignite the peace process. This opportunity was highlighted at the time by a number local NGOs and international actors. Donor governments were particularly interested that the GoSL and LTTE should agree a joint mechanism for channelling tsunami-related funds into the Tiger controlled areas of the north and east. The successful implementation of such a structure was seen as platform for peace building and reconciliation. However, government proposals – the post-tsunami operational mechanism (PTOMS) – became a politically contentious issue in the south and ultimately failed.

The Government at the time of the tsunami under President Chandrika Kumaratunga was a weak coalition dominated by minority Sinhala nationalist interests in the form of support from the JVP and JHU. These parties regarded the idea of an agreement for transferring humanitarian aid into LTTE hands as the de facto state-sanctioned legitimization of a terrorist organization. Providing the LTTE with international funds would acknowledge their capacity for large-scale civil administration, which would strengthen their claims for a separate state and undermine Sri Lanka's sovereignty. This analysis found widespread support in the south and the LTTE's trustworthiness as a viable humanitarian partner was undermined by reported evidence that they were importing military equipment under the guise of emergency relief.

2nd Conflict Period (2004-2007): Although the tsunami delayed the return to full scale conflict between the LTTE and the GoSL, the initial hopes that it could act as a catalyst for peace proved to be short lived. Throughout 2005 small scale skirmishes, assassinations, disappearances and road-side bombings became increasingly prevalent. By the beginning of 2006 it was apparent from the almost daily reporting of ceasefire agreement violations that the country was heading back to war. Although neither side was keen to fully abandon the CFA as it remained the only legal structure linking the two parties and could provide the basis for future negotiation, the slide towards war was

underlined by an openly articulated growing frustration from the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission who increasingly felt that they were tasked with implementing a meaningless mandate. A war in everything else but name, the dogged maintenance of the CFA and the continued presence of the SLMM became the legitimizing architecture behind which the GoSL and LTTE could continue with the business of conflict as usual yet claim each recurring violation as an aberration rather than the norm. Neither side wanted to cede the moral high ground to the other and risk alienating international opinion by being the first to denounce the CFA.

In July 2006 the GoSL launched sustained air and artillery bombardments against LTTE positions in southern Trincomalee, followed by a ground assault. Ostensibly to re-open vital water supplies to thousands of farmers which had been blocked by the LTTE, the operation was portrayed in terms of a humanitarian intervention by the Government. This marked a significant departure from their previous military action which generally required no further rationale than the prosecution of terrorism. The discourse of humanitarian intervention as both moral justification and ascribing legitimacy under international humanitarian law for military operations into territory under the control of the LTTE was subsequently used in the advances on Vaharai, Thoppigala and Mannar during the first quarter of 2007.

This period has witnessed a rapid deterioration of human rights with a massive increase in abductions, disappearances and extra-judicial killings. The killings of 17 local staff members from the French aid agency ACF in August 2006 marked the beginning of a period which saw Sri Lanka's record of relative security for humanitarian personnel plummet to being the second worst in the world.

A common trend underpinning each of these periods is the cyclical deployment of anti-foreign and anti-humanitarian/NGO actor sentiments as a strategy of both the state and, paradoxically, its detractors. As we shall see, the fear of assumed hidden foreign donor and humanitarian aid objectives is constructed and manipulated by the country's political stakeholders through the media in order to both garner popular support, as well as to distract attention from domestic ills and the failings of individual parties. Charges levied at the humanitarian enterprise are concentrated around the core emotive theme of a bias in favour of the Tamil people, which is re-articulated as an implicitly pro-LTTE stance. The labeling of international actors as being pro-LTTE implies that they harbor a tacit acceptance of the Tigers' claims for self-determination and aspirations for a Tamil Eelam, or independent homeland, in the north and east of Sri Lanka. This analysis, in turn, colors attempts at foreign facilitation or mediation of the conflict and peace process, the delivery of humanitarian aid and involvement in promoting aid effectiveness, good governance, security sector reform and human rights. Being labeled as pro-Tamil or pro-LTTE is not restricted to foreign actors,

but is extended, ipso facto, to those local organizations in receipt of international funding.

Although part of this construct is informed by Sri Lanka's experience of colonial rule, independence and post-colonial foreign relations (such as Sri Lanka's involvement with the Non-Aligned Movement), the international actors themselves are not beyond reproach. The failure of donors and humanitarian actors to effectively articulate their interests, aims and objectives to the Sinhala majority in their vernacular, has created an opportunity for such a void to be filled with the carefully crafted conjecture of domestic political interests. Whilst the failure to adequately align humanitarian assistance with national priorities is often blamed by the international community on the paucity of appropriate domestic policies with which to align, the tendency to limit consultation within a narrow circle of like-minded stakeholders has resulted in the creation of a rather insular humanitarian community unable or unwilling to engage with alternative perspectives.

Although an uncritical acceptance of this pro-Tamil/LTTE construction of the humanitarian enterprise pervades across a broad swathe of the Sinhalese community in the south of Sri Lanka, the district level surveys conducted for this study reveal that, opinions are often differentiated along ethnic, class and geographic lines, as well as between those who have experienced humanitarian assistance as beneficiaries, and those who have not.

This background section has outlined the contemporary and historical context around which the respondents have framed their views of the humanitarian enterprise. Of immediate pertinence to the findings, the period of field research for this study took place at a time when the GoSL and its popular media appeared resolute in the belief that they were winning the war with the LTTE and that a continuation of a military resolution was the only correct course of action. International criticism of this approach has been met with an intensification of anti-foreign involvement rhetoric and threats.

Universality

"They came to give aid and help the affected."

Female Tamil aid recipient from Trincomalee

"Sometimes we have no idea about what are their purposes."

Male Sinhalese aid recipient from Galle

"I believe they are trying to influence us."

Female Sinhalese random respondent from Kandy

"Some organizations are biased whilst others are not."

Male Moslem key respondent from Trincomalee



Local volunteers distribute aid to displaced children.

The notion of universality in the provision of humanitarian assistance by international organizations in Sri Lanka is frequently an ambiguous, contested and highly politicized concept that closely interlinks with how foreign humanitarian actors are viewed in relation to this study's three other themes of coherence, security and terrorism. The above comments reflect the general spectrum of opinion on international humanitarian assistance and reveal the extent of confusion that exists regarding the underlying motives of aid. Although neither the right nor the responsibility of the developed world to assist Sri Lanka as a country affected by poverty, conflict and natural disaster was widely challenged, many respondents felt that at best there was a lack of clarity concerning international humanitarian objectives, and at worst, that this humanitarian mist masked some more sinister agenda that was frequently linked to a bias in favor of the LTTE.

There was a distinct difference of opinion on the issue of universality between those respondents who had directly received assistance and those who had not. Amongst the recipients of aid there was a widespread expression of appreciation and gratitude for the tangible and direct assistance that had been given. The presence of foreign aid workers was widely respected. Comments on the international contribution of INGOs, such as *"the aid has been a great help to me... they have rebuilt my life"*⁴, were commonplace. The act of giving was generally described by recipients in terms of the humanitarian imperative, *"they came to help us because of our emergency situation"*⁵. In conflict affected areas the presence of international aid workers was frequently regarded as having some stabilizing or protective value.

However, aid recipient respondents were not entirely uncritical of international humanitarian actors. Their concerns generally focused upon three key communication issues. Firstly, a perceived lack of consultation at a community level over needs, priorities and implementation strategies, led some respondents to make comments such as *"we didn't always get what we needed"*, *"sometimes we got things we didn't need,"* or *"we weren't asked, we were just given."* Particularly in the aftermath of the tsunami, many agencies were seen as having pre-determined emergency relief objectives that did not always match local realities and frequently failed to elicit local opinions and involvement in decision making.

Secondly, many aid recipient respondents felt that international organizations did not always adequately or effectively communicate the purpose of their mission. Although this group of respondents did not

⁴ Male Moslem lawyer, key informant from Trincomalee.

⁵ Female Sinhalese, random respondent from Galle.

challenge the underlying humanitarian nature of that mission, they observed that the aid agency's inability to adequately recognize and counter local politicized criticism, contributed to these organizations' vulnerability to attack on the grounds of harboring hidden agendas.

Thirdly, there was a sense that western models of humanitarianism differed significantly from indigenous forms of assistance. Whilst the rationale for western humanitarianism was often accepted, it was not always understood, particularly when intertwined with the notions of individual human rights. As one social scientist commented, "*our people simply just don't understand their [international aid agencies] way of doing things.*" When asked to express a preference, most respondents said they would prefer to receive aid from a local agency that reflected an Asian philosophy of traditional community values but would be happy to receive aid from foreigners as long as there were no strings attached.

In contrast, amongst those respondents who had no direct experience of assistance, the humanitarian imperative was not widely accepted as a sufficient explanation for why international aid agencies are working in Sri Lanka. Many believed that there had to be another, more plausible, underlying motive that explained foreign interests in Sri Lanka. The motives suggested or implied by the respondents tended to focus on the self-serving dynamics and the political, economic and religious agendas of aid agencies or their donor governments.

The criticism that the humanitarian enterprise was fuelled by self-serving interests was common amongst non-recipients and many key informants. The comment, "*they look like they've come to help us... but they are mostly helping themselves*"⁶, reflects a concern that the humanitarian enterprise is primarily an industry designed to provide foreigners and a small minority of privileged locals with good jobs, exorbitant salaries and lavish lifestyles. The rapid influx of aid workers in the aftermath of both the Ceasefire Agreement and the tsunami resulted in a conspicuously large concentration of international aid agency personnel in and around the capital Colombo.

Within the local humanitarian community there was a view that international aid agencies were eroding local emergency response and rehabilitation capacities by "poaching" personnel from local government and NGO sources (Harris: 2006). Whilst the opportunity to work for a foreign agency was valorized for its comparatively high salary and additional benefits, the tempting of essential skilled professionals away from national organizations can be seen as a sort of secular corollary to the proselytization charges levied against foreign religious organizations.

⁶ Male, key informant from Galle.

Political and economic motives for providing humanitarian assistance ranged from assumptions that foreign governments wanted to strengthen their potential for gaining a strategic military stakehold in Sri Lanka's geo-political assets, such as Trincomalee's deep water harbor, through to the perennial claim of a pro-Tamil or LTTE bias. Some economic explanations recognized that international donor interests in a negotiated settlement to the Sri Lanka's conflict would be functional in assisting trading and investment objectives such as in the power industry or gaining access to anticipated off-shore oil and gas fields. Others pointed to the supposed influence of a pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora in many Western countries that was lobbying their governments to get more involved in pressuring Sri Lanka to make concessions in negotiating a settlement with the Tamil Tigers.

International support for the creation of a Post-Tsunami Operational Mechanism (PTOMS) through which foreign aid could be transferred to Tamil Tiger-controlled areas provides an example of a strategy ostensibly aimed at maximising the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance being politically reinterpreted. PTOMS was perceived by Sinhala nationalists as a donor orchestrated device to help further LTTE claims for a separate state. They argued that establishing a mechanism for the LTTE to receive international funds would place them on the same level as a state party.

The assumption that international forces were attempting to subvert Sri Lanka's domestic war on terror through the delivery of humanitarian assistance that was biased in favour of the Tamils and the LTTE has been a recurring claim throughout the conflict period and is perhaps the biggest obstacle to assistance being accepted as an impartial expression of universal humanitarian principles. This issue will be developed further in discussing the other three themes of coherence, security and terrorism.

Religious interests were mostly noted in connection with the activities of church-based organizations, particularly the increasing prevalence of New Age Christian churches establishing themselves in Sri Lanka, and what was assumed to be an underlying missionary mandate aimed at obtaining conversions in return for relief and development assistance. Although there has been a longstanding underlying tension between Christianity and Buddhism since the days of Portuguese colonial rule, the presence of established Anglican and Catholic Churches are now largely tolerated as an accepted feature of Sri Lanka's cosmopolitan mosaic. However, new churches are viewed by the Buddhist clergy as a particular threat to their communities. Conversions to Christianity are seen as further eroding the authority of the village Buddhist priest. Again, the foreign origins of most of these evangelical missionary churches provide a politically accepted handle for criticism. Many churches have their own international aid agencies operating in Sri Lanka and their humanitarian work is often viewed by the Buddhist clergy with fear and suspicion. However, claims of proselytization are routinely denied by most international faith-based organizations and

many have transparent policies and codes of conduct prohibiting their staff from using religious conditionally on the provision of assistance.

Operating within the confines of a congested and competitive humanitarian space, international organizations have tended to rely upon an assumption that their assistance is widely accepted on its face value as something intrinsically good, beneficial, neutral and devoid of ulterior motives. However, when the nature of international humanitarianism is neither well understood nor effectively explained, and its actions are located within the highly contested terrain of a state experiencing both social and political crises, over and above the immediate focus of the assistance being offered, the humanitarian imperative leaves itself open to appropriation and reinterpretation by other domestic forces in order to bolster their own agendas.

Unfortunately, INGOs are often unaware of the extent and nature of the criticism being levelled against them because most of the criticism is in the vernacular media, which is often strikingly different in tone and content from the minority English press. There is often a time-delay over the publication in English of issues that may have been developing a popular following in the vernacular press for some time. This can lead international actors to mistakenly dismiss criticism in the English press as irrational, irrelevant or unrepresentative rather than being reflective of the mainstream perspective. Furthermore, these agencies fail to effectively engage in the debate in their own defence as they seldom respond through the vernacular press and tend to focus on responses in English press instead. This in turn reinforces popular assumptions of international humanitarian organizations as being elitist and neo-colonial and further distances the international community from engaging with what has been described as the “*non-like minded*”, or spoilers, in Sri Lanka’s search for peace (Goodhand et al: 2005).

In summary, the notion of universality in humanitarian assistance does not seem to be significantly challenged in Sri Lanka and, indeed, western involvement, as long as it avoids clashing with local culture and religion, appears to be both welcomed and expected. However, the perception of the humanitarian community as a self-serving enterprise was widely expressed, as was the suspicion that agencies were using humanitarian action to pursue other agendas, particularly ones that favoured the LTTE. This perception was compounded by a sense that the agencies themselves were often ineffective in explaining their own mandate. This communication gap provided an opportunity for local interests to further their own political agendas by constructing a critical interpretation of the humanitarian enterprise.

Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism

“[He] is a devil, an uncivilised person and a terrorist in the pay of the LTTE”

Jeyaraj Ferandopulle, Sri Lanka Minister for Highways and Road Development referring to Sir John Holmes, UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs⁷

“Humanitarian agencies infuse fresh blood into terrorist organizations”

A Buddhist clergyman

“People believe that terrorism has made humanitarian work partisan”

Deputy Director of a Government Department

Two global policy trends have affected the way in which the humanitarian enterprise in Sri Lanka has been informed by issues of terrorism. Firstly, for almost a quarter of a century the Sri Lanka Government has been fighting to prevent the secessionist aspirations of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE, aka Tamil Tigers) from creating a permanent Tamil homeland and separate state in the north and east of the country. Throughout this period the international humanitarian community has become involved in providing assistance to the vulnerable, displaced and impoverished victims of the conflict. Since 1983 humanitarian agencies have worked with such conflict-affected constituents in both Government- and LTTE-controlled territories. However, as international humanitarian action shifted its focus through the 1980s and 1990s from working “in conflict” to working “on conflict”, it began to try help identify and address structural issues relating to justice, human rights governance and the absence of a peace process which were seen to support and perpetuate the conflict rather than just deal with the physical consequences. This shift placed humanitarianism firmly within the domestic political arena, eroded its original aura of neutrality and impartiality and rendered it “*a convenient foil, scapegoat, whipping boy and pawn*”⁸ for every party to the conflict and individual politician depending upon their own interests and needs at any particular time.

Secondly, up until 9/11, the Sri Lanka Government was constantly struggling to make an internationally credible and justifiable case for a military, rather than a negotiated, solution to its war with the LTTE. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the LTTE, despite an atrocious record

⁷ *The Sunday Times*, “Mariakadey Diplomacy to Combat the World”, 19th August, 2007, p. 4

⁸ Country representative of a European international aid agency.

of repeated terrorist attacks on civilian targets in the south of Sri Lanka, had constantly managed to elicit a more sympathetic international hearing than the Government using an extremely effective media, communications and political lobbying machine that linked the Tiger's command centre in the northern Wanni town of Kilinochchi with Western capitals around the world through a dedicated network of Tamil diasporas. Whilst pre-9/11 Western governments had been slow to proscribe the LTTE as a terrorist organization or move to curtail its massive foreign fundraising activities to finance its arms supply, often taking place under the guise of charitable relief and development aid collections, the post 9/11 Global War On Terror (GWOT) provided the Sri Lanka Government with a triple blessing. First, the timing of the LTTE's most audacious and economically crippling attack in two decades of conflict, during which most of Sri Lanka's national airlines' craft were destroyed or damaged during a raid on the country's only international airport, came less than a month before 9/11. The Sri Lanka Government subsequently worked hard in successfully garnering international support for banning the LTTE by emphasizing the terrorism-related correlations between the two events. At the same time, 9/11 impacted upon LTTE strategy by bringing them to the negotiation table rather than risk further international marginalization and persecution as a terrorist organization. Secondly, 9/11 provided successive governments in Sri Lanka with both a moral and strategic argument with which to counter international criticism of the way in which it prosecuted its own war on terror. Thirdly, the humanitarian labeling of military action in the GWOT's Afghan and Iraqi theatres provided the Rajapakse Government with an internationally acceptable way of framing its ambition of defeating the LTTE by force.

Although few aid recipient respondents in this study commented upon the issue of terrorism other than in the context of domestic security, which shall be dealt with in the following chapters, a large number of non-aid recipient respondents subscribed to the popular media view of humanitarian actors being somewhere on a scale ranging from passively sympathetic to the LTTE's cause, through to actively supporting them. This section examines the implications for humanitarian action of five themes emerging from their comments: 1) the notion of double standards in the West's treatment of terror in their own countries and in countries such as Iraq, compared with their stance on terrorism in Sri Lanka; 2) the imbalance of the West's approach to the LTTE in comparison to their treatment of the GoSL; 3) the idea of a demarcation in the boundaries of acceptable areas of engagement for humanitarian actors in Sri Lanka, 4) the media deployment and uncritical public acceptance of evidence purporting to demonstrate humanitarian complicity with the LTTE, and 5) donor cautiousness over funding in areas of LTTE influence.

Double Standards: A key source of tension between the GoSL and Western donor governments is their divergent perspectives over the war on terror. This tension is frequently played out in the country's media and has informed popular assumptions of foreign security agendas. Although not an official government position, senior ministers, as well as many

Sinhala nationalist critics and commentators, frequently and publicly observe a fundamental hypocrisy in the way that Sri Lanka's domestic war on terror is treated by western governments, compared with how they handle their own terrorist problems. The majority of ordinary people in the south of Sri Lanka would likely find sympathy with the drawing of a direct comparison between al Qaeda and the LTTE as terrorist organizations. However, they have difficulty in reconciling support for the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq in the name of combating terrorism, with an international insistence that the GoSL should negotiate a peace deal with the LTTE. Domestically, the GoSL's military persecution of the LTTE is equated with the coalition forces activities against the Taliban, al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein.

Many believe that negotiating with the LTTE rewards the use of terror as an acceptable means to achieving a political end. It is also argued that negotiation both legitimizes the LTTE's claim over contested territory and affords them an unfairly equitable say in the future of the country. The LTTE are often viewed in the south as a terrorist organization representing only a small minority of the population that has gained a stakehold only through sustained violence against the State, the coercion of its own people and the elimination of other moderate Tamil voices engaged in the mainstream political process. Faced with such an analysis of the LTTE in Sri Lanka, both political and popular opinion seems unable to comprehend why international donors insist on the GoSL pursuing a peace process when they themselves show little inclination to attempt to engage al Qaeda and its ilk in negotiations.

Thus, when international actors make comments suggesting that the Government of Sri Lanka should do more to curb and investigate human rights abuses or engage the LTTE in peace talks they are accused of being pro-LTTE and supporters of terrorism. Statements by visiting foreign diplomats, debates on Sri Lanka in foreign parliaments, the actions of the Norwegian facilitators and donor government co-chairs to the peace process all impact upon the work of international humanitarian aid agencies on the ground. For example, in 2000 when the British Parliament was debating whether or not to proscribe the LTTE, hand grenades were thrown by Sinhalese extremists at the offices of Oxfam GB in Colombo; in the same year when Norway's peace envoy visited Sri Lanka, the offices of Save the Children (U.K.)/Redd Barna (Norway) alliance were similarly attacked; and when in 2007 UN special advisor Alan Rock claimed that he had evidence of GoSL military complicity in assisting child abductions and forced recruitment by the Karuna Faction in the east there were widespread calls for the UN to be expelled from Sri Lanka.

Balance: Linked to the issue of Western double standards in how to deal with terrorism, is the perception that the West has also adopted an inappropriately differential treatment of the GoSL in relation to the LTTE. As a senior manager with a U.S. aid agency commented, *"the problem is that people feel that the internationals are only citing violations of human rights, etc., that are perpetrated by GOSL, and not other side."*

Whenever the international community criticizes the GoSL for not adequately addressing human rights abuses, for failing to pursue a negotiated settlement or for hitting civilians in bombing raids against LTTE positions, the retort invariably asks why similar questions are not levelled at the Tamil Tigers. The LTTE, it is argued, perpetrate far more human rights abuses than the GoSL, systematically targeting civilians in acts of terror and has established a ruthless authoritarian control over constituents by fear and coercion.

As one UN respondent noted, *“it’s probably because the south of Sri Lanka is more open than the north that it seems to get more than its fair share [of criticism]”*. His view, shared by other commentators, went on to explain that, despite criticism over the State’s purported failings in good governance, *“at the end of the day it’s an elected democracy whilst the so-called ‘Tamil Eelam’ is a dictatorship,”* and as such the Tiger leaders were better able to control and manipulate access and information.

The response from the international community to accusations of bias has often been to try balance its criticism evenly. So when the LTTE engage in an act of terrorism such as the bombing of a civilian bus, the international community will couch their condemnation alongside the weighted condemnation of the GoSL’s military response, such as an air strike, which the LTTE will invariably report as having hit a civilian target such as a school or hospital.⁹ However, what is perceived by the West as even-handedness is viewed in the south as further evidence of a bias towards the LTTE.

Boundaries: When humanitarians overstep certain boundaries of assistance in Sri Lanka they are accused of aiding and abetting terrorism. The construction of humanitarian assistance as partisan in its most extremely nationalistic manifestation sees any involvement with Tamils in the north and east as contributing to the LTTE’s cause. A less fundamentalist stance, such as that adopted by individual political figures and the media point to foreign *“meddling”* in internal affairs, defined as security, peace and human rights issues, as being pro-LTTE. The preference for INGOs and donors seems to be for them to *“stick to helping the poor and vulnerable”*¹⁰ by working *“in”* conflict for instance, rather than the trend of working *“on”* conflict.

However, even the provision of basic humanitarian needs often challenges the notion of what constitutes a politically acceptable boundary for humanitarian assistance in Sri Lanka. For example, as the

⁹ It is interesting to note that the recent recapturing of Vakarai from the LTTE revealed that the Tigers strategically locate their military bunkers within or even beneath hospital premises, presumably in order to avoid attack in the first instance, or to claim the moral high ground if they are.

¹⁰ A deputy director in a government department.



Refugee camp location board in Batticaloa.

second conflict period developed, humanitarian access to provide assistance to IDPs in areas under the control of the LTTE became increasingly restricted. INGO humanitarian supplies into the northern Wanni region became intermittent and subject to lengthy delays whilst military and administrative clearance were negotiated. In areas such as Vahkarai and Madhu where the LTTE are accused of using the civilian population as human shields, aid agency access prior to GoSL offensives have been almost entirely curtailed whilst the government forces themselves have claimed to act out of humanitarian concern.

In October 2006 the GoSL ordered four international aid agencies to leave the country. The organizations were Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) France, MSF Spain, Medicos del Mundo and Doctors of the World. The official reason for

these expulsions was that a parliamentary committee investigating the activities of NGOs had found these organizations to be in contravention of Customs, Immigration and Ministry of Defence regulations. The Country Director of Medicos del Mundo had been expelled earlier for issuing a training workshop certificate bearing the logo of the LTTE alongside the emblem of the Government of Sri Lanka. Although this particular incident was perhaps an unfortunate example of poor aid agency analysis and judgement that played straight into the hands of Sri Lanka’s increasingly powerful and vociferous anti-foreign NGO lobby, all of the agencies who became victims of what some INGO heads described as a “witch hunt”, were medical relief organizations primarily operating in the LTTE-controlled territory of the north and east providing services in essential areas such as emergency surgery and anaesthetics. Aid agencies speculated that the GoSL’s underlying motive for these expulsions was the fear that their medical service might be co-opted to treat wounded LTTE cadres.

Evidence: Amongst the local media there exists what one foreign correspondent termed “an almost rabid vigilance” for any sign of international aid agency support for the LTTE, no matter how spurious or stretched the credibility of that evidence may be. Recent examples included the “discovery” of medical items donated by the Dutch organisation ZOA Refugee Care in an LTTE controlled hospital, Save the Children labels on fishing boats found in an LTTE coastal base and UN plastic sheeting and rice bags used as lining for a LTTE bunker. Each of these examples of aid agency complicity with terrorists has of course the perfectly rational explanation that once aid is provided to genuine beneficiaries, the INGO no longer has any control over how it is appropriated by others and misused. Media reports seldom offer a mitigating perspective and such examples frequently form the nucleus of scathing diatribes by politicians against humanitarians, which in turn

can incite public action such as the picketing of ZOA offices in Colombo by Buddhist priest supporters of the JHU.

Donor Cautiousness: A number of aid agency respondents pointed out that since 9/11 donors had become much more cautious in their funding. Although many donor governments, including the U.S., had already proscribed the LTTE as a terrorist organization as early as 1997, post-9/11 legislation, such as the Patriot Act in the U.S., significantly limited the scope of grant money whilst increasing the level of controls and accountability in using it. The deputy director of a USAID funded international organisation noted that *“former perceptions of the LTTE as freedom fighters in the U.S. has changed, funding is now not given to agencies for work in north and east. Every guarantee has to certify that they are not involved in LTTE activities.”*

The criterion that funding from USAID, and from some other government donor agencies, cannot directly or indirectly be used to assist the LTTE has certainly restricted the ability of U.S. aid agencies in particular to implement programmes in the north and east Tiger-controlled or influenced areas of Sri Lanka. Some have managed to circumvent these restrictions with what one aid worker described as a *“don’t ask, don’t tell”* project proposal submission and reporting *“game”*. The aid worker gave the example of a tsunami assistance project in which local construction contractors would invariably be required to pay a tithe to the LTTE in order to be allowed to carry out the project without hindrance. Whilst both the donor and the implementing agency were both aware that such practices were taking place, there was an unspoken understanding between them that they would neither be mentioned in progress reports, nor pursued by monitoring and evaluation officers or consultants during field visits.

Some U.S. INGOs have more flexibility to operate in the “grey” areas where the LTTE are active but not fully in control. This is because of their independence from U.S. Government funds, having raised considerable amounts of their own through tsunami-related appeals. However, these agencies are still circumspect regarding the type of projects they support and how they are reported because they fear that there is a risk of legal action in the U.S. if they were seen to be in contravention of homeland security legislation preventing the support of terrorist organizations.

Although there is a marked absence of USAID funded projects in LTTE controlled areas there is, however, an abundance of European NGOs operating in these areas despite both the EU and many of its constituent individual states having listed the Tigers as a banned terrorist organisation. European laws appear to be more flexible than U.S. legislation when it comes to assistance of a humanitarian nature and where there is clearly no intent on behalf of the aid to support terrorist groups. However, these INGOs regularly fall afoul of Sri Lanka’s media and politicians who lose no opportunity to “expose” agency acts that are construed as evidence of their support for the LTTE.

This section has revealed the different dynamics which impact upon the popularly perceived relationship between terrorism and humanitarianism in Sri Lanka. The following sections go on to examine how this connection affects the way in which international coherence agendas are viewed, and the security of humanitarian actors operating in what UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, John Holmes, was recently labeled a “terrorist” for describing as the second most dangerous country in the world for aid workers.¹¹

Coherence

“The rhetoric of humanitarian intervention is often used to justify local military action.”

Country Representative of a European aid organization in Sri Lanka

“In Sri Lanka aid and politics are always linked at every level.”

Local aid worker with an INGO

“We [the donors] first thought the tsunami offered a great opportunity for peace.”

Senior diplomat in the embassy of a Western government

In Sri Lanka, different variants of a coherence agenda linking humanitarian and human rights issues with political and military interests can be found amongst the international donor community, the Government and the LTTE. However, this is not coherence in the sense of a nexus between UN, or otherwise sanctioned foreign military intervention, and aid, such as found in Afghanistan and Darfur. There is currently no international armed presence in Sri Lanka. The only international “force” involved in the conflict is the deployment of unarmed Scandinavian and Icelandic observers under the establishment of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) agreed by the LTTE and GoSL. Their mission is to monitor, receive complaints of, investigate and adjudicate upon land and maritime infringements of the 2002 Ceasefire Agreement. The only post-Independence period example of armed intervention was that of the Indian Peace Keeping Mission (IPKF) in the late 1980s; an experience which left behind a deep distrust of and resistance to any suggestions of armed peace keepers having a role in Sri Lanka’s conflict.

This does not mean, though, that coherence in Sri Lanka today is without an operational military dimension. The pursuance of either a military solution to end over twenty years of conflict, or the prevention of a military solution in favour of a negotiated settlement, inform the

¹¹ *The Sunday Times*, op cit

coherence strategies of each of the main stakeholders. This section will examine three dominant coherence related trends in Sri Lanka: firstly, the linking of humanitarian-, human rights- and peace-related issues by the international donor community; secondly, the Sri Lanka Government's response to this position and the re-articulation of their military objectives as humanitarian ones; and thirdly the manipulation of humanitarian and human rights issues by the LTTE to curry international support and further their political and military aims. It

Coherence and the International Community: Many of the key informant respondents and some of the non-beneficiary focus groups perceived international donors as having multiple objectives, linking humanitarian, human rights, political, economic and military agendas, which have already been detailed in the previous section on universality. However, few outside the aid or diplomatic community themselves identified the convergence of these issues as becoming increasingly regarded by international donors as a more targeted, impact-oriented and cost-effective strategy of assistance in Sri Lanka.

All of the main Western donor governments, the multilateral funding institutions of the World Bank (WB) and Asia Development Bank (ADB) and Sri Lanka's single largest bilateral donor, the Japanese Government, through JICA (Japanese International Cooperation Agency) and JBIC (Japan Bank of International Cooperation) openly favor a negotiated settlement to Sri Lanka's conflict as in the country's best interests, (and ipso facto, theirs) for establishing a stable environment for trade and investment in contributing to the conditions for sustainable development and economic growth.

The Tokyo Donor Conference which followed shortly after the declaration of the Ceasefire Agreement in February 2002 pledged some U.S. \$4 billion to post-conflict reconstruction efforts with the proviso of sustained progress towards peace in negotiations between the LTTE and the GoSL. This was followed under the Wickramasinghe administration of the time with an unusually high level of openness towards good governance, constitutional and institutional reform initiatives as donor objectives started to harmonize and align behind the Government's pro-peace policies. However, this collaboration was later to help undermine the Wickremasinghe administration as opponents criticized him for being a puppet to foreign objectives.

Some foreign diplomatic missions in Sri Lanka have restructured and merged their international development, humanitarian assistance, defence, trade/commerce and diplomacy responsibilities. This reflects the growing donor belief that an integrated multisectoral approach to engagement in conflict-affected states would be more effective in achieving each departments' individual objectives and the meta goals of sustainable peace and development, rather than acting as though they are separate issues.

A number of respondents noted that during 2007 international donors have been more vociferous in making connections between peace, development and human rights. As conflict has escalated in the north and east, human rights groups have reported upon the disturbing number of abductions, disappearances and extra-judicial killings that were taking place (internationally highlighted by the murder of 17 Action Contre La Faim aid workers in August 2006 and two Sri Lanka Red Cross volunteers in May 2007). This prompted some bilateral donors (e.g., Germany and U.K.) to temporarily suspend scheduled instalments of debt relief assistance to the Sri Lankan Government, whilst calling for a resumption of peace talks and for the Government to be more proactive in the curtailment and investigation of human rights abuses.

Donors concerned with furthering peace and human rights in Sri Lanka were perceived to believe that they have little leverage to influence change except through conditionality. In dealing with the Sri Lanka Government, conditionality takes the form of pledges for increased trade and economic and humanitarian assistance in return for compliance and improved performance on peace and human rights; or the delay and denial of promised assistance if they fail to comply. In attempting to pressure the LTTE, donors adopt a slightly different approach which adds the threat of continued and more stringent international proscription for lack of progress against possible de-listing as terrorists and access to economic and humanitarian assistance for compliance.

Coherence and the Government of Sri Lanka: Few beneficiary, focus group or random respondents recognized any elements of a coherence agenda by the Sri Lanka Government. However, both local and international aid workers, civil society, diplomatic and military respondents observed an increasingly strategic connection between the military, political and humanitarian objectives of the Government. This disparity in responses may have reflected the way in which coherence issues were framed and discussed during the interviews, rather than a lack of opinion on the part of the former group, with the latter respondents being more familiar with the terminology and concepts surrounding this topic. Where a coherence agenda was noted, it was viewed as being in part a reaction to the criticism of the GoSL by the international community and a copying of their methods of strategic humanitarian intervention.

The most recent phase of Sri Lanka's conflict has witnessed a change in the way that the Government has articulated its justification for operations against the LTTE in the north and east. During the pre-Ceasefire Agreement conflict period, operations were primarily posited as anti-terrorist exercises. However, in the post-Ceasefire Agreement period, drawing upon the rhetoric of the Global War On Terror (GWOT) and international engagements in the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq, the GoSL has introduced a humanitarian dimension to justify its actions.

The first significant example of this new phenomenon occurred in July 2006 after LTTE forces closed the Marivalu anicut, an agricultural irrigation supply channel and sluice gate located in a Tamil Tiger-occupied area of Trincomalee district but reportedly an essential source of water for some 15,000 farmers in the adjacent Government-controlled lands. Although some respondents felt that *“a small contingent could have easily retaken it”*¹² the GoSL launched artillery and aerial bombardments for a number of days before committing ground troops in what they claimed was a humanitarian operation (reminiscent of tactics deployed by the Coalition forces in Afghanistan and Iraq). This humanitarian operation was subsequently extended *“with the aim of liberating the Tamil civilians who were undergoing immense suffering at the hands of the LTTE”*¹³ in the occupied eastern districts. The protracted GoSL bombardments that aimed to debilitate LTTE positions and force the civilian population to leave, followed by the gradual incursion of ground forces, were successively deployed through 2006 and 2007 in “liberating” the east and “clearing” out the LTTE from Sampur, Muttur, Vakaraï and Thoppigalla¹⁴, and were all conducted under the auspices of humanitarian action. These operations were rationalized by the Commander of the Sri Lanka Army on the ground that the LTTE *“were keeping the Tamil civilians as a shield and they were engaged in recruitment. Whatever the relief assistance coming from NGOs they were taking them. People were complaining because they were not receiving enough food. Because, we tried to save the civilians from this type of situations, we say it was a humanitarian mission.”*¹⁵

Although the GoSL claimed this as a humanitarian mission it was also undeniably a strategically political and military one which *“fitted precisely with the Government’s desire to defeat the LTTE in the east and then put pressure on them in the Wann”*^{16 17}. In a context of international condemnation over the failure of the peace talks and the erosion of the Ceasefire Agreement, the GoSL sought a humanitarian argument for military intervention that the donors would find acceptable because *“they themselves use it elsewhere in the world.”*¹⁸

Following the fall of Thoppigalla, the last major LTTE stronghold in Batticaloa, the GoSL announced that they would be commencing a massive infrastructure reconstruction and investment programme in the east under the heading “East Rising” which would comprise a “hearts and minds” type intervention (again evoking the theory and practice of Western military “humanitarian” intervention) aimed at demonstrating to Tamil civilians the benefits of a “peace” dividend in a post-LTTE controlled territory.

¹² The view of a local INGO aid worker respondent also confirmed by military respondents.

¹³ Interview with a senior military officer.

¹⁴ Sampur/Muttur (Trincomalee district); Vakaraï/Thoppigalla (Batticaloa district), see map.

¹⁵ *Daily News*, Monday 4th June 2007, p. 9.

¹⁶ Local aid worker respondent.

¹⁷ The Wann (Vanni) is the term used to describe area of land in northern Sri Lanka that lies between Jaffna and Vavuniya.

¹⁸ Civil society respondent in Colombo.

Coherence and the LTTE: Although this study was not able to conduct interviews in LTTE-controlled areas, it was able to speak to respondents who had experience of either living as internally displaced civilians or working as local government employees and aid workers in the northern and eastern districts under Tamil Tiger control. Respondents who had been recipients of humanitarian assistance spoke guardedly of the correlation between the LTTE-controlled aid and its military objectives, whilst aid workers and other observers pointed towards the LTTE's manipulation of the political, aid, military and human rights nexus, particularly vis-à-vis relations with international actors.

At community level in the LTTE-controlled areas there has been an inextricable linkage between access to aid, social benefits and the Tigers' military/political agenda. There is a de facto proviso that in order to obtain assistance in the form of food aid, shelter, a reduced rate of local taxation, etc., from the LTTE administration, families in areas under LTTE control should have at least one child enlisted into their cadres. Those that do not acquiesce to this unwritten stricture have been subjected to threats, intimidation, reduced access to assistance and higher rates of taxation.¹⁹ The LTTE's control of civilians is reinforced by their policy of excluding international agencies from direct access to villagers. Instead international assistance has tended to be directed through the plethora of small local NGOs which are *"little more than fronts for their [the LTTE's] development wing."*²⁰

The humanitarian imperative driving international aid agencies at community or beneficiary level in Tamil Tiger-controlled areas has conveniently dove-tailed with the LTTE's military need for a source of revenue and a stable recruitment, as well their political need of maintaining international credibility, exposure and a channel for communications and media. At revenue level, the LTTE have controlled the import, price and taxation for virtually every type of goods or services available in their areas.

For example, the construction of a tube well — a typical humanitarian activity — by an international aid agency implemented through a local NGO in the northern Wanni region could have the following revenue-gathering potential for the LTTE's military machine: a) charging a percentage of the value as import duty at the point of entry to Wanni for the tube well, cement and sand (whether imported legally or smuggled); b) setting an inflated price for local purchase by INGOs and charging a percentage of the sale price in tax for construction materials; c) local NGOs building in an administrative overhead for implementation, a percentage of which would go to the LTTE; d) income tax on local labor used in construction; and e) taxation on the product of any

¹⁹ Information provided by a former LTTE cadre.

²⁰ An aid workers with an international agency in the Wanni.

value additions, such as micro-finance or direct grant livelihoods projects arising from the provision of a tube well such as home-garden agriculture.²¹ Respondents also reported that GoSL military personnel at the border crossings routinely extorted payment in cash, or as a percentage of goods, from lorry drivers for the import of materials into LTTE areas. Similarly in the east both the LTTE and latterly the Karuna Faction/TMVP were reported to have extorted payments for the transport or use of humanitarian materials.

The LTTE requires a constant supply of new labor to replenish the number of its cadres who have been captured, deserted, killed or wounded in battle. Their main source of such labor is amongst the resident population within its own territory. By assisting and encouraging international aid to help provide potable water, build temporary and permanent shelters and invest in livelihood schemes, etc., the LTTE benefit twice. Firstly they do not have to spend so much of their own reserves on assisting the local population and secondly that population, having many of its basic needs satisfied, will be less inclined to try and leave and thus be more susceptible to recruitment drives. Maintaining a distance between the INGO and the local community also enables the LTTE to give the impression to its constituents that the aid provided is a result of the Tiger's largess, thereby further inculcating a sense of obligation in return.

At a political level the LTTE needs to be able to channel its aspirations for an independent Tamil homeland whilst highlighting the human rights abuses and deprivations by the hands of the Sri Lankan state, to an international audience. The resident INGO community in the Wanni provide the ideal conduit through which to voice these issues. International aid agencies in the Wanni "*live in constant fear of expulsion*"²² by the LTTE which would render ineffective their ability to deliver upon their mandate with attendant implications for agency fundraising. Thus they risk becoming sometimes unwitting, but mostly unwilling, pawns in the LTTE's political game, as well as that of the Government's in response.

Coherence and the Tsunami Response: The domestic and international response to the tsunami in Sri Lanka provides an interesting case study which draws upon a number of different coherence-related elements. Two areas will be discussed in this section: firstly the role of foreign military in tsunami relief operations and secondly the attempt by the international community to derive peace-related progress from the aftermath of the disaster.

²¹ Information compiled from various beneficiary, international and local aid worker respondents.

²² An aid worker in the Wanni.



Fishing boats in wake of tsunami.

Within a few days of the tsunami, detachments of various foreign military forces had deployed to Sri Lanka to assist in the relief efforts. The largest contingents included a full aircraft carrier group of the Indian navy and some 1,500 U.S. Marines supported by another aircraft carrier battle group. The U.K. and other E.U. countries provided significant contributions, and smaller numbers of medical or search and rescue teams came from a plethora of other nations from as far afield as Brazil. Most of the beneficiary respondents commented that the foreign military were very helpful in collecting bodies, removing debris and constructing emergency shelters. The majority said that their presence and professionalism was appreciated and, as one local government servant stated, “*they came, they did their job and they left*” indicating that they did not outstay their welcome or attempt

to pursue any other objective. However, some papers and Government sources at the time criticized the military presence as an erosion of national sovereignty (some detachments had reputedly arrived without request or invitation) whilst others recommended that these forces could be put to better use in helping the state fight the LTTE (*Daily Mirror*). The international military were however extremely cautious not to get embroiled in assistance outside that of a purely relief mandate and within few months the majority had completed their missions or handed over to local authorities and NGOs.

Mooting the suggestion that foreign forces could be deployed in fighting the LTTE does, however, illustrate the lack of official and key nationalist lobby support for the possibility that the tsunami disaster could help to get the peace process back on track. The tsunami occurred at a juncture when many donors were on the verge of withdrawing post-conflict funding from Sri Lanka. Incidents of low trajectory warfare prior to December 26, 2004, were becoming more frequent in the north and east whilst the LTTE was known to be re-recruiting and re-arming. Concurrently, the GoSL’s position becoming increasingly influenced by the Sinhala nationalist agendas of the JVP and JHU.

Beyond internal concerns, foreign military humanitarian relief assistance in Sri Lanka had regional geo-political implications. According to Professor Uyangoda of Colombo University, the presence of so many U.S. Marines was perceived by the Government in New Delhi as “*a symbolic intrusion into India’s sphere of influence.*”²³ India, deploying

²³ Quoted by Chaitanya Kalbag of Reuters, *Sri Lanka Tsunami Aid Becomes Geopolitical Game*, 3 January, 2005.

their first 'armed' intervention in Sri Lanka since the debacle of the IPKF in 1987-1989, quickly despatched a force of similar strength to match that of the U.S., whilst critics of the West in Sri Lanka speculated whether the Marine presence was "*part of the U.S. global design*"²⁴. The deployment of U.S. Marines to the Eastern Province in close proximity of LTTE-controlled areas prompted concerns from the Tamil Tigers that given the U.S. prohibition of their organizations as terrorist, and populist nationalist calls for anti-terrorist assistance, that the troops could be used against them.

However, the international community was optimistic that the tsunami disaster could help foster peace and was extremely keen to promote a post-tsunami peace process. They were active in pressurizing the GoSL and LTTE to negotiate the establishment of a mechanism through which foreign aid could be channelled to support tsunami-affected communities in the Tamil Tiger-controlled areas of the north and east. The Post Tsunami Operational Mechanism (PTOMS) was jointly agreed by the GoSL and LTTE as a conduit for such assistance but almost instantly became unworkable as Sinhala nationalist parties claimed that it conferred a legitimization of the LTTE as a de facto state.²⁵

As one of the introductory quotes remark, "*in Sri Lanka, aid and politics are always linked at every level*", and the politicization of humanitarian assistance is invariably subjected to populist Sinhala nationalist interpretations in the press and posturing of politicians seeking personal gain. As with notions of universality, issues of coherence take on insidious connotations and are frequently distorted beyond reason in the media which in turn percolates into the public consciousness and informs responses to studies of humanitarian perceptions such as this. This section has revealed that the shift towards a coherence agenda amongst some donors in Sri Lanka has appeared to undermine the notion of humanitarian assistance as being impartial. Instead, it has become political regarded as imbued with conditionality over peace negotiations and human rights. In such a context populist accusations of the humanitarian enterprise as supporters of the LTTE tend to stick, and such labels have serious implications for aid worker security, to which we now turn.

Security

Questions to respondents on security and the humanitarian enterprise in Sri Lanka revealed three main findings relating to: a) perceptions amongst those receiving assistance in conflict-affected areas concerning how the humanitarian presence had impacted upon their personal sense of security; b) the views of aid workers regarding how the security environment had affected their work and safety, and c), how the

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Renner, M. and Chafe, Z. (2007) *Beyond Disasters: Creating Opportunities for Peace*, Worldwatch Institute: Danvers MA.

insecurity of aid workers in the field was linked by respondents to the other themes of universality, coherence and terrorism.

Security and Aid Recipients: Many respondents in the conflict-affected district of Trincomalee commented that they believed that the presence of international aid agencies working on projects in their villages afforded them a greater degree of security than when they were absent. As one aid recipient commented, “*we feel safer when they are around.*” This perception was reinforced by the views of local staff from the aid agencies themselves. “*They [the villagers] think that the LTTE and Karuna Faction won’t do anything if we are around,*” noted one INGO field officer. This notion is operationalized in conflict-affected districts by one international agency, “Nonviolent Peace Force”. They deploy foreign nationals to such areas in order to help provide a physical buffer for escalating tensions and a neutral party to facilitate safe spaces for dialogue. Such actions are reported to have made a difference in easing local level tensions.

However, respondents also noted that the increase in post-tsunami reconstruction activities had increased insecurities for conflict-affected communities. Due to the influx of funds, particularly in the construction industry, and the concentration of large groups of male building laborers in the 15 to 25 year age range, both the Karuna Faction and the LTTE had become increasingly interested in such sites as a source of extortion for funds and forced recruitment for their cadres.

Lawlessness and corruption were identified as two of the greatest threats to security by respondents in each district. Corruption by local government officials extorting payments from the victims of disaster for inclusion on post-tsunami beneficiary housing lists, together with attendant threats for non-compliance was so widely reported that it would seem to be an endemic practice across the entire tsunami-affected region of Sri Lanka. Despite the criticism that foreign aid agencies did not consult adequately with communities, comments such as “*but the local government is far worse*”, or “*local officials are the ones who mess everything up*” were commonplace.

Lawlessness was particularly noted in connection with the ascendancy of the Karuna Faction or TMVP in the eastern districts over the past two years. As the Government has relied heavily on the support of this former LTTE break-away wing to clear the Tamil Tigers from their positions in the east, respondents noted that it had allowed the Karuna Faction to engage in its own acts of violence, terror, abduction, forced recruitment and extortion with impunity. As one local aid worker commented, “*even the police are scared of them [the Karuna Faction]*”.

Security and Aid Workers: The overlap between the post-tsunami and second conflict periods has had serious implications for the security of humanitarian workers in the field. In August 2006, for the first time in Sri Lanka’s history, aid workers appear to have been specifically targeted and killed. 17 local Tamil field workers from the French aid agency

Action Contre La Faim (ACF) were murdered in the Moslem dominated Mutur area of Trincomalee district during a GoSL ground offensive to recapture recently occupied territory from the LTTE. This act highlighted how the rapid proliferation of humanitarian presence that occurred during the aftermath of the tsunami helped create conditions for the likelihood of negative INGO-military interactions, as the humanitarian operating environment became increasingly volatile and insecure in the north and east. According to human rights observers, such as the Jaffna University Teachers for Human Rights, there is evidence to suggest that the murders were carried out by GoSL military forces, although this is strongly denied and subsequent investigations have yet to concluded.

Between January 2006 and May 2007 some 44 local aid workers have been killed in Sri Lanka according to the statistics compiled by an international NGO's security officer. In his recent visit to the island, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, John Holmes, pointed out that Sri Lanka has gone from being one of the safest to become the second most dangerous country for humanitarian workers. The rapid shift in late 2001 from a war setting to one of relative peace meant that the majority of those INGOs entering Sri Lanka for the first time in January 2005 (or scaling up in-country operations) mostly conceptualized the humanitarian environment as one of post-natural disaster emergency relief and rehabilitation. Scant attention was paid to the underlying pre-existing conflict situation and its likely effect on the modalities of providing tsunami-related assistance. Inadequate contextual analysis may have contributed to a culture of humanitarian operations in which many aid agencies failed to prioritize the need for conflict-sensitive programming, conflict awareness in human resource management and the development of security guidelines.

The experience of post-tsunami assistance in Trincomalee district provides an interesting case study which reveals many of the complexities of providing humanitarian assistance within a context of deteriorating security conditions. Within six months of the tsunami, violence had become a regular occurrence in and around the multi-ethnic city of Trincomalee. Divergent local political interest groups quickly politicized post-tsunami aid along ethnic lines. Both local and international aid agencies were regularly criticized by these groups for failing to equitably distribute aid. Their offices and personnel were, on occasion, physically attacked. Aid workers operating in Tamil-dominated areas, or in areas under the control of the LTTE, were regarded with increasing suspicion by the GoSL military and neighbouring non-Tamil communities as the conflict worsened. The employment of field workers from the local Tamil community deployed in LTTE-held territory but regularly required to cross into Government-controlled areas and frequently billeted in mixed ethnic urban areas, brought attendant security-related implications and dynamics for aid agency staff which was only widely realized in the aftermath of the ACF murders.

Connecting Security: Since the ACF staff killings Sri Lanka's human rights record has increasingly been a source of tension between the

GoSL and the international community. Suggestions that the security forces were responsible for the ACF murders and the subsequent killing of Muslims in Pottuvil as well as the abduction and execution of two Sri Lanka Red Cross volunteers have been vehemently denied by the Government. Reports by international human rights groups point as well to the growing incidence of disappearances and extra-judicial killings that they believe to be largely State-sponsored, through proxies such as the Karuna Faction.

Responses to human rights reports and criticism have followed a predictable pattern of labeling authors and organizations as biased in favor of the LTTE. As the humanitarian community petition the GoSL to be more proactive in properly investigating aid worker killings, controlling the Karuna Faction and doing more to improve the human rights situation, accusations of double standards, hidden agendas and terrorist sympathies abound, further eroding the space and effectiveness of humanitarian work to address the needs of those affected by conflict and disaster.

As donors have become more conscious of working “on” conflict issues by supporting international NGO and local civil society initiatives that have peace building or conflict transformation components, as well as by linking aid with, and advocating for, a resumption of peace talks and an improvement of human rights, humanitarian space has become consequently more politicized and therefore, more dangerous. Although many organizations do aim to maintain traditional humanitarian mandates and avoid the dangers of coherence, they are often unwillingly and sometimes unwittingly sucked in to the political domain.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the four HA2015 focal themes of *universality*, *terrorism*, *coherence* and *security*, are each relevant and inextricably interconnected in Sri Lanka’s humanitarian context. That context, particularly over the past seven years, has been uniquely challenging in that the humanitarian enterprise has had to contend with the roller-coaster ride of a rapidly changing environment that has witnessed the country shifting from war to peace, and back to war again, amidst political turmoil and the widespread coastal destruction and displacement resulting from a major natural disaster. It is clear from this study’s respondents, both those of senior level key informants as well as through the voices of those directly experiencing or observing assistance on the ground, that the roles actually, or perceived to be, played by the humanitarian enterprise are largely influenced by the ways in which the main domestic actors attempt to position themselves in dealing with Sri Lanka’s multiple, yet again interrelated, crises.

International humanitarian involvement is widely welcomed in Sri Lanka provided assistance arrives, as the Good Samaritan, in a spirit

of an unconditional universality that strives to help a country in need. However, in a society already polarized by notions of contested identities — be they spatial, ethnic or political — the humanitarian enterprise is soon sullied by powerful national stakeholders who deploy divergent claims and constructs of international humanitarianism as they compete to advance their own interests and objectives. The politically populist appropriation, manipulation and reinterpretation of humanitarianism are re-occurring tropes that have underlined each area of inquiry in this study and reflect the reality of providing assistance in Sri Lanka.

Three important political constructs of the humanitarian enterprise inform the way in which it is perceived and allowed to operate in Sri Lanka. Firstly, the label of being pro-Tamil through to being pro-LTTE or pro-terrorist, is by far the most frequently levied and emotive accusation. The second most popular perception is that which posits the humanitarian community as representing either culturally, and ideologically incompatible Western values; or as harboring veiled and vested geopolitical, strategic and economic neo-colonial/imperialist interests. The third most significant construct is that of international agencies as Christian missionaries bent on persuading Buddhists to convert.

These interpretations of international humanitarian assistance are frequently deployed through political and media commentary for a multitude of purposes. Firstly the humanitarian community viewed through these lenses provides the State with a convenient scapegoat that enables it to avoid facing up to its own failings of governance. They also serve to undermine the legitimacy of international concerns over issues of peace and human rights. Creating a climate in which such subjects are regarded as unpatriotic, partisan, and aimed at subverting national integrity or eroding national culture and religion, helps ensure that such notions gain limited currency with a local audience.

Privately, local audiences are not, however, entirely accepting of these dominant political and media constructs of humanitarianism. This study has revealed that those with direct experience of assistance were more likely to reject or challenge these interpretations than more distant observers. However, their personal views are seldom publicly articulated, either individually or collectively, due to the perceived disincentives involved in voicing dissent.

Although the humanitarian enterprise is forced to operate within this highly politicized context, its own failings have helped contribute the ease with which local interests have been able to construct an ineffectively contested image of the motives behind international assistance. This study has shown that international humanitarian actors working in Sri Lanka have exacerbated the propensity for their deployment in the role of scapegoat through poor external communications which have been reinforced by perceived inherent ambiguities and contradictions in their positioning on peace, conflict and human rights, insufficient investment

in local consultation, participation and ownership of assistance initiatives and an overcrowding of the humanitarian terrain.

The myriad of humanitarian organizations that proliferated in the wake of both the Ceasefire Agreement and the tsunami has contributed to the congestion and confusion of humanitarian space in Sri Lanka. The high visibility and perceived high living of a plethora of international actors has reinforced negative stereotyping of the humanitarianism as a self-serving Western enterprise. The popular presentation of the speed of post-tsunami reconstruction as unduly protracted has also added to these images.

Respondents frequently commented that the humanitarian actors had failed to adequately articulate their core values and mission in Sri Lanka, either to beneficiaries in the field or to a national audience. This information gap appears to have been appropriated by local political interests who are only too happy to fill in the missing details, albeit reordered to maximize their own objectives. A lack of effective media engagement in the local vernacular a significant factor that limited a wider rural audience from better understanding the humanitarian enterprise. An over-reliance on Colombo-centric, English-dominated and Western-educated interlocutors as the local frames of reference have mitigated against the integration of humanitarianism in popular culture. These failings point to a need within the humanitarian community as a whole for a more effective communications strategy that counteracts their dominant negative image by reaching out to both Sinhala and Tamil speaking audiences outside of the capital.

Communications was also perceived as deficit at project implementation level. Respondents who had received aid spoke of their confusion over the distinctions between different agencies. They also noted with frustration the frequent lack of local community level consultation and involvement in the prioritization, planning and implementation of humanitarian interventions. This has been an oft-repeated concern in successive evaluations of aid over the past ten years and this study once again highlights that it remains an area that needs to be seriously addressed by humanitarian agencies.

The third main communications-related concern connects coherence with security and terrorism. This study has shown that international donor efforts to integrate humanitarian assistance with human rights, peace and security concerns has problematized aid in the Sri Lankan context. Local political readings of this trend view a coherence agenda as an unwelcome interference in domestic security affairs, displaying double standards in dealing with the threat of terrorism, imposing conditionality on relief and development assistance and supporting the cause of Tamil succession. This perception has had grave implications for the security of both local and international humanitarian aid workers. Within a period of just three years Sri Lanka has changed from being one of the safest conflict-affected countries in which aid workers can operate, to one of the most dangerous.

In Sri Lanka's present political context the future for the humanitarian enterprise seems to be bleak. Unless the international donor and humanitarian community can effectively counter the popular dominance of a skewed construct contrived to further the interests of powerful local actors, the value of aid appears destined to become increasingly laden with restrictive assumptions and implications. Rational international voices advocating the rule of law, good governance, a negotiated settlement to the conflict and respect for human rights risk being further marginalized under the labels of a hypocritical foreign meddling, concealing dangerous hidden agendas that would undermine the independence and integrity of the Sri Lankan state. The longer that this view of humanitarianism remains entrenched and unchallenged the more difficult it will be to safely provide effective assistance to those in need.

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