

Rampage Against Tamils Left Scars Lasting Decade

By Feizal Samath

COLOMBO - Ten years after Sinhalese mobs in Colombo rampaged against Tamils and sacked the minority's establishments, Sri Lanka is still suffering the consequences.

These are not just the personal loss and psychological damage felt by people like Nirmalan, who was 18 when he watched a friend be thrown into a bonfire and burned alive.

But the country itself -- once dubbed the most peaceful in the Indian subcontinent -- was torn apart by the pogrom of July 24 to 27, 1983.

A professional class went into exile, a rebellion into high gear and a government's reputation into eclipse. Sri Lanka's rulers were accused not only of standing by until the last day of the carnage but actually setting it off.

The many Sinhalese gangs that worked methodically to kill Tamils apparently thought they were simply teaching a lesson to an ethnic minority whose success they envied.

Government estimates at the time put the death toll at about 500. Billions of rupees' (tens of millions of dollars') worth of Tamil property -- office buildings, factories, shops, homes and

vehicles -- were destroyed.

"Unofficial estimates put the figure at 3,000 Tamils dead," said Neelan Tiruchelvam, a respected Tamil lawyer and human rights activist.

"1983 -- a watershed in Sri Lanka's history -- also spawned the militarisation of Tamil politics. There have been previous large-scale riots against the Tamils but 1983 was the worst," he said.

The massacre sent hundreds of Tamil youths whose relatives were killed in the capital off to join guerrilla groups to seek revenge.

As a result, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) -- the main rebel force, which had been fighting since 1978 for a separate state in the north and east -- grew from a ragtag bunch of ill-trained young men into one of the world's most fearsome guerrilla armies.

More than half a million Tamils went abroad, some seeking political asylum to escape harassment and others going for economic reasons.

Among them were many of Sri Lanka's brightest people -- doctors, lawyers, engineers, accountants, managers.

The events of 1983 also turned the clock back on a rapidly growing island economy that was setting its sights on becoming Asia's newest

financial centre. Tourism fell, foreign investment dried up and foreign donors suspended aid.

Tamils, accounting for about 19 percent of Sri Lanka's population of 17 million, came from South India centuries ago. The majority Sinhalese are believed to be from northern India.

After 1948, the Sinhalese-controlled government of independent Sri Lanka began to prefer the Sinhalese. This led to Tamil demands for equal rights in land distribution, jobs and education. Gradually, political action turned into guerrilla warfare.

The day before the riots started, the government suffered its biggest yet loss of security personnel. On July 23, 1983, Tamil militants ambushed and killed 13 soldiers at Tinneveli on the Jaffna Peninsula. The dead were brought to the capital for a mass funeral on the following night.

Harry Gunatillake, a Sinhalese air force commander turned political analyst, said it was at this point that then president Junius Jayewardene decided to use violence to "teach the Tamils... a lesson." Jayewardene has denied such allegations.

According to political analysts, the elimination of Tamils was begun by gangs covertly working under the direction of Cyril Mathew, boss of the government's powerful trade union. Mathew, now dead, denied complicity but few believed him.

Once started, the attacks ignited a tinderbox. Analysts say working-class Sinhalese in the capital felt frustration over a government ban on public-sector strikes and other suppression. The Tamils provided an outlet for anger against the government as well as for ethnic tension.

Perhaps the most moving word on the massacre came from Prof. Mahinda Paliwardene, a Sinhalese. Writing in a local newspaper soon afterwards, he said "the horrors of July will be an eternal reminder of our failure to listen to the Buddha."

"We failed to protect our citizens when hooligans attacked," he said. "Events have revealed, for all to see, how thin is the veneer of our piousness. Not only the murders, but the sheer nature and extent of our attendant cruelties, permit no "white-washing".

"Instead of trying to project a false image, let us see ourselves in our own true image."
(Reuter)