# National Report on Violence and Health in Sri Lanka

**World Health Organization**
COUNTRY OFFICE FOR **Sri Lanka**

Ministry of Healthcare and Nutrition

prevention

**World Health Organization**
COUNTRY OFFICE FOR **Sri Lanka**

**Ministry of Healthcare and Nutrition**

# National Report on
# Violence and Health
# in Sri Lanka

Colombo, April 2008

# 10. Collective violence

## 10.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses collective violence with special reference to Sri Lanka where collective violence inclusive of political and ethnic violence in its multi-faceted forms has plagued the country taking a heavy toll of human life. Immediately before the country gained Independence from the British in 1948, violence in any form was not common as it is today and had not assumed political or ethnic dimensions. Diverse causes that precipitated group violence too were almost non-existent and individual acts of violence – killings, rape, abductions, looting, banditry and so on were scarce with little impact on the overall social order of the country. In the pre-independence period collective violence, if at all was in the form of struggle for freedom against the foreign rulers.

Nevertheless, collective violence has emerged in the recent decades as an issue affecting the daily life of Sri Lanka. Violence and terror unleashed by groups against the State, responses of the State in return, gang warfare and underworld operations have considerably affected the Sri Lankan society. Violence in the aftermath of the clashes between the State and a group of militants in the North & East demanding autonomy has prevailed for over two decades. The easy accessibility to high-tech arms and weapons which in certain instances have fallen into the wrong hands, the army deserters in particular, has given rise to a gun culture that threatens to explode the entire social fabric of the country.

**Definition**

The World Report on Violence and Health (2002) defines collective violence as, "the instrumental use of violence by people who identify themselves as members of a group whether this group is transitory or has a more permanent identity – against another group or set of individuals, in order to achieve political, economic or social objectives" (1).

**Forms of collective violence**

Various forms of collective violence have been recognized including,

- Wars, terrorism and other violent conflicts that occur within or between states.
- State-perpetrated violence such as genocide, repression, disappearances, torture and other abuses of human rights.
- Organized violent crimes such as banditry and gang warfare.

**Torture**

The World Medical Association in it's Tokyo declaration in 1975, has defined torture as "deliberate systemic or wanton infliction of physical or mental suffering by one or more persons acting alone or on the order of any authority, to force another person to yield information, to make confession or for any other reasons". However in most instances, an individual is subjected to torture as he or she is a member of a group or set of individuals (2). Accordingly, torture can also be considered as a form of collective violence. The usual victims are refugees, detainees, prisoners of war, and members of minority or even majority ethnic groups etc. Torture can also take place to a lesser extent in other forms of violence such as child abuse, youth violence, elder abuse, domestic and gender-based violence.

**10.2 Extent of the problem**

Collective violence is not reported on a regular manner in Sri Lanka. This type of violence has assumed political or ethnic dimensions. There have been periods of political/ ethnic violence followed by short or long periods of non-violence. Therefore, the information and data on collective violence would be presented in a historical perspective than providing data and information for each year.

Furthermore, as mentioned in chapter 2 there is no routine surveillance system on collective violence and what is mentioned here are the data obtained from documents published on this subject and by focus group discussions held in the Ministry of Health for the purpose of compiling this report. It was not possible to separate data related to collective violence from the information provided by the Registrar General's Department and the morbidity data provided by the Medical Statistician of the Ministry of Health.

**A brief historical review of political and ethnic violence in Sri Lanka**

Except for identified few instances, the political violence in Sri Lanka limited to pre- and post- election violence at the times of election since independence (3). It occurred in different severity at different times and now on decrease in severity. The available literature indicates that the collective violence is connected with poverty, corruption, underworld gangsterism and drug menace (3,4,5).

**Political violence**

Collective violence in a severe form was seen in 1971 when a group of disgruntled youths took up arms against the state. The state was taken unawares and though swift action was taken by the state it left a trail of destruction of life and property. The youth responded to a call by the government to lay down arms and surrender on conditions of complete amnesty and a process of rehabilitation was instituted (3). Temporary accommodations for them were given in the camps set up in the two universities Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara. They were gradually incorporated into the society and some of them have even held substantial posts in the social institutions.

Although the movement went underground for a reasonable period, it raised again in late 1980s with the policy of the government changed in order to devolve the power to the provinces. This time the terror tactics were more coordinated and targeted not only the state infrastructure but the members of the armed forces and their families. In addition many criminal elements of the society infiltrated the movement for their personal advantage. These activities reached a peak in 1989 when the day to day affairs of the government and the civil society was affected severely. The insurrection ended with the arrest of the leaders and many of their associates. The same movement many years later entered the mainstream politics and is in a strong position in the political arena today.

**Beginning of the North / East crisis**

Sri Lanka is facing the long standing and well-known instance of violence in the North and East provinces where a group has taken up arms asking for a separate state. Historically the concerted and combined effort of Sinhalese who were and still are the majority, Tamils and Moslems guided by their leaders resulted in gaining independence from the British without a struggle.

By 1950s when legislative changes regarding the use of Sinhalese as the official language the Sinhalese Only Act were made suspicion and doubt was created in the minds of the Tamils regarding the intentions and the motives of the state resulting in an environment of unease. Although there was sporadic violence occurred, it became a significant entity in 1983 when a group armed themselves and identified themselves as 'Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)' and launched violent activities demanding a separate state. According to the Presidential Truth Commission on Ethnic Violence 2002 the whiplash violence that followed the killing of 13 Soldiers by militants in the North escalated this conflict (6). Such escalations of violence occurred at different periods such as 1956, 1958, 1971, 1976, 1977 and one of the worst in 1983.

The Cease-Fire Agreement (CFA) was signed between the state and the LTTE in 2002 and there was relief from hostilities throughout the country although sporadic violations of the agreement continued, each party claiming that the opposite party made more violations.

The violations of the CFA escalated towards the latter part of 2007 and eventually the CFA ended in January 2008.

## 10.3 Factors associated with political and ethnic violence

1. Political victimization with the change of governments.
2. High rate of unemployment and the perceived need of political influence for appointment and promotions.
3. Rampant incidents of bribery and corruption leading to a disposition that any act of crime can be hushed up with gratifications.
4. High rate of poverty and many people could be motivated to engage in violent activities by offering a small amount of money.
5. Breakdown of the system of law and order in some areas.
6. Inadequacy of stringent and deterrent penalties for the offenders of collective violence due to a variety of reasons.
7. Inequity in the distribution of resources by Provinces and sometimes by different ethnic and religious groups.
8. Perceived in-equal political patronage for activities of different religions and of different ethnic groups.
9. Inadequate resources for the organizations maintaining the law and order.
10. Presence of underworld operations and gangsterism, especially in major cities.
11. Easy access to high-tech sophisticated firearms and weaponry.
12. The drug menace plaguing the society which is responsible for many crimes in the society including political and ethnic related violence.

## 10.4 Consequences of collective violence
### Impact on health

Collective violence both political and ethnic has had a negative impact on the health care of the country. The difficulty on the part of the displaced and the refugees in camps to gain access to medical care is one dimension; trials and tribulations encountered by the medical personnel in the conflict–stricken areas to discharge their duties efficiently is another facet. Staffing and maintaining the medical institutions and the support services in areas inaccessible to state officials are other issues. The victims who have been exposed to the war

and undergone traumatic experiences leading to physical and mental stress become the responsibility of the health sector.

In conflict situations, as it is globally accepted children and women are the most vulnerable groups who are forced to bear the brunt of consequences of armed clashes, sometimes with adverse impacts lasting a lifetime.

The early consequences of physical torture include injury to the chest, head and other organs or visceral problems of the abdomen like renal impairments. The late consequences are infections, temporary and permanent disabilities, and post traumatic stress disorder. Common symptoms in what has been called 'war neurosis' are dejection, weariness, tension, irritability, hypersensitivity, startled reaction, sleep disturbance and tremors; or more specially anxiety phobias and depression (7). In clinics held in refugee camps, the majority of cases, apart from skin conditions (e.g. scabies), gastrointestinal disturbances (e.g. diarrhoea and peptic ulcer) and upper respiratory tract infections, were suffering from transient stress relations, reactive depression and anxiety. They manifested somatic symptoms of which the following were common: headache, dizziness, dyspepsia, backache, palpitation, chest pain, paresthesiae and other multiple complaints for which no obvious organic cause could be found.

**Impact on economy**

Violence in any form on a widespread scale in a country would invariably have a drastic impact on the local economy. Sri Lanka, a developing country, has been forced to inject massive doses of funds to maintain the law and order in the country, vis-à-vis a catastrophic armed struggle that has plagued all the sectors of the economy for over two decades. The maintenance of a large contingent of troops across the North and the East and the importation of high-tech, state of-the–art weaponry and other equipment have necessarily made a sizeable dent in the economy at the expense of the finances much needed for the development of the other sectors-health, education and welfare.

**Impact on community and culture**

Violence in whatever form it exists underscores an erosion of benign socio-cultural values. Age old deep rooted values associated with the local way of living-compassion, tolerance, amiability and non-violence are just brushed aside. Path to violence is being cemented.

**10.5 Interventions and policy response**

Different forms of interventions have been used by the state to curb violence. India's intervention constituted the deployment of the IPKF (Indian Peace Keeping Force) on the invitation of the Sri Lankan Government. A large contingent of Indian soldiers landed in Sri Lanka and they were deployed in the Northern and Eastern Provinces, vested with the authority of maintaining peace in the area. At least for a short while, there was a lull in the storm but in the face of heavy opposition against the IPKF by the nationalist forces the then President had to ask India to withdraw the troops.

The intensity of the demand for a separate state for the north and the east escalated with increasing violence and as a policy response the state mulled the devolution of the centralized power to the periphery. With an amendment to the constitution the Provincial Council system was set-up. The desired goals could not be achieved.

Norway's intervention on the invitation of the Sri Lankan state was in the form of a team of facilitators who engaged in a diplomatic mission between the state and the LTTE to bring them on to the negotiating table. Their attempts culminated in the ceasefire agreement (CFA) which came to an end in early 2008.

**10.6 Conclusions and recommendations**

All peace loving citizens of the country should support the control of collective violence which takes place in a sporadic manner.

- It is obligatory on the part of the state to use all the available mechanisms and strategies to curb violence, which threatens to explode the social order. Perpetrators of violence need to be brought to book irrespective of their social standing.
- It is the Police that have the direct and the closest link with the masses in keeping the law and order, intact. It was observed in the last Presidential Election, 2005, that the Police Commission was very effective in controlling pre and post election violence.
- The ethnic violence is the scourge of the country, a cancerous growth eating into all the sectors of the country. Attempts over two decades have not brought any fruitful results and the ceasefire too ended without results. However for the country to proceed with its development goals peace should be negotiated and a solution worked out to satisfy all parties and the interests of all the communities. A policy of live and let live should prevail.
- The gun culture has to be eliminated. Those who are caught with illegal firearms in their possession should be made to face long terms of imprisonment and even the confiscation of their property can be considered.
- Organizations and authorities vested with the onerous responsibility of child protection need more teeth to prevent children from being dragged into violence. The state should go all out to create a world opinion so that all militant organizations could be pressurized to stop the child conscriptions.
- The health sector should be in preparedness to meet the health consequences particularly to manage the injured following collective violence.
- There is a need for a comprehensive counseling mechanism, in the wake of thousands of women and children who have been exposed to traumatic experiences of the conflict and are suffering from symptoms of war neurosis. They have to be got into the mainstream of the civil society. These impacts cannot be allowed to plague them throughout their life.
- Rehabilitate the youth and alternative employment should be provided for those who have taken arms under the military system of the LTTE, when lasting peace is achieved.

References

1. World Report on Violence and Health, World Health Organization, Geneva, 2002.

2. Fernando, F. Medico Legal Aspects of Torture. 2000

3. Perera, S. Political Violence in Sri Lanka – Dynamics, Consequences and Issues of Decentralization. Centre for Women's Research. 1998.

4. Socialist Tamil Eelam, Political Tigers of Tamil Eelam Cited in 'Dealing with Diversity 2004, Sri Lankan Discourses on Peace and Conflict. Georg Freks and Bart Klem (eds). The Institute of International Relations. 2004.

5. Sri Lanka Human Rights Practices 1993, U.S.Department of State, January 31, 1994.

6. Report of the Presidential Truth Commission on Ethnic Violence 1981 - 1994, Government Publication Bureau, Colombo, Sri Lanka.  2002.

7. Hoole Rajan, D. Somadundaram, K. Sritharan and Rajani Thiranagama. The Broken Palmyra, The Tamil Crisis in Sri Lanka, An inside account. Claremont, Sri Lanka Studies Institute. 1990.