

City caught between brutality and bombs. (1994, November 02).
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City caught between brutality and bombs

Corner of Asia has become broken shelter

By John F. Burns
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JAFFNA

After years under siege, this old colonial city in a far corner of Asia has become a sad vestige of blasted buildings and ripped-up railway lines, of flickering kerosene lamps and tinkling bicycle bells.

For nearly five years, the 750,000 people who live in the windswept Jaffna peninsula on the northern tip of Sri Lanka, almost all Tamils, have lived without electricity, without telephones, and with scarce supplies of food and fuel.

Even the railroad line to other parts of Sri Lanka is gone, its ties chopped for firewood and its rails melted for scrap.

Surrounding Jaffna are Sri Lankan government forces, which have used bombing raids, artillery salvos and naval attack boats to strike homes, churches and flotillas of small boats that try to flee the siege.

But what seems to instill the most fear in one of the world's longest-running and most brutal ethnic wars is the rebel group that rules here, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, which has built one of Asia's most repressive societies.

The fear is acknowledged, obliquely, even by top Tiger officials.

"We are a small guerrilla organization fighting for the rights of a small people," said Anton Balasingham, the chief spokesman for the rebel group. "So we have had to utilize certain extraordinary methods in our style of war."

Human rights groups say Tiger rule has been built on arbitrary arrests and torture, "disappearances" and assassinations. Similar practices have flourished on the other side of the conflict, where death squads formed from the Sri Lankan army and police have operated for years.

Most estimates put the combined death toll among civilians at 40,000, perhaps more, in addition to the 20,000 to 30,000 combatants who have died on both sides since 1983. But where the Tigers are unique



— File photo

BOMB CACHE: Government troops near Jaffna show off some captured Tamil Tiger mortar shells

is in their reliance on what amounts to a children's army. Tiger leaders have recruited boys and girls as young as 11, sending them into battle equipped with "suicide capsules," glass vials of potassium cyanide on cords around their necks to be taken if they are threatened with capture.

At Tiger war cemeteries, headstones show many fighters who were not yet teenagers when they died, only a few older than 18.

At street corners throughout Jaffna, there are shrines to dead Tigers consisting of life-size cutouts of teen-age fighters killed in battle.

Moving about Jaffna in sullen-faced groups, young fighters spread an atmosphere of anxiety.

When a truckload of guerrillas carrying Chinese-made automatic rifles stopped beside a row of food stalls in the city, adult shoppers fell silent. Many hastened away.

Asked why, one middle-aged man replied curtly: "Can't say." A woman companion placed a finger to her lips, saying: "The facts must rest in our hearts."

The Tigers are the survivors of a violent rivalry among militant groups acting to avenge decades of grievance among the country's

three million Tamils.

After independence from Britain in 1948, succeeding governments in Colombo, the capital, passed measures that gave privileges in education, government employment and language to the country's Sinhalese majority, who make up three-quarters of the population of 17 million.

Since the rebellion began among Tamils in 1983, Jaffna has known little peace.

Hopes for an end to the war rose in 1987, when India, which had been the rebels' main arms supplier, stepped in with a peacekeeping force. Before long, the Indians were at war with the Tigers, losing 1,500 soldiers killed before they withdrew.

Recently there have been fresh hopes for peace. In a conciliatory gesture, the newly elected government of Prime Minister Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga has begun raising the possibility of creating an autonomous Tamil homeland in northern Sri Lanka that would have its capital in Jaffna but would remain linked to the rest of Sri Lanka in a federation.

The government released 13 rebels prisoners on Saturday, a day after the first round of peace talks



ended, The Associated Press reported.

Vellupillai Prabhakaran, the Tiger leader, has hinted that he may be ready to settle for less than an independent Tamil state.

"We want a peaceful solution, one that will make our people secure," said Balasingham, the rebels' spokesman. "We know we cannot go on like this forever."

By encouraging reporters to visit Jaffna for the first time in years, the two sides offered another sign of lessening tension.

On both sides, the urge for peace seemed pervasive.

Government troops at the airbase, an arid encampment of gun bunkers and earth embankments, said conditions were barely tolerable, with intense heat for much of the year and malaria epidemics.

"We can't beat the Tigers," one officer said. "All we can do is to try and hang on."

In Jaffna, too, war-weariness is strong. Along streets made gap-toothed by bombing and artillery, many people compared conditions under the siege to the battles involving colonial conquerors that went on for hundreds of years.

"We are living in the 18th century," said Vincent Selvanayagam, 62, a notary who makes his living typing documents on a battered Olivetti in a storefront in Jaffna's battered centre.

"We have come to the tether's end."