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Distant Warriors, Distant Peace Workers?
Multiple Diaspora Roles in Sri Lanka's Violent Conflict

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Abstract:

This article provides a critical, empirically based analysis of the multiple ways in which diaspora communities involve in transnational politics related to their war-affected former home countries. The case of Sri Lanka – and the Tamil and Sinhalese diasporas in the West – is used to illustrate how contemporary armed conflicts are increasingly waged in an international arena. The article shows that active diaspora groups have enabled an extension of nationalist mobilization, hostilities and polarization across the globe. Diaspora actors involve in propaganda work and fundraising in support of the belligerent parties in Sri Lanka, while the polarization between Sinhalese and Tamils is to a large extent replicated in the diaspora. However, there are also examples of diaspora groups which challenge war and militarism, for instance by calling for non-violent conflict resolution, condemning atrocities by both sides, and engaging in cross-ethnic dialogue. The article also argues that diaspora engagement in reconstruction of war-torn areas can be a double-edged sward, as it can reproduce – or reduce – grievances and inequalities that fuel the conflict. By discussing the many ways in which diasporas engage in homeland politics, the article challenges simplified understandings of diasporas as *either* 'warriors' *or* 'peace workers' in relation to their homeland conflicts.

Key words:

Transnational politics, diasporas, violent conflict, peace activism, Sri Lanka.

Introduction

Thousands of people with placards outside the UN complex in Geneva advocating Tamil rights to self-determination, protestors in down-town Toronto urging the international community to help Sri Lanka fight Tamil terrorism, conference organizers in Oslo and Tokyo, lobbyists in New York and London and enthusiasts in every corner of the world creating yet another web site for the benefit of their distant homeland – today's 'warriors' in the ongoing conflict in Sri Lanka do not all wear military outfits and linger in the jungles of the war-ravaged South Asian island. The war is waged in all parts of the world – just as voices for non-violent conflict resolution are heard from different places on the globe.

1

It has been repeatedly noticed that the dynamics of armed conflicts are played out not only in the war zone, but that various actors play important roles from afar. Recently, scholars and policy makers have directed their attention towards diasporas and their influence on violent conflicts in their former home countries (see Smith and Stares 2007). The involvement of diaspora groups in propaganda work, advocacy and fundraising for armed actors has received much attention, particularly in the context of the global 'war against terrorism' (see Collier and Hoeffler 2001; Shain 2002). However, there have also been attempts at reversing the negative picture of diaspora groups by focusing on their largely untapped potential as peacebuilders, who from a safer distance can reconcile differences, lobby for non-violent conflict resolution and fund the reconstruction of war-torn societies (Lyons 2004; Mohamoud 2005; Zunzer 2004).

This article aims to deepen the discussion on diasporas in conflicts and take it beyond the dichotomising question of *whether* diasporas are 'good' or 'bad'. To do that, it provides a critical, empirically-based analysis of one case – Sri Lanka. In the two decades long civil war in Sri Lanka, a well-organized Tamil diaspora has played an important role, maintaining Tamil nationalism, engaging in political work and funding the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which struggles for Tamil self-determination in the north-east of the island against the Sinhalese-dominated government. While the sizeable Tamil diaspora has largely been created in the wake of violent conflict, there has also been a substantial flow of Sinhalese migrants to Western countries. Although the majority of them have not been displaced by the war, many engage in 'homeland politics', nurturing their dream of an undivided Sri Lanka to which Tamil separatism is seen as a serious threat. A peace process initiated between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE in 2002 opened up for diaspora support to peace efforts and 'post'-war reconstruction. However, the gradual break-down of the peace process has given way to new outbreaks of large-scale violence – and more polarized and war-nurturing diaspora roles.

The article argues that the active involvement of diaspora groups has enabled an extension of nationalist mobilization, hostilities and polarization to an international arena. Diaspora actors involve in propaganda work of high relevance for the international legitimacy and support for the main conflict parties. The polarization between Sinhalese and Tamils is to a large extent replicated in the diaspora. However, there are also examples of diaspora groups which challenge the logic of war, for instance by calling for non-violent conflict resolution, condemning atrocities by all sides, and engaging in cross-ethnic dialogue. Moreover, the article shows how diaspora engagement in reconstruction of war-torn areas is linked to peace and conflict dynamics – it can reproduce grievances and inequalities as well as soothe them. By discussing the multiple ways in which diasporas engage and play a role in homeland politics, the article challenges simplified

understandings of diasporas as *either* 'warriors' *or* 'peace workers' in relation to their homeland conflicts.[1]

War, peace and diasporas

That large numbers of people live outside of what they see as their 'homeland' is nothing new, nor is it a novelty that many continue their engagement in homeland politics. However, the advances in transportation and communication technology over the recent decades have enabled much closer interaction between migrants in different parts of the world and the homeland. The burgeoning interest among researchers and policy makers in the role of diasporas[2] is also relatively new, and is only beginning to generate a systematized understanding of diaspora roles in armed conflicts. Although the links between migration and war are too complex to allow for meaningful generalizations about causality, the different ways in which diasporas influence homeland conflicts can be summarized:

Directly supporting the warring parties Diaspora groups provide economic support to opposition parties, rebel groups and other political actors. This can be through direct contribution of funds, or through participation in global business and/or criminal networks that fund armed struggles. Individuals in the diaspora can also be crucial for rebel groups' ability to procure and smuggle weapons (see Byman et al 2001). The Northern Irish case illustrates the importance of diaspora politics. The large Irish diaspora in the USA fuelled the conflict by funding the IRA, but later shifted its engagement to instead support the peace process (Cochrane 2007). There are also many examples of the diaspora providing leadership to political struggles back home, for instance when key actors in rebel or protest movements function from abroad (as was the case with Palestine and South Africa).

Canvassing international support Diaspora networks involve in advocacy, propaganda and political protests to gain legitimacy for political struggles and mobilize support from the international community. International support is crucial both for the military strength of belligerent actors (access to weapons, military training, intelligence, international aid) and for influencing the parameters for potential peace settlements (e.g. international support for secession or political reform). Diaspora groups may also lobby for international interventions in the conflict or for sanctions. The Jewish, Irish, Armenian and Cuban diasporas are examples of groups that have successfully influenced US policies affecting their homeland conflicts (see Smith and Stares 2007).

Influencing ideas in the homeland Diaspora-produced media, film, music and other cultural expressions can play an important role in influencing the discourses and ideas about the conflict and conflict resolution held by key actor and ordinary people 'back home'. Diaspora groups can also use the relative safety of their new countries to engage in discussions about creative conflict resolution and enter into dialogue with representatives from the 'enemy' side. It has also been suggested that diaspora experiences of democratic structures and culture can

be a springboard to push for democratization 'back home' (Mohamoud 2005; Zunzer 2004; Lyons 2004).

Supporting development and reconstruction Diaspora communities play an important economic role for their homeland through the remittances they send to relatives, but also as consumers of homeland products, as investors in businesses in the homeland and as contributors to a variety of charity organizations. To conclude that diaspora economic contributions always are conducive to the peaceful ending of wars and prevention of new conflicts is however premature. Development is a double-edged sword, which can support peaceful relations, but which can just as well exacerbate conflicts and create new disagreements (see Anderson 1999). Development initiatives can be co-opted by belligerent parties, exacerbate inequalities, frustrations and distrust, discourage cooperation and confirm enemy images. Diaspora assistance to development and reconstruction however has the potential to contribute to peace if it provides alternatives to the dependency on a war economy, address grievances that are at the roots of the armed conflict or provide incentives for cooperation across enemy lines.

When analysing the potential for diasporas to contribute to peace, both key words – 'peace' and 'diaspora' – need to be problematized. What peace is and how it should best be achieved is highly contested in all conflict contexts, and which diaspora activities contribute to and which obstruct peace may be differently interpreted depending on the timing of the analysis and the political viewpoint taken. Looking at how 'a diaspora' contributes to war or peace is similarly problematic. The immense diversity within 'a diaspora' must be carefully noted. A large number of persons who fall under a broad diaspora label do not actively engage in homeland politics, and other identities such as class, gender, age, generation, education etc. are central to shaping the diverse manners in which people relate to and engage with their former homeland (or not) (see Al-Ali 2007).

War in Sri Lanka

The roots of violent conflict in Sri Lanka can be traced to the failure of the centralized, Sinhalese-dominated state to respond effectively to the aspirations of marginalized groups. Uneven development and the lack of access to power triggered not only the Tamil nationalist struggle for self-determination in the north-east, but also gave rise to the very violent socialist insurrections by youth in the marginal areas of the south in the early 1970s and late 1980s. Grievances have hence been politicized along ethno-nationalist lines, as well as along class lines.

Ethnic identity was politicized already during British colonial rule, when the Tamil minority was disproportionately represented in higher education and the administration.[3] Following independence in 1948, the Sri Lankan state went through a process of 'Sinhalezation'. Language policies, university admission reform, unfair access to public service employment,

state-run settler programmes for Sinhalese farmers in Tamil areas and clientelism contributed to a sense among the minorities of being second-class citizens. This laid the ground for the Tamil nationalist struggle. Indian support to Tamil militant groups was crucial for their growth during the 1980s.

The dichotomized understanding of the conflict in Sri Lanka as a government-LTTE or Sinhala- Tamil conflict risks hiding the contradictory interests within the two communities. Protracted rivalries between the two main political parties, and the socialist youth insurrections in the south of the country are examples of grave intra-Sinhalese conflicts. The Tamil liberation struggle has also entailed violence between various Tamil militant groups. The claim of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to be 'the sole representative of the Tamil people' has been challenged by opposing Tamil groups including, since 2004, a break-away LTTE faction in eastern Sri Lanka. Furthermore, a dichotomized understanding of the conflict ignores the politically and economically significant Muslim minority, as well as the marginalized so-called Indian Tamils.

Attempts to solve the conflict have been made with involvement from India in the 1980s, and most recently with Norwegian facilitation. The most noteworthy achievement of the Norwegian peace process was the signing of a ceasefire agreement in February 2002. Six rounds of negotiations were held between the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE, until the LTTE withdrew in 2003. The violence escalated gradually and the ceasefire agreement was officially abrogated in 2008.

Migration and life in the diaspora

The last comprehensive census in Sri Lanka (from 1981) appreciated the Sri Lankan Tamil population to 1.9 million. Estimations of the size of the Tamil diaspora (severely obstructed by the lack of consistent statistics and definitions) range from 450,000 to one million. It is thus likely that the size of the diaspora is at least as large as one forth of the Sri Lankan Tamil population. The highest numbers of Tamils are found in India, Canada, Germany, United Kingdom and Australia. The Tamil diaspora is largely pictured as a 'victim diaspora' (cf. Cohen 1997), driven away from Sri Lanka by the violent conflict. Large-scale anti-Tamil violence in 1983, Indian's intervention and subsequent war with the LTTE in the late 1980s and the exodus from the northern peninsula of Jaffna after government take-over in 1995 are collective traumas around which Tamil identity is structured. However, Tamil migration is not solely a direct reaction to violence, but also mirrors ambitions at up-ward mobility, family reunification and marriage alliances and a tradition of mobility founded during colonial time (McDowell 1996). Different waves of migration can be distinguished. To the United Kingdom, for instance, a first wave of Sri Lankans (both Tamils and Sinhalese), mainly English-speaking professionals, came after independence. In the 1970s, a second wave brought Tamils of a slightly lower class and educational level in search for education and employment opportunities. From the 1980s more Tamils, increasingly with rural, lower-class

backgrounds, came as asylum seekers (see Valentine 1996). There is also a trend of secondary migration from non-English speaking countries in Europe to the UK and Canada (see Lindley & van Hear 2007).

There is a concentration of Tamil settlements to certain countries, cities and neighbourhoods. The abundance of Tamil shops, restaurants and other service providers (listed in thick business directories) in for instance Scarborough in Toronto and Eastham in London gives a sense of a 'Tamil majority area'. TV and radio stations, newspapers and a myriad of internet sites keep Tamils around the world informed about the developments in the homeland, while numerous language and dance schools contribute to preserving the Tamil culture across generations. Temples and churches, religious festivals and a large number of organizations (e.g. women's groups, sports groups etc.) play an important role as a meaningful social environment for Tamils, providing practical information and fostering a sense of community (see Bivand Erdal 2006). There are also a large number of Tamil organizations which engage in development and humanitarian activities in Sri Lanka. They include everything from the wide-ranging Tamils Rehabilitation Organization (which was recently banned in a number of countries on account of its links with the LTTE) to home village associations and alumni organizations, which fund development projects in their villages and schools (see Cheran 2003).

The LTTE has a strong presence in the diaspora, through its own networks, front organizations and sympathetic organizations and individuals. LTTE raises funds efficiently, and most Tamils get a knock on their doors (however far away they live) and a request for contributions to the liberation struggle. Many give willingly, others reluctantly, and some who resist or have openly criticized the LTTE have met with threats and in some cases violence (see Human Rights Watch 2006). In many places, the LTTE has significant influence over temples, schools and sports events, which are used to canvass support for the struggle and to collect funds. There has thus been a politicization of Tamil life in the diaspora. The dynamics between the leadership in Sri Lanka and the diaspora is most often described as one where the LTTE (and its leadership in northern Sri Lanka) is controlling the diaspora, rather than the other way around. Notwithstanding the LTTE's all-dominant position, long-distance Tamil nationalism contains a tension between the LTTE's claim to be 'the sole representative of the Tamil people' and the diversity and conflicting interests and loyalties of the Tamils. While large numbers of Tamils display their unity and support for the Tamil struggle by participating in events, such as the yearly Heroes Day commemoration of martyrs, under the surface 'the Tamil people' have fundamentally different backgrounds and views. Some are openly or quietly critical of the LTTE, while others explicitly support them, and people adopt a range of different identity positions related to class, caste, generation, time in the new country and political sympathies.

The largest group of Sinhalese who have migrated from Sri Lanka are guest workers in the Middle East (approximately 700,000). However, over hundred thousand Sinhalese live in the West, with the highest concentration in Australia, Italy and the United Kingdom (see Zunzer 2004:15; Henayaka-Lochbihler & Lambusta 2004). Although some politically motivated migration of Sinhalese has taken place (for instance in the wake of the violent socialist rebellion in the late 1980s), Sinhalese migration has rarely been directly related to the war in Sri Lanka. Instead, Sinhalese have mainly migrated to Europe, North America and Australia to work or study. Early migration of Sinhalese followed a similar pattern to that of the Tamils (predominantly English-speaking professionals moving to Western countries), while during recent decades labour migration has increased and allowed large numbers of the low-skilled, predominantly female, rural population to temporarily seek employment in the Middle East.

Like the early Tamil migrants, Sinhalese migrants to Western countries have been largely perceived by their host societies as 'unproblematic' due to their middle-class, educated background and willingness to adjust (Gamage 1998). The Sinhalese in the diaspora are fewer, less concentrated to certain areas and less well-organized than the diaspora Tamils, something which makes some feel that they are 'a minority' in their new countries in relation to the Tamils. Nevertheless, many Sinhalese outside of Sri Lanka keep strong relations with their home country, engage in homeland politics and form Sri Lankan/Sinhalese cultural, social and political organizations. Many 'Sri Lankan associations' in the diaspora consist predominantly – sometimes solely – of Sinhalese, and just as in Sri Lanka, 'Sri Lankan' identity is often the same as 'Sinhalese' identity in the eyes of minority groups. Sri Lanka's diplomatic missions play an active role organising Sri Lankans (often predominantly Sinhalese) for celebrations in connection with for instance Independence Day and the Sinhala Tamil New Year.

Sinhalese in the diaspora uphold a long-distance nationalism formed around the idea of a threatened homeland, an ancient culture that needs to be preserved, and the endangered unity of the sacred (Buddhist) island of Sri Lanka. A number of Sinhala diaspora organizations engage in the struggle to 'safeguard the motherland against terrorism'. Political parties, including those pursuing extreme Sinhala nationalist politics like the socialist Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) and the Buddhist Jathika Hela Urumaya, have branches in Western countries. Their leading figures from Sri Lanka regularly attend diaspora meetings and the diaspora contributes funds to the parties. Numerous internet sites convey news and historical backgrounds from a Sinhala nationalist perspective to the diaspora, as do radio stations.

It should be noted that women are considerably less visible in diaspora politics than men (just as in politics in Sri Lanka, where women hold only around five per cent of the seats

in parliament). It is not uncommon that men gather to discuss the latest developments in the homeland, while women do the cooking and serving. However, these gender divisions are broken up by the second generation, as young educated women increasingly engage in the development and politics of the 'homeland'.

Waging war – or peace? – in the international arena

When Sri Lanka's President visited London in June 2008 he was met by two rival diaspora demonstrations. Over thousand Tamils had gathered to protest against the government's human rights violations and express their support for the Tamil struggle for self-determination. 'European Governments Stop Funding Sri Lankan Government's Violation of Human Rights' said one of the banners. On the other side of a barrier put up by the police, a smaller group of Sri Lankan expatriates held Sri Lankan flags and banners in support of Sri Lanka's war against LTTE terrorism. Demonstrations like these, as well as a large number of rallies, public meetings and conferences about the human rights violation committed by the enemy illustrate well that the war in Sri Lanka is also fought in an international arena. Here, it is not physical territory the belligerents are after, but legitimacy and international backing.

The legitimacy at stake in the diaspora-supported 'war' in the international arena has very real implications for the strength of the parties: the access to arms and military support for the government of Sri Lanka and the possibility to raise diaspora funds and operate international networks for trade and smuggling of weapons in the case of the LTTE. It is also the international community which will ultimately set the limits as to what political arrangement can be accepted as a solution to the conflict in Sri Lanka (Tamil independence or a unitary centralized state, or something in-between).

At the heart of the struggle in the international arena is the labelling of the LTTE as 'freedom fighters' or 'terrorists' (see Nadarajah & Sriskandarajah 2005). The terrorist label has been used by the government, media and LTTE-critical groups in Sri Lanka to justify a military strategy (including violence against civilians). Internationally, the Sri Lankan government in the mid-1990s intensified its campaign to get the LTTE banned. That the LTTE is now listed among terrorist organizations by India, Australia, USA, the UK, and since 2006 also Canada and the European Union, has been a major victory for the government and Sinhala nationalist groups. Sri Lanka's foreign service and political leaders have played a central role in the advocacy work, while Sinhala nationalist and Tamil anti-LTTE diaspora organizations have contributed to spreading information, organising meetings and lobbying politicians.

Although the Sri Lankan government and sympathetic diaspora groups have increased their activity internationally, the LTTE and the Tamil nationalists have traditionally been much more successful in mobilising the diaspora and operating international networks.

The LTTE is believed to generate USD 200-300 million per year through licit and illicit businesses and fronts abroad – a substantial portion of its total income (see *Jane's Intelligence Review* 2007). Organizations and networks related to or supportive of the LTTE have frequently organized large-scale public demonstrations against the Sri Lankan government, and in support of the Tamil struggle and the LTTE leadership (large pictures of the LTTE leader often feature prominently on such occasions). In the USA, Tamil groups have supported the election campaigns of certain politicians as a means to 'buy their ear' (interview, Colombo 2006). In Canada and the UK, the concentration of large numbers of Tamils in certain areas provide incentives for politicians to engage for the Tamil (LTTE-defined) cause to win important block votes. Tamil diaspora-based news and information is, at least partly, directed to an international audience. As argued by Withaker, the internet has 'allowed Sri Lankan Tamil nationalists to speak effectively and subversively to the globalizing world' (Withaker 2005: 469). The Sinhalese and the Sri Lankan government abroad primarily react against and struggle to counteract the pro-LTTE propaganda.

It is clear that individuals and organizations from the Sri Lankan diasporas involve more often as 'distant warriors' than as peace promoters (cf. Wickremesekera 2005). There are, however, examples of diaspora support to less one-sided and polarized peace efforts, for instance groups which issue press releases and statements and organize public meetings in support of non-violent conflict resolution and power sharing in Sri Lanka. Such messages and initiatives – although small in comparison – challenge the polarized views of the two sides and the discourses saying that war is the only solution.

While other scholars have argued that the Tamil diaspora pushed the LTTE to go for peace negotiations in 2002 (see Fair 2007), there is little, if any, evidence which convincingly supports this claim. However, it is true that the LTTE's London-based ideologist has been a moderating force with direct access to the LTTE leader, and most likely played a key role in the LTTE's decision to join the peace process. Other prominent diaspora Tamils have provided important competence in the peace process. The 2003 proposal for an interim governance structure for the north-east – the most concrete proposal formulated by the LTTE ever – was worked out with strong involvement from the diaspora. The Sri Lankan government has similarly lent expertise from the diaspora, for instance when appointing a former Australian resident to head its Peace Secretariat. The fact that Sri Lanka's current hawkish Secretary of Defence is a US citizen have prompted attempts by Tamil groups to get him prosecuted in the US for war crimes.

Long-distance reconciliation? Polarization and dialogue in the diaspora

'There is an invisible fence between Sinhalese and Tamils', one Tamil man said when describing the Tamil-Sinhalese relations in London as more segregated than those in Sri

Lanka (field notes, UK 2006). The ethnic polarization in Sri Lanka is replicated, and sometimes even strengthened, in the diaspora. Just as in Sri Lanka, Sinhalese and Tamils in the diaspora often have incompatible views of what the conflict is about and how it should be resolved. These views are reinforced by the different perspectives conveyed by Sinhala and Tamil media respectively. The increased access to different media sources since the introduction of the internet does not seem to have generated more nuanced understandings of the conflict. Tamils and Sinhalese do however interact, and many would disagree that there is an 'invisible fence' between them. However, when Tamils and Sinhalese meet in schools, workplaces or shops carrying Sri Lankan groceries, most would avoid discussing politics. The polarization in the diaspora gradually developed along with the intensity of the conflict in Sri Lanka. While the first diaspora generation had many cross-ethnic friends and interactions, later generations have intermingled less. Before the war, Sri Lankan student unions in the UK consisted of both Tamils and Sinhalese (with a majority of Tamils), but as the conflict started in Sri Lanka, Tamils begun to use the unions to mobilize support for their nationalist struggle. 'We had to prioritize, and it was no longer possible to be together with the Sinhalese', one former union member explained. The LTTE has discouraged Tamils in the diaspora from having meetings and celebrations together with Sinhalese (field notes, UK and Canada 2006 and 2008). Sinhalese-Tamil cooperation and friendships have been seen by those strongly engaged in the Tamil struggle as a threat to Tamil identity and unity.

Sri Lankan associations, and cultural celebrations and events organized by the Sri Lankan diplomatic missions are typically perceived as 'Sinhalese' and not attended by Tamils. The fact that the embassies have been used by the Sri Lankan state in its campaigns against the LTTE alienate most Tamils. At a party organized by one Sri Lankan High Commission in honour of the Sri Lankan cricket team (which is usually pointed to as multi-ethnic) a two minutes silence was held to commemorate Sinhalese civilians killed by a (suspected) LTTE bomb, while the Tamils killed by government bombs received no attention (field notes, UK 2006). In Germany, Tamils have faced difficulties when contacting the embassy about renewal of passports and birth certificates, as the embassy languages are Sinhala or English, which most Tamils in Germany do not speak (interview, Colombo 2006). The feeling among Tamils that the Sri Lankan state is mainly catering to Sinhala interests is thus extended to the rest of the world through negative Tamil experiences of the embassies. Tamil boycotts of events in which Sri Lankan government representatives make an effort to include them further reinforce the division.

In spite of this, there are however initiatives that challenge the polarization between Tamils and Sinhalese in the diaspora. Organisations like Australian Friends for Peace in Sri Lanka and the International Network of Sri Lankan Diaspora, Canadians for Peace and Sri Lanka Democracy Forum have engaged both Tamils and Sinhalese, albeit in a small scale, around a common agenda critical of the war efforts and supportive of peace

negotiations and power sharing in Sri Lanka. Many persons maintain friendships across ethnic divides and share a feeling of commonality with fellow Sri Lankans regardless of ethnic identity. This seems to particularly be the case among the generation who left the country before the war started, or their children, as well as in a middle- and upper-class environment, or among leftist groups. One interviewee described a difference of attitude between the lower classes, who are often the real victims of war and engage strongly in the Tamil nationalist cause ('do the foot work'), and the higher classes and intellectuals, who can be more open to cosmopolitan identities but might not have first hand experiences of the horrors of war (interview, Sri Lanka 2006).

A number of attempts have been made by international NGOs to bring together persons from the Sinhalese and Tamil diasporas to interact, spell out conflict positions and generate creative ideas for conflict resolution. The Berghof Foundation organized a study tour to Sri Lanka in 2003 for diaspora members to learn about the situation in all parts of the country, while interacting as a group, and to build links with groups in Sri Lanka (Zunzer 2005). Just as with cross-ethnic dialogue projects within Sri Lanka, it is utterly difficult to know the effects of such initiatives. Most diaspora dialogue seminars are one-off events, which lack follow-up. Although often judged by participants as useful when providing space to discuss and socialize, they are not likely to initiate major attitudinal or behaviour changes or generate other peace initiatives (cf. Orjuela 2008a). The space and enthusiasm for peace work in the diaspora varies with the situation in Sri Lanka. The commencement of a peace process gives hope that facilitates the mobilization for peace rallies and meetings. Escalated violence, on the other hand, shrinks the space for criticism of militarism and puts the peace activists at risk of being pointed out as 'unpatriotic' and 'traitors'.

The tensions within the respective communities are also played out and negotiated in the diaspora. Voices that challenge the LTTE's claim to be the sole representative of the Tamils find expression in and through the diaspora. However, just like in Sri Lanka, the war-time logic that Tamil only have a choice of either being with or against the LTTE prevail also in the diaspora, and individuals and groups critical of the LTTE are frequently silenced or accused of taking the government's side (see Nallainathan 2007).

A central question is of course how polarization and dialogue in the diaspora influence actors and events in Sri Lanka. It has been suggested that Tamils in the diaspora, with their experiences of Western democracy and human rights, can convey their ideas to the LTTE and thereby contribute to its democratization and use of non-violent methods (Zunzer 2004). During the ceasefire, persons from the diaspora gained increased access to and were listened to by the LTTE. As the war restarted, however, the space to influence the LTTE diminished, as the importance of its political wing shrunk and military interests gained prominence (interviews, Sri Lanka 2006). The opinion that democratization and

human rights may have to be compromised as long as the struggle is going on dominates among Tamils in the diaspora.

Diaspora-run media is widely read and listened to in Sri Lanka, and thus contributes to forming opinions and framing the understanding of conflict and peace issues. However, as already discussed, media is usually strongly polarized. Nevertheless, diaspora peace initiatives, if reported, can be symbolically important as they show that dialogue and alternative views are possible. In contrast to the LTTE and Sinhalese nationalist organizations, Sri Lankan peace organizations lack strong links with the diaspora. Instead, peace NGOs are heavily dependent on funding from foreign donor agencies and are regularly accused by Sinhala nationalists for being co-opted by foreign interests (Orjuela 2008a). Although civil society leaders in Sri Lanka maintain links with persons from the diaspora, there are no conscious attempts to raise funds in the diaspora, and only a few examples of concrete collaboration.

Development and reconstruction: Tools for peace or a continuation of conflict?

The contributions diasporas make to development and reconstruction of their war-torn homelands are often referred to as 'peacebuilding'. However, the case of Sri Lanka clearly shows that development is highly political and that it cannot be assumed that remittances and diaspora development projects contribute to preventing or solving conflicts.

Remittances to Sri Lanka were in 2004 estimated to US$ 1.3 billion. This was more than double the foreign direct investment flows, and in terms of export earnings second only to the garment industry (Lasagabaster, Maimbo, & Hulugalle 2005). Much of the remittances come from Sri Lankan guest workers in the Middle East, and are thus incomes for relatively poor rural families (see Van Hear 2002). Tamil remittance flows to the north-east have funded relief for those caught up in the war, but also made possible international migration. During the ceasefire, Tamil remittances enabled increased consumption, savings and reconstruction efforts. Two thirds of the estimated US$ 14 million turnover of the Tamils Rehabilitation Organization for 2004 was provided by diaspora Tamils through a network of TRO organizations across the world (interview with TRO representative, Sri Lanka 2005). Tamil fundraising for relief and development has however been complicated by the suspicions directed towards diaspora organizations for being LTTE fronts. The influx of funds for reconstruction from international agencies in the wake of the ceasefire agreement is believed to have slowed down the fundraising efforts in the Tamil diaspora (interview, Sri Lanka 2006).

While there are many examples of Sinhalese diaspora organizations supporting development projects and charities in Sri Lanka, Sinhalese groups have been fewer and

often less well-organized than the Tamil ones. The tsunami disaster of December 2004, however, intensified both Sinhalese and Tamil diaspora support for reconstruction, while also granting it some attention from the wider population in Western countries. Although tsunami reconstruction and other development concerns could potentially be a shared interest that could encourage cooperation between Tamils and Sinhalese in the diaspora and in Sri Lanka, most diaspora initiatives have been mono-ethnic.

Remittances and development projects initiated from the diaspora to some extent compensate for the unbalanced development patterns in Sri Lanka by providing marginalized groups in poor areas (both Tamils and Sinhalese) with resources and opportunities. This may to some extent alleviate frustrations that can otherwise be politicized and used to mobilize support for war efforts. However, the potential for diaspora money to provide alternatives to war-related employment and the population's dependency on the warring parties seems to be realized only to a very limited extent. For poor Sinhalese, labour migration does provide an alternative to employment in the Armed Forces, but may be out of reach for many since it requires an initial payment to the employment agency. In the north-east, although diaspora development organizations may have produced some employment opportunities, the bulk of the diaspora money is, given the insecure situation, used for private consumption and relief activities rather than to generate long-term development and employment. The risk that diaspora remittances and development money fall in the hands of armed groups also needs to be taken into consideration and further investigated.

The examples of how development efforts can feed into and exacerbate existing conflicts are numerous in Sri Lanka. While many conventional donors and NGOs have – at least on paper – acquired an awareness of conflict risks in their work, these discussions seem to have gained less ground in diaspora circles. One concern is that the uneven distribution of remittances between households in the north-east risks creating a new dividing line between 'haves' and 'have-nots'. It is no longer mainly caste which determines who is poor or better-off in a village. Access to remittances will decide who can survive reasonably well and who remain trapped in acute poverty. In addition to this, migration flows have created a new division between the diaspora and those who remain in Sri Lanka. As expressed by one interviewee: 'now there are only two castes: the diaspora Tamils and the local Tamils' (interview, Sri Lanka 2006). Another example of diaspora-influenced uneven development is between the north and the east. Since there are more persons from the north (particularly Jaffna), in the diaspora, there is also a significantly larger inflow of foreign resources to those areas, whereas the already neglected east fall further behind (see Balakrishnan 2004: 222). The LTTE leadership's inattention to the east was one motive behind the break-away of the LTTE's eastern commander Karuna in 2004, which severely weakened the LTTE, increased the levels of violence and further contributed to the collapse of the peace process.

The reconstruction after the tsunami provides other examples of how the handling of development assistance can exacerbate conflicts. The cross-ethnic solidarity and cooperation at the local level immediately after the catastrophe were not followed by cordial relations and cooperation at the macro-level. On the contrary, the politics of reconstruction strengthened the nationalist discourses on both sides and increased mistrust and a sense of ethnic discrimination at the grassroots level (see Sirisena 2005). The LTTE accused the government for neglecting the Tamil tsunami-affected areas and drummed up diaspora support on the basis that the LTTE and the Tamil diaspora were the sole redeemers of the affected Tamils. The failure to implement a joint LTTE-government structure to channel donor funds to the north-east provided justification for the LTTE's accusation. The LTTE, in turn, was accused of trying to monopolize tsunami fundraising in the diaspora by discrediting or blocking help which did not go through LTTE-sanctioned channels (see UTHR-J 2005). Both parties most likely made use of the massive inflow of resources to rebuild military strength.

Serious attempts were made to use development initiatives to build popular trust in the peace process initiated in 2002. Large investments were to regain economic growth and rebuild the war-torn areas. However, the lack of political structures to channel funds to the north-east delayed these investments. There was widespread disappointment that the Sri Lankan government and international donors had not delivered the promised 'peace dividend'. Many people returning to the north from displacement in other parts of Sri Lanka received no support. What enabled them to reconstruct houses, restart businesses and buy consumption goods – and thus to some extent enjoy a peace dividend – were remittances from relatives abroad. While the diaspora support was clearly necessary, it also came to symbolize the lack of legitimacy of the government and the realization that only the diaspora can be trusted to give assistance (field notes, Sri Lanka 2005).

The LTTE, meanwhile, strived to use development to increase its legitimacy as a political actor. For instance, the guerrilla organization engaged actively in tsunami reconstruction. This, among other things, illustrated LTTE's ambitions to take responsibility for development in the north-east as part of its state-building project. LTTE-led development efforts have however been limited and highly dependent on the diaspora and on international donors (cf. Stokke 2006). The attempts made by the Sri Lankan government to counteract marginalization and underdevelopment in the north-east without involving the LTTE was seen by the LTTE as a vicious plan to undermine the struggle for Tamil rights. Paradoxically, hence, development became a 'continuation of war by other means', as both parties used it to 'win the hearts and minds of the people', and thereby gain legitimacy (Orjuela 2008b).

Conclusions

14

This article has painted a rather dark picture of diaspora involvement as an extension of hostilities, polarization and nationalist struggle from Sri Lanka to the global arena. However, in the various war-encouraging roles of the diaspora lie also the potential for contributions to decrease or end violence, inequality and polarization in Sri Lanka. Diaspora funding of armed strategies can potentially be withdrawn or bestowed with conditions and by that put pressure on warring parties. Diaspora-based media, which today to a large extent nurtures enemy images, can be used to disperse information which is less one-sided, just as the advocacy experience and contacts held by the diaspora can be used to lobby for constructive conflict resolution rather than for the interest of belligerent actors. This potential to use diaspora power to challenge the logic and system of conflict remains in the Sri Lankan case largely unexplored.

It is clear that important dynamics of the war- and peacemaking in Sri Lanka are enacted in a global arena and centred on the warring parties' (most importantly the Sri Lankan government's and the LTTE's) quest for international legitimacy and support. In this struggle, diaspora groups play an important role providing media space and disseminating information internationally in support of 'their' side in the conflict. Persons in the diaspora also engage in advocacy work and facilitate access to power holders in their host countries and internationally. The diaspora – both on the Tamil and Sinhalese side – mainly plays a role in the conflict which is subordinated to and supportive of that of the leaders in the homeland. The hegemonic position of the LTTE in the Tamil struggle clearly extends to the diaspora. It is unlikely that a critical mass of diaspora Tamils will come out strongly to question the undemocratic and violent methods of the LTTE as long as they continue to see the Sri Lankan government as their chief enemy – and as long as they fear what the LTTE can do to dissidents and their family members in Sri Lanka. Sinhalese diaspora groups have likewise – although to a much more limited extent – stood up behind homeland leaders who engage in the struggle to safeguard the sovereign Sri Lankan state against 'terrorism'. The diaspora groups who attempt to 'wage peace' in an international arena has been considerably less successful and vociferous. But the fact that there are small attempts at spreading statements which criticize military solutions and point to human rights abuses of both sides and the possibilities for non-violent conflict resolution shows that the global war-making strategies can be challenged.

While other research on the role of diasporas in conflict have mainly focused on diaspora support for belligerent parties and their role in influencing international actors, this article adds depth to the understanding of diaspora roles by also analysing two other aspects: the polarisation and dialogue between diasporas (in this case the Tamil and Sinhalese), and diaspora-supported development and reconstruction. Both these aspects play into the conflict dynamics in Sri Lanka.

Most studies of diaspora contributions to peace- or war-making are limited to one 'diaspora'. However, dynamics between different diasporas from the same contested homeland can usefully highlight the potential for and obstacles to dialogue and reconciliation between people rendered enemies by years of conflict and violence. Both Tamil and Sinhalese diaspora engagement in their homeland conflict most often reinforce the enemy images and polarization that are common in Sri Lanka. However, the picture of diaspora groups engaged in an ethnic (Tamil-Sinhalese) battle is too simplified. Outside the conflict area, the conditions to engage politically and to shape identities in relation to the homeland are different from those in the war zone. The lack of necessity to meet each other and the polarized media can reinforce segregation and images of the 'other' as enemy. At the same time, however, the diaspora existence opens up space to transcend conflicting ethnic/national identities and adopt shared identities (e.g. as 'Canadian', 'immigrant', 'minority in the new society' or 'Asian'), or to recognize the ambiguity and hybridity of identities and adopt more cosmopolitan stances. Such identifications can be used as the basis for cross-ethnic mobilization for peace and to challenge hard-line nationalist positions. Given the huge diversity within diasporas, we find many more examples of alternative identities and struggles in places which are less publicized, but nevertheless significant for framing the understanding of conflict and peace processes. For instance, the positions and engagement that can be found in women's groups and among second or third generation youth are worth exploring.

The article also emphasises the need to take into account diaspora-supported activities when analysing how development and humanitarian assistance can contribute to peacebuilding – or enhance tensions. Private remittances and assistance provided through diaspora organizations risk exacerbating unequal distribution of resources in the homeland society and creating new economic differences – something which can increase the grievances which are at the roots of violent conflict. However, diaspora aid can just as well provide opportunities for marginalized groups, decrease frustration and inequality in society and connect people across enemy lines. The peace and conflict impact of diaspora involvement in development/humanitarian work in their homeland to some extent depends on how the diaspora is organized. Increased awareness of how development interventions influence conflict dynamics can help to ensure that diaspora development assistance works for, rather than against, peace.

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End notes:

1 This article is based on secondary sources as well as on analysis of media/internet sources, observation of/participation in diaspora activities, and interviews and informal conversations with persons in/from the diaspora in Canada, United States, United Kingdom, Norway, Sweden and Sri Lanka, 2003-2008. The research has been funded by the Swedish Research Council.

2 The term 'diaspora' has often been used to describe groups which have been forcefully dispersed from their homeland, have an ethno-national consciousness, are collectively committed to the preservation or restoration of their homeland, nurture a dream of return and share a sense of alienation in their new country of residence (see Safran 1991; Cohen 1997). As the diaspora concept itself has been dispersed within and outside of academia its connotations have widened and it is now frequently used about people living outside (what they consider) their homeland (Brubaker 2005). This article applies the latter, broad definition.

3 The Tamils from north-eastern Sri Lanka make up 13 per cent and the Sinhalese 74 per cent of Sri Lanka's population. Two other groups, Muslims and Indian Tamils, make up 7 and 5.5 per cent each, according data from the last all-island census in 1981.