Violence at the Margins: Street Gangs, Globalized Conflict and Sri Lankan Tamil Battlefields in London, Toronto and Paris

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Abstract:
This article explores the global dimensions of violent conflict and the parallels and links between violence in the Diaspora and the homeland. It does so by discussing Tamil street gangs in London, Toronto and Paris. The Tamil Diaspora played a key role in the war between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which raged between 1983 and 2009. In spite of being a marginal phenomenon in the Tamil Diaspora, Tamil street gangs became part of a wider culture of fear within the Tamil community and possibly reinforced the LTTE's dominance over and fundraising in the Diaspora. Although some of the rivalling gangs have been cast as pro- and anti-LTTE, gang violence cannot be interpreted as a direct continuation of conflict from Sri Lanka but has to be understood in relation to marginalization and identification in the city of residence. In everyday life in the Diaspora, 'the gang' has been a way for some young Tamil men to strive for respect, riches and heroism, employing a mixture of references to gang culture and the LTTE, and building on both ethnic and geographical identifications. The larger Tamil community, on its part, has been eager to dissociate itself from the street gangs as they threaten the image of the Tamils as law-abiding and well-adjusted migrants.

Key words:
Tamil Diaspora, Sri Lanka, street gangs, violence, LTTE

Introduction

Although most violent conflicts today are fought within states, the importance of understanding their many external links has been increasingly recognized. The role of diasporas as both peacemakers and warmongers has received growing attention (Smith and Stares, 2007). In policy circles and public debate, concerns have been raised about armed conflicts 'spilling over' into Western countries that have become the homes of migrants from war-affected areas. At the same time, researchers have turned their attention to the violent street gangs, which thrive in spaces of marginalization and lawlessness in cities around the world, and which are often globally linked (Hagedorn, 2006). Some analysts have painted a picture of the urban street gangs as a new security threat on par with civil wars, arguing that as gangs become increasingly internationalized, politicized and sophisticated, it has become

more and more difficult to differentiate between a juvenile delinquent and a guerrilla fighter, or a street gang leader and a war lord (Sullivan, 2006; Manwaring, 2005). In-depth research into street gangs, however, shows that the likening of street gangs with rebels and terrorists is often misguided (Jütersonke, Muggah and Rodgers, 2009). Nonetheless, it has been noted that similar mechanisms of marginalization that are among the root causes of civil wars are also relevant to the understanding of urban gang violence. In any event, globalized civil wars and urban gang violence both point to the blurred boundaries between what is 'peace' and what is 'war', and between political and criminal violence in the contemporary world.

The war fought between the Sri Lankan government and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) between 1983 and 2009 was one example of a globalized civil war at the margins of international attention. In this war, the Tamil Diaspora played a crucial role. The links between migration and armed conflict in Sri Lanka have been multiple and dialectic: while discrimination and violence against Tamils in Sri Lanka provided strong motivation for migration and opened up opportunities for Tamils to seek asylum in Western countries, the migrants' political involvement and economic support for the LTTE in turn enabled the war to continue for decades. The war ended only after 26 years and an estimated 100,000 deaths after the LTTE was defeated by the Sri Lankan government in 2009. The final year of the war, during which atrocities took on immense proportions – making Sri Lanka the conflict with the largest number of battle-related deaths globally in 2008 (Harbom and Wallensteen, 2009: 579) – also made the Tamil Diaspora visible to the general public in countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, Switzerland, Norway, France and Australia. In these and other countries, thousands of Diaspora Tamils engaged in large-scale rallies, blocked roads, staged hunger strikes and vociferously protested against the Sri Lankan government's violence. While the Tamil Diaspora generally has been considered 'well-adjusted' and 'unproblematic' by its host countries, critics have pointed to their support for and funding of the terrorist-labelled LTTE (Thompson, 2012; Bell, 2007). The LTTE's dominance over the Tamil Diaspora and the lack of freedom of speech within the Diaspora indicated that the Sri Lankan war had extended into Western countries. In addition to this, examples emerged of young Tamils engaging in street gangs known for their brutality (including the use of samurai swords) in places such as Toronto, London, Paris and Oslo, raising questions about whether and how the violent conflicts fought in marginalized urban areas of the West were linked to the war in Sri Lanka.

This article is concerned with the global dimensions of violent conflict and the parallels and links between violence in the Diaspora and the homeland. It discusses identities and formation of Tamil street gangs and, while doing this, explores the intersections between political armed struggle and criminal violence, as well as between the global and the local in contemporary violent conflicts. However, the importance and prevalence of Tamil street gangs should not be overstated – it is in fact a marginal phenomenon in the Tamil Diaspora. Nevertheless, a study of violent street gangs and their relations to homeland conflicts can provide basis for a fruitful

discussion about criminality and political violence, identity politics in the context of globalization, violence at the margins, and links between conflicts in the Diaspora and in the homeland. Although the war in Sri Lanka ended in 2009, the issues of conflict and violence remain relevant for Tamils both in Sri Lanka and in the Diaspora as a sustainable peace, which caters to Tamil grievances, is still to be reached in Sri Lanka.

The article continues from here with some brief ethnographic stories to introduce the issue of parallel war zones in Sri Lanka and the Diaspora. Thereafter, it takes a closer look at the war in Sri Lanka and the ways in which it was also waged in spaces outside the South Asian island. Thereafter, it brings up some lessons learnt from the literature on gang violence and its connection to politics and armed conflicts, before it engages in an explorative discussion of Tamil gangs, with reference to London, Toronto and Paris, the dynamics of the gangs, and the links to politics and the armed struggle in Sri Lanka.[1]

War stories

The Tamil Diaspora is estimated to comprise around one million persons (Orjuela, 2012: 98), and although far from all Diaspora Tamils received a formal status of refugees, they often identify strongly as a 'victim Diaspora' (see Cohen, 2008), driven away from the homeland due to ethnic conflict and violence. In late 2007, when I visited one Diaspora member, a Tamil woman from northern Sri Lanka, she showed me around her house, situated in one of London's many multicultural suburbs. In what she still saw as her home country, thousands of miles away, the government was in the midst of a fierce campaign to retake territory from the LTTE. Little did this woman know when she left Sri Lanka with her children to save them from the horrors of war – the government's air bombings, forced recruitment by the Tamil Tigers, disappearances, poverty and a deprived education system – that she would end up in a different kind of 'war zone'. As she opened one of her wardrobes, I saw that it did not contain clothes. Instead, there was a small shrine, with candles, incense sticks and photos of her teenage son. 'Isn't he handsome?' she asked, and I agreed. He had died a few years earlier, and her life now circled around her grief for him. He was murdered, in what the media reported to be a fight between ultra-violent Tamil gangs from different parts of London.

Having arrived in London shortly after a visit to Sri Lanka, I was struck by the many similarities between the Tamil-inhabited suburbs of London and the Tamil areas of northern and eastern Sri Lanka: the smells from numerous South Asian restaurants, the availability of

[1] The article builds on research on the role of the Diaspora in the armed conflict in Sri Lanka, which apart from the analysis of literature and news articles, also include numerous interviews with and observations of activities of Diaspora Tamils, conducted in Canada, United Kingdom, Sweden, Norway, Switzerland, United States, Malaysia and Sri Lanka, 2003-2010. Funding from the Swedish Research Council is gratefully acknowledged. The article takes as its point of departure the story of one leading member of a Tamil street gang, interviewed in London in 2007. While the empirical material available on Tamil street gangs is not sufficient to draw any firm conclusions, this interview, supplemented with an interview with a police officer and interviews with other members of the Tamil Diaspora, as well as with media reports and secondary literature, nevertheless can be useful to raise relevant questions on the topic of street gangs and the globalized aspects of violent conflicts.

unusual vegetables and Sri Lankan groceries, the many Tamil shops – 116 Tamil-owned businesses only on the High Street of Eastham, a local politician proudly informed me – and the people in the busy streets. This was not all: the fears held by the Tamils, the extortion of money from businesses and threats to those who did not pay, the worries about relatives caught in the war 'back home' and sometimes the sense of being second class citizens in a country where someone else was in power, led my thoughts to life in Sri Lanka's war zone. Over the years I have conducted research in Sri Lanka, many grieving women have shown me photos of their sons – a Tamil mother in an eastern village whose son had joined the Tigers and been killed; poor Sinhalese women whose sons were declared 'missing in action' as they served in the Sri Lankan army; another Tamil mother whose son was killed under unclear circumstances when attempting to flee to Europe through a human smuggling ring.

A few days after my visit to the woman with the wardrobe shrine, I found myself sitting opposite another handsome young Tamil in another London suburb. He is described by the media and authorities as a 'serious criminal' and a leading figure in one of London's most notorious Tamil street gangs. The text, 'Will die never back off' was tattooed onto one of his arms. He was willing to fight – to risk his own life and the life of others – for his friends and, as he said, to be 'number one'. He left his home village in northern Sri Lanka in the early 1990s as an underage refugee on an illegal route to Europe. Had he stayed, it is not unlikely that he would have been fighting on behalf of the Tigers, rather than for his London friends.

The war in Sri Lanka and the Tamil Diaspora

The image of the Liberation Tigers in Sri Lanka as brave fighters who would die rather than back off was particularly clearly communicated through the cyanide capsule each Tiger was supposed to wear around his or her neck, to be able to choose suicide if captured by the enemy. The last months of battle between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE over an ever-shrinking strip of rebel controlled land, illustrated that not only were the Tigers willing to die for their cause – they were also willing to let thousands of Tamil civilians perish with them. As the Sri Lankan government indiscriminately targeted civilians with their air force, the LTTE shot at civilians trying to flee to the government-controlled area (United Nations, 2011). [2]

The violent conflict in Sri Lanka had its origins in what can be labelled an 'ethnic conflict'. A minority ethnic group had a somewhat more privileged position during colonial rule – the Sri Lankan Tamils, making up 12 per cent of the population and inhabiting mainly the north and east of the island. After independence, a democratic system instead allowed the ethnic majority to dominate – the Sinhalese, who were 74 per cent of the population. Post-independence Sri Lanka – initially hailed for being a model third world democracy – developed into a state that can be described as 'ethnicized'. Language reform made Sinhala

[2] Contrary to the LTTE-created myth, not every Tiger did in fact use the cyanide when facing defeat – including the beleaguered leadership in May 2009.

the sole official language in 1956, while changes in the admission to higher education, resettlement of landless Sinhalese farmers in areas inhabited by Tamils, and the granting of a special place to Buddhism (the religion of the Sinhalese), was seen by the minorities as steps towards the 'Sinhalization' of the state. The non-Sinhalese population increasingly felt like second class citizens, and Tamil leaders embarked on a project of politicizing Tamil identity around the idea that the Tamils make up 'a nation' and therefore had the right to self-determination in their parts of the island. The failure to instigate change through the political system and through non-violent protest led to the militarization and radicalization of the Tamil nationalist movement. The LTTE was formed in the 1970s, and grew into a substantial threat to the Sri Lankan state after shocking anti-Tamil violence in 1983 had attracted scores of new recruits – as well as support from India (see Spencer, 1990; Swamy, 2002; Balasingham, 2004; Sahadevan & DeVotta, 2006; Wilson, 2000; Wickramasinghe, 2006).

While the war between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil separatists was, to a large extent, about control over territory – the LTTE between 1990 and 2008 had control over substantial parts of northern and eastern Sri Lanka – it also had battlefronts that were less easily distinguishable. Guerrilla warfare, fighting between government-supported Tamil paramilitaries and the LTTE, the LTTE's terror attacks against civilians as well as the government's fierce measures to prevent them turned large parts of the island into a war zone. Although the conflict cannot be described as one where 'ancient hatreds' characterized the relations between Tamils and Sinhalese, it did bring about a polarisation between the groups. Tamils often had a sense of being discriminated against and targeted by the Sri Lankan government and its forces (and by extension the Sinhalese, whose votes support the war). Large parts of the Sinhalese public were unaware of the plight of the Tamils, lent support to the government's military efforts and suspected Tamils (particularly young men and women from the north and east of the island) of being Tigers and hence potential 'terrorists' (Orjuela, 2008). Undeniably, the reality was more complex than is conveyed by the notion of a government-LTTE and Sinhalese-Tamil conflict. The government side was characterized by the rivalry between two main, Sinhalese-dominated political parties, which took turns to evoke Sinhala nationalism and fears of the Tamil other to gain or stay in power. The Tamil polity was plagued by infighting between different Tamil armed groups and parties, as well as violence against Tamils defined by the LTTE as traitors to the cause. In addition to this, two other ethnic groups, the so-called Indian Tamils, brought to Sri Lanka by the British to work in the tea estates and the Muslims, have suffered the consequences of war without being its main protagonists.

Initially, the resources for the Tamil militant struggle came from India, the superpower of the region, with its large Tamil population and security doctrine that rationalized destabilization of neighbour states which challenged Indian security interests (Gunaratna, 1998: 155). However, after they had turned their weapons against India's peacekeeping forces in the late

1980s, the Tigers had to look for new ways to raise money and procure arms. For this, the Diaspora was crucial.

Due to the lack of consistent statistics and definitions, it is difficult to assess the size of the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora. Estimates range from 450,000 to one million, with the largest populations in India, Canada, Germany, United Kingdom and Australia. It is likely that the Diaspora is at least as big as one fourth of the Tamil population in Sri Lanka (Orjuela, 2012: 95; Sriskandarajah, 2002). The tradition of Tamil migration has long historical roots, but it was only after the anti-Tamil violence and the beginning of the civil war in Sri Lanka in 1983 that large numbers of Tamils migrated (McDowell, 1996; Daniel, 1996). Memories of war-related trauma and marginalization in Sri Lanka, grief, or sometimes guilt, of having had to leave the homeland, and worries about those still left there have characterized the life of many Tamil migrants. Numerous Tamils kept close contacts with their dear ones in the homeland, and their new life abroad was often characterized by a strong identification with and participation in the politics of the nationalist struggle back home. The migrants hence, in many ways, brought the war with them to their new countries (Orjuela, 2012).

The LTTE had opened its first office abroad in London in 1978, and gradually developed a strong international organization, comprising of development organizations, Tamil media (including radio and television), cultural, youth and women's organizations, an efficient fundraising structure as well as arms procurement networks and a shipping fleet (Chalk, 2000; Peiris, 2001). Before Internet and cheap telephone cards, it was hard for Diaspora Tamils to get information about what was going on 'at home' outside of Tiger-run information channels, which nurtured Tamil nationalism and urged Diaspora support for the liberation struggle. Many migrants were indeed strong supporters of the Tigers and felt that contributing money and time was the least they could do from the relative safety of exile. Others found themselves in an environment where the Tigers stood for the all-dominant discourse on how to relate to the homeland. LTTE-linked associations organized social, cultural and sports activities, in addition to providing support to gain housing and employment for the newly arrived. Tamil nationalism and the LTTE became a natural part of everyday life for many in the Diaspora. At the same time, the Diaspora grew increasingly essential for the LTTE.

The LTTE was believed to have generated US$200-300 million per year through licit and illicit businesses and fronts abroad – a substantial portion of its total incomes (see *Jane's Intelligence Review*, 2007). The Tiger networks for fundraising were extraordinarily efficient. Few Diaspora Tamils could escape a knock on their door and a request for contributions to the struggle in the homeland. Many gave willingly, others reluctantly, and some who resisted or openly criticised the LTTE and their methods met with threats. Several cases of violence against LTTE critics have been recorded (see Human Rights Watch, 2006). Apart from direct contributions from Diaspora Tamils, the LTTE generated incomes through the fundraising of LTTE humanitarian organizations, cultural events, the taxing of Tamil businesses and through

their own trade and businesses. Drug trafficking and human smuggling was also believed to be systematically used to generate incomes for the LTTE (Peiris, 2001; Gunaratna, 1998).

The Diaspora also formed an important part of the LTTE's propaganda network, disseminating information and lobbying power holders. The Tamils have, on account of their numbers and geographical concentration, been able to use their votes to gain the support of politicians – including ministers and parliamentarians – in Canada and the United Kingdom. As international legitimacy and support was deemed essential for the Tamil separatist struggle to succeed, the Diaspora and the LTTE's international networks were crucial for the project of framing the Tigers as 'freedom fighters' and countering the campaigns by the Sri Lankan government to define them as 'terrorists'.

The strong support in the Tamil Diaspora for the Tigers, persisting until the final battle in 2009, was facilitated by LTTE's domination over the Diaspora media, the Sri Lankan government's brutality and many human rights abuses against Tamils, the lack of viable alternative Tamil voices both in Sri Lanka and in the Diaspora and – not uncommonly – a sense of alienation in the new home country (Orjuela, 2012).

The dramatic end phase of the war in Sri Lanka further reinforced the Tamil Diaspora identity. The Diaspora responded to the tragedy of mass civilian casualties in northern Sri Lanka with large-scale mobilization. As has rarely been the case throughout Sri Lanka's violent history, the Sri Lankan war was for some time global top news. That the LTTE finally lost the war and the dead body of its leader was displayed by the Sri Lankan forces was met by many in the Diaspora with disbelief and disillusionment. The end of the LTTE in Sri Lanka meant an end to its all-compassing dominance over the Tamil Diaspora. Post-LTTE, Tamil Diaspora politics has been characterized by organizational fragmentation, leadership struggles, resignation and rumours of former LTTE organizers pocketing money raised for the LTTE. However, the support for separatism remains strong among Tamils in the Diaspora, and a so-called Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam has been formed to continue the Tamil nationalist struggle by political means (International Crisis Group, 2010; Vimalarajah and Cheran, 2010). Intensified Sinhalese nationalism and domination in Sri Lanka after the government's victory over the LTTE have made Diaspora Tamils take on the role of voicing Tamil concerns as the Tamils in Sri Lanka largely lack voice and representation. The continued political activism in the Tamil Diaspora has led the Sri Lankan government to define the Diaspora as a major security threat to the country (Rajapaksa, 2012).

War, street gangs and politics in a globalized world

Violent conflicts have grown increasingly difficult to define, categorize and make sense of. The lines between what is 'war' and 'peace', criminal and political violence, 'global' and 'local' in contemporary armed conflicts are blurred. Today's conflicts involve a variety of

different actors, often lack clear declarations of war and clear endings, cannot easily be delimited geographically and involve a mingling of criminality and politics.

First, far from the classical understanding of war as the state's continuation of politics with other means in an international system where states compete for power, today's wars contain a much messier set of actors. The state's monopoly of violence is challenged by an increasing number of non-state actors – rebels, terrorists, guerrilla fighters, warlords, activists and urban youth delinquents. The boundary between who is a military actor and who is a civilian is no longer clear-cut (see Kaldor, 2006).

Second, wars are often not declared, nor are they formally ended, making it difficult to define when and where there is war and when and where there is peace (Ibid; Richards, 2005). Areas where peace is said to prevail may still be plagued by violence, something that is particularly common in places where, after a peace agreement, political violence has been replaced by equally detrimental criminal violence. Examples include Northern Ireland, Sierra Leone, Guatemala and the Balkans (see Ball, 2002).

Third, these ill-defined armed conflicts are not geographically contained. Although the vast majority of armed conflicts in recent decades are intra-state conflicts, they are often internationalized in various ways – through direct or indirect support to the warring parties by other states or armed actors, through their economic dependence on international business or global criminal networks and through the involvement of migrants (Kaldor, 2006; Smith and Stares, 2007). Research on Diaspora involvement in homeland conflicts has emphasized the importance of 'long-distance nationalism', which creates meaning for migrants and motivates them to lend economic or political support for struggles in their former homelands. This can be both a way to use the relative freedom of exile to fight against repression 'at home' (Adamson, 2002), and a process that creates personal and collective meaning. As Benedict Anderson notes: 'The same metropolis which marginalizes and stigmatizes [the migrant] simultaneously enables him to play, in a flash, on the others side of the planet, national hero' (quoted in Adamson, 2002: 165).

Fourth, the line between criminality and political violence is likewise indistinct. On the one hand, the war against terrorism has led to the criminalization of political struggles (Ingram and Dodds, 2009). On the other hand, many actors in armed conflict are driven more by interests related to their own enrichment than by political goals of fighting against injustice (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004). The growing problem of urban criminality and youth gangs in large cities around the world, for example, cannot be understood merely as criminality, but is also linked to identity politics and resistance in a context of marginalization and globalization (Jütersonke, Muggah and Rodgers, 2009).

Violent urban gangs and youth delinquents are in fact increasingly being viewed as a security threat. Some policy analysts describe the organized crime represented by street gangs as 'new urban insurgencies' and a 'silent threat to state sovereignty' (Sullivan, 2006; Manwaring, 2005). Organized crime and street gangs are no longer only a domestic law-enforcement problem. Their global range, size, disruptive ability and political ambitions make them a threat to state and human security on par with civil wars (Hagedorn, 2006).

Criminal street gangs can pose a threat to the state in several ways. As the government fails to control them, they strain government capacity while also challenging the legitimacy of the government and the political system. There are examples of gangs that practically function as alternative governments in areas under their control, and, like in El Salvador and Guatemala, collect taxes from individuals and businesses. Gangs may also challenge the state by dominating the economy, using violence and threats to unfairly compete with normal businesses, and by infiltrating the police and non-governmental organizations (Sullivan, 2006: 494). The discourse on gangs as a security threat includes warnings of gangs developing into full-fledged warring entities. John P. Sullivan describes three generations of gangs, where the first generation is primarily oriented towards power and control in local neighbourhoods. They commit crimes in an ad hoc way and are loosely organized. Second generation gangs are more well organized criminal networks, which to be able to carry out their activities undisturbed, also strive for certain political control. Although most gangs remain in the first or second stage, a small number of gangs in North and South America and South Africa have acquired what Sullivan calls 'third generation characteristics'. They have 'evolved political aims, operate or seek to operate [globally], and employ their sophistication to acquire power, money, and engage in mercenary or political activities' (Sullivan, 2006: 491). As criminal networks with a global reach that control territory and pursue political ends, they have become much like warlords and rebel groups. The prime example of this type of gang is the Mara Salvatrucha, formed in Los Angeles by Central American immigrants, and established in Central America after the deportation from the US of thousands of young criminals (Jütersonke, Muggah and Rodgers, 2009). These gangs have used extremely violent methods as they battle each other and the police for control of neighbourhoods and even whole cities. Some gangs run sophisticated operations for human smuggling, and their members serve as foot soldiers for pre-existing drug-trafficking networks, as well as for international car-theft rings (Arana, 2005).

These, however, are extreme examples. In-depth studies of the gang problem in various parts of the world reveal that gang violence is most often localized, often related to in-fighting between gangs. Besides, even powerful gangs lack both the organization and motivation to pose a threat to states in the way that policy makers concerned with 'urban insurgencies' suggest (Jütersonke, Muggah and Rodgers, 2009; Alexander, 2000; Jensen, 2008). It may be more relevant to analyse the street gang threat sustained by media and policy makers as part of a process of framing young men, often with an immigrant background, and from problem-

ridden suburbs as the dangerous 'other'. In the United Kingdom, the discourse of the dangerous young male has shifted from being used primarily about black men to being used to depict Muslims. Labelling persons and violent acts as related to 'a gang' serves to make invisible the complex social processes behind urban violence by simplistically linking 'the gang' with inexplicable and uncontrolled violence (Alexander, 2000).

Rather than understanding the urban gang through the lens of security threats and unrestrained violence, they must be understood in terms of social exclusion and inequality. Today's global cities, including those in wealthy countries, harbour increasing problems of poverty, marginalization and exclusion. The line between those included in, and those excluded from welfare, employment and participation in society is often drawn along the lines of ethnicity and/or immigration status. Although the prevalence of violent gangs vary between cities, they tend to flourish in areas where resources, support and opportunities are lacking (Jütersonke, Muggah and Rodgers, 2009; RCMP, 2006). The fear – real and perceived – of violence has generated new forms of spatial segregation and social discrimination in cities around the world – there is a growing gap between the 'safe' gated communities and the 'violent' slums (Jütersonke, Muggah and Rodgers, 2009). The insecurity in poor neighbourhoods feeds the logic that says that the gangs have to use violence for their own protection: 'Like gated communities with their private security guards for the wealthy, armed groups or vigilantes […] are filling a vacuum within poor communities, where the state is unable to maintain order' (Hagedorn, 2005: 158).

Often, gang members depict their violence as a struggle against injustice or as measures needed to safeguard their families and neighbourhoods. Jensen and Rogers note that gangs in Nicaragua borrowed ideological motivation from the Sandinista revolution, while South African gangs situated their violence in the larger framework of the anti-apartheid struggle. However, the rhetoric of idealism and care for the neighbourhood was often not matched by the violent reality. The authors conclude that although gangs in Managua and Cape Town could 'plausibly be said to be fighting "against" wider structural circumstances of exclusion and racism', they were 'really not fighting "for" anything but themselves'. The gangs may better be described as forces that 'direct their actions against domination, but without necessarily having well-defined battle lines or standard forms of confrontation' (Jensen and Rogers, 2009: 231).

The concern with gang violence as a threat to security and order has prompted hard measures by states. However, the 'war against gangs' that have been initiated often have not succeeded in decreasing gang violence. On the contrary, the repressive measures have often led to escalated violence and encouraged the gang culture (Jütersonke, Muggah and Rodgers, 2009). A vicious cycle of fear and violence has evolved, where 'the existence of gangs has facilitated – or necessitated, depending on one's point of view – a constant security presence of the state

in townships' (Jensen and Rogers, 2009: 230), and this very security presence has augmented the sense of marginalization and repression that breeds gang activity.

Criminality, Violence and Politics – the Sri Lankan Tamil Case

The line between crime and politics was blurred already from the start of the Tamil nationalist struggle in Sri Lanka. One decisive moment in the history of the conflict was when separatism was outlawed in 1983, and Tamil parliamentarians who had won their seats on a separatist platform walked out of parliament. This closed the door for pursuit of the Tamil cause – already to a large extent framed as a struggle for self-determination – within the political system. The LTTE itself was established by young men from Valvettithurai, a town on Sri Lanka's northern coast, known to be a paradise for smugglers between Sri Lanka and India (Balasingham, 2001; Swamy, 2002). The LTTE leader himself has been described by critics as 'a street thug with a background specializing in extortion and smuggling who developed political ambitions in the early 1970s' (Thompson, 2008). The LTTE was more geared towards action than ideology, and only got a more spelled out nationalist and socialist ideology after a London-based intellectual, Anton Balasingham, was brought into the movement (Balasingham, 2001). However, it did not take long for the Sri Lankan state to redefine the Tamil separatists from merely a law-enforcement problem to an issue of national security. In the early 1980s, it was the army, rather than the police, that was put in charge of combating the still relatively small Tamil insurgency.

Years of full-scale civil war later, the US-led war against terrorism initiated in 2001 allowed the Sri Lankan government to link up with a global anti-terror discourse and frame the LTTE as terrorists. For this purpose, the government had good help from the Tigers themselves, as their use of child soldiers, attacks against civilians and killings of opponents proved them worthy of the epithet in the eyes of the world. The LTTE was proscribed by India in 1991, the US in 1997, Sri Lanka in 1998, UK in 2001 and the European Union and Canada in 2006 (see Nadaraja & Sriskandarajah, 2005). The bans made it illegal to raise funds or engage in propaganda work for the LTTE in most countries with a large Tamil Diaspora. In practice, however, fundraising continued, as LTTE related activities were initially not acted against by law-enforcement authorities. The ban did not discourage many Diaspora Tamils from contributing money, participating in public rallies or functions organised by pro-LTTE groups. For instance, the large commemoration of Heroes held every November continued to draw tens of thousands of Tamils in London. However, the ban did open up spaces for those who did not want to be part of the LTTE-led struggle, as Tamils approached by fundraisers could avoid paying by threatening to call the police. Another consequence of the ban was a sense among politically active Tamils of being under surveillance, having to be careful when formulating their messages so as not to be defined as 'terrorists'. The terrorism discourse contributed to a disciplining of the Diaspora, as it feared accusations of terrorism (Nadarajah, 2009). A wave of arrests of suspected LTTE leaders across Europe further sent the signal that the LTTE activities were not acceptable.

Generally, Tamil migrants had been perceived by their host societies to be well adjusted, hard working and law-abiding. Like Britain's Asian communities, they were, in the words of Clair Alexander, seen to be 'alien and incomprehensible perhaps, but peaceable, law-abiding, successful and […] largely unproblematic' (Alexander, 2000: 5). The early wave of well-educated migrants often reached high positions in society, and second generation Tamils have done well educationally and professionally. With the immigration flows of asylum seekers of lower class and caste and rural background, which began in the 1980s, criminality problems were noted in some instances (McDowell, 1996). While the Tamil populations at large remained law-abiding – at least if you leave aside the funding of the LTTE-led nationalist struggle in Sri Lanka – Tamils earned a reputation for being often involved in credit card fraud. In addition to credit card fraud and insurance fraud, several Tamils have also been caught for drug dealing, and there have been accusations of involvement in human smuggling (Peiris, 2001; Kaila, 1996; Joshi, 2000). While some analysts see this as proof of criminal activities organised by the LTTE, others argue that these individuals have falsely claimed links to the LTTE in order to appear to be committing crimes for a higher purpose.

The demise of the LTTE in Sri Lanka in 2009 has prompted speculation of what has happened to the remnants of the LTTE structures and criminal networks. The prospect of the LTTE morphing into a criminal organization without political goals was brought up by some critics, but no evidence suggests that this has happened. The Sri Lankan Ministry of Defence web site has regularly reported on Tamil Diaspora activities and, in 2012, argued that 'the growth of Tamil militancy, in the form of underworld gangs in Europe with experience in arms procurement, drug and human trafficking, could be said to be only the "tip of the iceberg" of what is to come in the future, the mutating residue of a third world terrorist movement in the first world' (MoD, 2012).

'The Gang'

Let us now return to the tattooed young man I interviewed at a fast food restaurant in the outskirts of London in 2007, as the war was still going on in Sri Lanka. I will call him Prasath. I have no reason to believe that he was particularly representative or unrepresentative of Tamil gang members in general. A local police officer recounts that Prasath's gang was formed by Tamil boys who went stealing in shops on a small scale, and that the level of crime and violence thereafter escalated (interview, 2007). His gang was involved in extortion of Tamil businesses, credit card fraud, violent clashes with rival Tamil gangs and murder. Prasath, however, described the origin of his gang as a response to threats from other gangs:

> Why are we walking around with the boys like a group? We see the black boys, they are walking as a group. We get robbed and beaten up [by them]. I lost my phone, the next day it happened to a friend, [and another friend] lost jewellery. We fight back with them. Before [we got together as a group], the black boys ruled [this area]. As soon as we came [they left]. We started as a gang, we were friends.

He talked more about a group of friends than a gang, which is a label frequently applied in media reports, by the police and the general public. The word 'gang', a critic has noted, is often 'being applied carelessly to any offence being committed that involves either violence or multiple offenders'. Moreover, 'attaching the word gang to reports [has] replaced a need to establish real motives behind […] tragic incidents' (Unnamed, 2007). The varied results from attempts at enumerating gangs and gang members illustrate the difficulty of defining what a gang is. For instance, in the United States, the number of gangs was estimated at 24,000, with a total of 760,000 members in 2004 (RCMP, 2006: iv), while Central America in 2007 could have had anything between 69,000 and 200,000 gang members (Jütersonke, Muggah and Rodgers, 2009: 377). In London, police and media counted up to 257 gangs in 2007 (Unnamed, 2007), while France in 2011 was said to have 480 gangs (Cosgrove, 2011). Malcolm W. Klein's much used definition suggests that a gang is an aggregation of youth, who are perceived as a distinct group by others in their neighbourhood, recognize themselves as a group, and 'have been involved in a sufficient number of delinquent incidents to call forth a consistent negative response from neighbourhood residents, and/or law enforcement agencies' (Klein, 1971: 46). The use of gang names and the history of criminality as well as the high levels of violence, which spurred the London Metropolitan Police to set up a special task force to deal with Tamil gang-related violence, indicate that Prasath's group and several other violent Tamil youth groups could indeed be called 'gangs'. The Tamil gangs in London have, however, not been very well organized. According to police sources, they have a flat hierarchy, and criminal acts are carried out spontaneously rather than in an organized manner. Nevertheless, the level of violence, when displayed, is very high, with samurai swords, axes and daggers as preferred weapons (interview, 2007; Majumdar, 2007).

The Tamil gangs should be understood in the broader context of the growth of a gang culture in London and globally. Although urban gangs existed already during the 19th century (Hagedorn, 2005), the Los Angeles gangs born during the 1980s set a standard for a new type of brutality and gang culture. Tamil gangs appeared in cities like London, Toronto, Montreal and Paris in the 1990s. A large number of refugees and other Tamil migrants had arrived in these cities, and clustered in areas such as Scarborough in Toronto, Wembley, Newham and Tooting in London, and the neighbourhoods around Gare du Nord and La Chapelle in Paris.

In London, Tamil gangs have appeared under names such as Wembley Boys, East Side Boys, Tooting Tamils, Harrow Tamils, Rayners Lane, Snake Gang, Red Line, VVT, Jaffna Boys and Ariyalai. The fact that some of these gangs had taken names of villages or towns in Sri Lanka (Jaffna, Ariyalai and VVT), and that some had members originating from particular geographical areas in Sri Lanka (Harrow Tamils having a background from Vavuniya, for instance), made some observers misguidedly conclude that the violent clashes between the gangs were a continuation of regional conflicts within Sri Lanka (e.g. *Hillingdon Times*, 2004). Increasingly, Tamil gangs have taken on names that refer to their particular area in London. The gang violence has largely related to rivalry between different Tamil gangs. Since

2000, twelve persons have been killed in Tamil gang fighting in London. Due to threats to witnesses, perpetrators have often eluded justice. Extortion and credit card fraud have also been common crimes. In Newham, eastern London, gang members, according to the police, demanded between 10,000 and 15,000 GBP per year from shops and businesses. A police operation in 2007 uncovered that over the previous two years, credit card fraud by Tamil gangs amounted to 70 million GBP (Majumdar, 2007). During my interview, Prasath, in fact gave me a detailed explanation of how to commit credit card fraud (pre-chip and pin technology, though). By 2012, however, the activities of Tamil street gangs had ceased. The reduction of gang activity can be attributed to harder police measures, including arrests and anti-social behaviour orders. In addition to this, young Tamils without permanent residence permit or citizenship refrained from engaging in criminal gang activity because they feared being sent to Sri Lanka, as deportations became common after the war ended.
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The Canadian experience of gangs includes much more sophisticated and large-scale Tamil gangs. In Toronto, during the 1990s, two rival Tamil gangs were considered to be among the most menacing gangs in Canada. VVT and AK Kannan were each estimated to have around 300 members (Thompson, 2012: 40; Bell, 2007; Massignani-Bourgault, 2006), some of whom were new immigrants who had a history with the LTTE or other Tamil rebel groups in Sri Lanka. VVT was named after Valvettithurai, the home town of LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran, and was perceived to have links with the LTTE. AK Kannan, named after the AK-47 assault rifle, was considered an anti-LTTE gang. Both gangs were highly organized, and their members were suspected of involvement in drug trafficking, human smuggling, fraud and counterfeiting, in addition to the ruthless violence displayed in their clashes with each other, which cost the lives of several young Tamils (some of them unrelated to any gangs) during the 1990s. Local Tamil leaders negotiated a truce between the gangs in 1998, but violence soon re-erupted. It was a police crackdown in 2001, when 40 gang leaders were arrested leading to the deportation of a number of them, which put an end to the activities of VVT and AK Kannan. After that, only minor Tamil youth gangs have been active in Canada (Shepherd, 2001, 2006; Thompson, 2012; Bell, 2007).

In Paris, Tamil street gangs appeared in the mid-1990s. The biggest of the gangs, Mukkapola, was believed to have had about 400 members, while gangs named Viluthu, Minnale, Vennila and the Snakes had between 20 and 50 members. The Tamil gangs were said to be involved in racketeering, burglaries, violent assaults and drug trafficking (Pierrat, 2008). Fighting between the gangs led to an upsurge of violence in 2003 and again in 2007, as the pro-LTTE Vennila gang fought gangs that were not with the Tigers (*Asian Tribune*, 2007). In 2011 and 2012, concerns were again raised about extremely violent Tamil gangs operating in Paris, as fighting between rival gangs caused deaths (Cosgrove, 2011; *Tamilexpress* (2012b).

In Oslo in 2007, a brutal confrontation between newly arrived young Tamils from France and Germany and local Tamil youth killed one young Tamil, and led to speculation about the establishment of street gangs among Tamil youth in Norway (*Tamilnet*, 2007).

While the level of organization, criminal behaviour and continuance vary extensively between different Tamil gangs, one thing that they have in common is that the violence has noticeably been confined to the Tamil community. Prasath expressed it like this: 'We're not gonna go to a white man's shop – How am I gonna know [who owns it etc.] [How am I gonna get respect?]. If I go to the [main street in my neighbourhood], I'm gonna speak my language, I know what I'm doing'. There was also a sense that because the threats and violence were only a menace to the Tamil community, law-enforcing authorities had not prioritized taking action against them. Prasath recounted a time when he beat up a man and then returned to the scene of the crime, only to be ignored by the police: 'The police know it was me who did it. They don't bother, because I'm not hurting the white people', he said.

Tamil community leaders and young people with no link to the gangs in Toronto and London talked about the Tamil gangs with worry and resentment. The threat was one of random violence and degeneration of the youth, and contributed to a culture of fear within the Tamil community. What was likewise detrimental was the fact that the gangs posed a threat against the image of Tamil immigrants as law-abiding citizens. The violent gang members made up a stark contrast to the otherwise well-behaved second generation Tamil migrants who did well in their studies, respected their parents and traditions, while successfully adjusting to the country they grew up in. Cooperating with the police has been one way in which Tamil leaders have distanced themselves from the violent gangs. In eastern London, for instance, Tamil community organizations and the Tamil public collaborated with the police to restrain the gangs, by sharing information and signing petitions urging that gang leaders be banned from the borough (interviews, 2007, 2008; Aftenposten, 2007).

Identities, Resistance

While media, the police and the wider society, including the Tamil community, dissociate themselves from and to some extent demonise the gangs, gang members have their own justifications for their criminal involvement. Prasath recounts:

> I did fraud. This country makes you do that. If you are an asylum seeker, you have no work permit. How do you live if you have no work permit? How do you want me to live? You get 30 pounds a week in benefits. I smoke cigarettes. I spend 10 pounds a day on cigarettes. That is 70 pounds a week.
> […]
> The article [in a local newspaper] said that there were four ring leaders [in the gang], and that I'm in the top two. Maybe to them it looks like that. But it is not like that. Me and my friends are like elders. When on the [...] High Street, and the young boys go to a shop, I'm going there to tell them to treat people in a nice way. I have a lot of friends who are younger than me. They say *Anna*, *Anna* [elder brother] to me. I ask: Why do you love me? They say: Because you don't do things bad. I always tell them the right things to do. They always phone me, and come [to see

> me]. […] When I was here [was their age] no one was here to tell me what to do. That is why I ended up so bad.

This quote points to the important role of the gang in providing incomes as well as a social structure and support for young immigrants. It also indicates that the gang culture does not signify a breakdown of norms; rather it applies a different set of norms.

A number of issues are relevant for understanding the logic behind the gangs: the war experience from Sri Lanka, the migration process, marginalization and lack of opportunities and recognition in the new country, and issues of identity, dignity and respect.

While there are many examples of gang leaders and members who are second-generation immigrants, many others have spent the beginning of their life in Sri Lanka, some with direct experience of war related violence, loss and fear. Some have had military training or battle experience from the LTTE or other Tamil groups. Although there is no direct causality between war-induced trauma and violent behaviour after emigration, there are likely to be links. Several of the gang leaders and members like Prasath have migrated as children, without their families. During the war, when young Tamils risked forced recruitment by the LTTE as well as arrest and torture by the Sri Lankan government forces, it was common for an extended family to contribute to the costs of sending one child abroad – often through human smugglers – hoping that the child (most likely a boy) would survive and establish himself in a country with more opportunities. The migration route itself was dangerous and if the child reached his destination, he often lacked the family structure to establish a social context that facilitated access to education and employment. In such situations, gangs may in some ways function as a 'surrogate family' for their members (cf. Arana 2005; Sullivan 2006: 496; Gordon 1998: 169).

The literature on gangs point to the lack of opportunities, particularly for newly arrived immigrants; language skills, immigration status, ethnicity and lack of contacts converge to make it difficult to gain employment and succeed economically (e.g. Gordon, 1998: 182). It may be tempting to choose a criminal life with an overflow of money and fear-based respect, over hard, underpaid jobs or unemployment. Steffen Jensen, based on experience in South Africa, concluded that the gang could be 'a site for heroic identification and order, in opposition to dominant society, while it also promised infinite riches' (Jensen, 1998: 17).

The identity politics of youth gangs entails the polarization between 'self' and 'other' that characterize any conflict, where the 'self' is perceived to need to defend him/herself and his/her community against the dangerous and evil 'other'. Mainstream society makes the gangs the dangerous 'other', or in the words of Claire Alexander, a 'folk-devil' which functions as a focal point for public fears and state interventions (Alexander, 2000). The gangs, on their part, often picture the police and other, rival, street gangs, as their dangerous other. Both Prasath and the police officer in charge of fighting Tamil criminality told me

about an episode when Prasath's gang one night (on the birthday of the gang leader) decided to block off High Street. This street could be seen as symbolic of the claims to power of the gang as well as of the police. Prasath said: 'If the policeman says High Street belongs to him… [he is wrong]. High Street belongs to me. I stay here more than you. You only come when there is a problem. I make the problems'. He continued: 'He [the police officer] stops crime. We are not crime stoppers, we do crime. We know how to break your system'. From the police officer's point of view, this particular incident of the temporary occupation of High Street contributed to his resolve to put a stop to Tamil gang activity in the area (interviews, 2007).

While Prasath's 'Will die never back off' tattoo said something about his uncompromising stance and commitment to his friends, a tattoo on his other arm engraved his identity as a Tamil: 'Tamilan' (Tamil) it says. He said this is his 'number one identity'. However, when asked where he is from, he would usually say Sri Lanka, rather than Tamil Eelam, the Tamil homeland that LTTE struggled to gain independence for – since few people in London would have a clue of where Tamil Eelam is. During the cricket world cup, he supported Sri Lanka, unlike many other Tamils of Sri Lankan origin, who would prefer an Indian victory over Sri Lanka where Tamils had been suppressed for so long. Prasath's identification as a Tamil, however, is mixed with a strong identification with his local area in London.

> Maybe some gangs fight about girls. We don't. […] There were two murders [that we were linked to], a couple of axing [incidents], bodily [harm]. None of these had anything to do with girls. If someone has a problem with my friend, we go. If there is an argument. East London [is our area]. I'm Eastham Tamil. I am Tamil. But Eastham. There are Wembley [Tamils]. There is an East-West [divide]. Who got the power is the issue […] I fight for my friends. I got a problem with anyone who has got a problem with my friends. They are not gonna stand and wait. We're not gonna give up on each other.

Fighting hence erupts between rival gangs due to personal conflicts as well as power struggles based on a localized geographical identity (see also *Tamilexpress*, 2012a). Another conflict dimension, however, not least in relation to the larger gangs in Toronto and Paris, is control over the drug trade and, as we will soon turn to, the pro- and anti-LTTE divide.

Although at one level, gang violence could be interpreted as an avenue of protest against marginalization and lack of power in relation to mainstream society, it takes expression mainly in in-fighting amongst the marginalized. The history of intra-Tamil conflict in Sri Lanka, while not in any substantial way related to Tamil gang violence, makes up a parallel, illustrating how the marginalized minority contribute to their own demise by violence and in-fighting that risks triggering yet more suppression from the state.

Gangs and Tigers

Around his neck, Prasath had a plate with the emblem of the LTTE. He was a bit ambivalent when he talked about the Tigers. He said: 'We are not part of the Tigers. We follow them. We stand for them. We are not gonna let them down. They are doing good for the Tamil people'. Several Tamil community leaders and intellectuals I spoke to in both London and Toronto maintained that that there are no links between the gangs and the Tigers, the main reason being that the LTTE would not want to have anything to do with uncontrollable gangsters who give the Tamil community a bad reputation (interviews, 2007, 2008). Prasath also denied giving any of the profits from the gang's criminal activities to the Tigers, and said that his gang had received a couple of warning from the Tigers, who, he said, 'hate people who are fighting here'. Police sources, however, insisted that the LTTE had used gangs in London to extort money for their armed struggle in Sri Lanka (interview, 2007; Majumdar, 2007).

The more well-organized gangs in Toronto were more explicitly positioned on different sides of the pro-LTTE and anti-LTTE divide that had given rise to such extensive violent struggles in Sri Lanka (see Swamy, 2002). It was suspected that the criminal activities that VVT and its members engaged in were connected with LTTE's fundraising efforts. In addition to this, the gangs are believed to have functioned to spread fear in the Tamil community, which facilitated the extortion of money (Shepherd, 2001; Massignani-Bourgault, 2006). The allegation of a connection between the LTTE and the gangs gained further credibility with the finding that there was an overlap of key persons in the gangs and in the Canadian LTTE as well as an overlap between the techniques used by the Tigers in Sri Lanka and the gangs, for example, relating to the particular blend of explosives used in a car bombing in Toronto (Bell, 2002). Tamil gangs in Toronto have been known to disturb meetings held by organizations critical of the LTTE. In 1994, the Tamil Resource Centre was burnt down by gang members, shortly after a meeting had been held there in commemoration of a Tamil who had been killed by the Tigers (interviews, 2008).

In Paris, the LTTE was reportedly disturbed by the emergence of Tamil street gangs in the mid-1990s, as the gangs challenged the LTTE's control over the Tamil community. However, the LTTE developed a strategy to use the gangs to strengthen their ties to the community. They put two main gangs in charge of carrying out criminal acts, including house break ins which they did not want to be connected with, while they at the same time argued that the community's full backing of the LTTE was necessary to put an end to gang activity (Pierrat, 2008**;** Garaude, 2007). Others have observed that Vennila gang members provided security to functions and activities organized by the LTTE in France, and were also responsible for autocratic adjudication of disputes among Tamil expatriates in Paris (*Asian Tribune*, 2007). The Vennila gang allegedly had been tasked by the LTTE to intimidate critics and to raise funds through force for commissions up to 20 per cent (Jeyaraj, 2011). The LTTE's shifting association with different gangs was also behind some of the fighting between gangs (*Asian Tribune*, 2007). In 2007, the leader of the Vennila group, along with other key gang members and LTTE leaders, were arrested.

From the examples from London, Toronto and Paris, it is clear that the Tamil street gangs during periods of high activity contributed to a sense of fear among the Tamil Diaspora community. Rumours of links between the LTTE and certain gangs may have facilitated, in some way, the LTTE's control and dominance over the Diaspora. This culture of fear has to be understood in relation to the wider context of LTTE dominance both in the Tamil parts of Sri Lanka and in the Diaspora. The LTTE's funding efforts targeted the whole Diaspora population, and few could avoid supporting the LTTE's separatist project. It was an open secret that the LTTE was behind the greater part of Tamil organizations and activities in the Diaspora, while political initiatives taken outside of the control of the LTTE were opposed or silenced. The fact that almost all Tamil businesses in many Tamil areas were closed on the day in November each year when martyrs of the struggle were commemorated – much like they were in Tamil parts of Sri Lanka – illustrates the dominance of the Tiger project over the Diaspora.

The LTTE appeared to have a double policy towards the gangs. The Tigers made use of some gangs to extort money and threaten dissidents, but when Tamil gang violence got out of control – and into mainstream media, giving negative publicity to the Tamil community and attracting attention by the police – the Tigers distanced themselves from them and got involved in attempts to control them. The reining in of Tamil gangs in Toronto in 2001 was facilitated by close collaboration between the police and Tamils closely connected to the LTTE (interview, 2008; Thompson, 2012). There seems to be no direct links between the demise of the LTTE in 2009 and the level of activity of Tamil gangs in Diaspora countries. The demise of the gangs in Toronto came before the end of the war in Sri Lanka, while recent reports from Paris indicate that the Tamil gangs there continue being seen as a menace to society (Cosgrove, 2011; *Tamilexpress*, 2012b). In London, it seems to be the fear of deportation to Sri Lanka after the end of the war, rather than the fact that the LTTE no longer exists, that has been behind the shrinking gang activity.

Prasath's use of the LTTE symbol and his veneration of the Tigers was not necessarily something that was linked to his involvement in a gang. It was part of a larger trend of young Tamil boys glorifying and identifying with the Tigers. The LTTE propaganda that was widely spread in Diaspora media gave a heroic picture of the Tigers that could contribute to providing young Tamils with meaning and identification in an everyday context where being Tamil was often connected to stereotypes of being a nerd. However, strong Diaspora support for the Tigers did not – unlike in other armed conflicts – translate into Diaspora youth leaving for Sri Lanka to join the separatist war. While the Tigers demanded that every family in the areas under their control enlist one son or daughter, Diaspora families were only expected to contribute money. It is unclear what happened to the gang members who were deported to Sri Lanka despite fears of persecution there. Some former AK Kannan members were rumoured to have joined the Sri Lankan Army. Another gang member appeared as the spokesperson at a

ship of Tamil immigrants attempting to reach Australia to seek asylum, raising suspicion of his potential links to human smuggling endeavours (Bell, 2009). Unlike in the case of Central American gangs, the rather limited number of deportation of Tamil gang members is unlikely to 'export' the gang problem to Sri Lanka – a few criminals from the West are not likely to add much to Sri Lanka's already rather nasty criminal underworld.

However, one way in which the Tamil street gangs have fed into the conflict dynamics in Sri Lanka relates to the ways they have been used in the propaganda battles over international legitimacy that have accompanied the battles over territory in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan government has eagerly disseminated any news about crimes committed by Diaspora Tamils amongst international governments, organizations and opinion makers in order to undermine the credibility of the Tamil Diaspora and gain support for its struggle against Tamil separatism.

Conclusions

In spite of being a marginal phenomenon in relation to the broader Tamil Diaspora, Tamil street gangs of London, Toronto and Paris have come to form part of a wider culture of fear within the Tamil community, which has extended across geographical boundaries. A closer look at the case of Tamil street gangs lends little support to the notion that urban street gangs risk morphing into full-fledged terrorist organizations or warlords. A reference to powerful gangs in Central America is not very helpful in understanding Tamil gang violence and Diaspora politics. Such comparisons instead tend to serve the political purpose of augmenting the sense of danger – something that could have served the interests of both main belligerent parties in the conflict in Sri Lanka. On the LTTE side, the culture of fear of which the gang violence became a part, could be used to support the LTTE's dominant position in the Diaspora, and to some extent to support its fundraising efforts. The Sri Lankan government, on the other hand, readily referred to Tamil gang violence when seeking to cultivate a culture of fear where the Tamil Diaspora, the LTTE and Tamil criminals were pictured as a menace to peace in Sri Lanka and beyond.

In everyday life in the Diaspora, 'the gang' has been a way for some young Tamil men to strive for respect, riches and heroism, employing a mixture of references to gang culture and the LTTE, and building on both ethnic and geographical identifications. The larger Tamil community, on its part, has been eager to dissociate itself from the street gangs as they threaten the image of the Tamils as law-abiding and well-adjusted migrants.

The LTTE seemed to have had a consciously ambivalent approach towards the street gangs, seeing them on the one hand as a threat to their dominance over the Tamil Diaspora and to the reputation of the Tamils, and on the other as useful proxies to carry out 'dirty work' and maintain a sense of fear in the community. However, the importance of the gangs for the

LTTE or for life in the Tamil Diaspora should not be over stated, since the Tamil street gangs have been limited in importance, endurance and scope. Some links between the LTTE and gangs have existed, illustrating one way in which an armed conflict becomes globalized and how the boundaries between criminality and politics can be blurred. These links include cases of gang members who have earlier fought with Tamil rebel groups and gangs carrying out extortion and intimidation on behalf of LTTE organisations. More often, however, the links between the LTTE and street gangs have been more symbolic as young people have adapted the Tamil cause and LTTE heroism to create meaning to their acts and identities, or as the marginalized position of Tamil youth in Western megacities has mirrored the marginalized position of Tamils in a Sinhalese dominated state of Sri Lanka.

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