

Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

7 June 1985

MEMORANDUM FOR: Peter Burleigh
Chief, INR/NESA/South Asia Division
Department of State

FROM: [redacted] 25X1
Chief, Geography Division, OGI

SUBJECT: Conflict in Sri Lanka: 25X1
Demographic Factors [redacted]

1. The attached memorandum presents a perspective on the current conflict in Sri Lanka which may contain some possible talking points for the visit of Rajiv Gandhi and Indian government officials to the United States. [redacted] 25X1

2. The memorandum was drafted by [redacted] a specialist in geography and demography, who is working under contract in OGI during 1985. It reflects his special interests in Sri Lanka [redacted] as well as his more basic line of research: the relationship of demography and instability. He can be reached on [redacted] if you would like to discuss the subject further. [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] 25X1

Attachment: 25X1
Conflict in Sri Lanka: Demographic Factors [redacted]
GI M 85-10151, June 1985, [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] 25X1

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CONFLICT IN SRI LANKA: DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS

Summary

The present "ethnic" strife in Sri Lanka is rooted in several demographic factors which have not been taken into sufficient account in current reporting on the insurgency there. A greater appreciation and recognition of these factors on the part of the Sri Lankan and Indian governments could lead to policy approaches that might reduce the basis for discontent. [redacted]

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Two different spurts of population growth occurred in Sri Lanka during the post WWII era, and each produced a "bulge" of young adults competing for positions in a slowly growing or stagnant economy. The first spurt, in the late 40's and early 50's, occurred in the Wet Zone--the area dominated by the Sinhalese--and resulted in a "bulge" of young adults approximately two decades later in the early 1970's. The second spurt, in the mid-60's, occurred in the Dry Zone--an area associated with the Tamils where malaria had suppressed fertility and kept death rates high until the late 40's. This spurt produced a "bulge" of young adults that peaked around 1982. The initial Sinhalese "bulge" can be associated with insurgency approximately two decades later in the early 70's in which the insurgents were Sinhalese between the ages of 17 and 25. The second bulge can be correlated with the current insurgency which includes Tamil youths and has been confined exclusively to the Dry Zone. Just as the demographic pressure fueling the Sinhalese insurrection in the early 1970's faded, so the Tamil "bulge" associated with the current insurgency will wane in time. [redacted]

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Sinhalese policies that discriminate against Tamil youths in the military and university admissions reflect not only reaction to favoritism shown Tamils during British rule, and the current Tamil insurgency, but also a deep-seated fear of the Tamil presence in South Asia--especially in India's Tamil Nadu State. The Sri Lankan government, overwhelmingly Sinhalese, and heavily dependent on support from Sinhalese Buddhists, probably cannot take other than a "hard line" position with the Tamil insurgents. Yet the government lacks the military force to deal with the insurgency. In this situation, the role of India as the dominant force in South Asia may be the key to future developments. If India could address the problem as one rooted in demographic factors and trends--and the stresses they place on institutions and employment opportunities--the prospects for a peaceful settlement might increase. [redacted]

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GI M 85-10151 [redacted]

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Roots of the Conflict

The Sinhalese, descendants of an ancient North Indian Buddhist civilization, constitute three-quarters of Sri Lanka's population, but their position as the majority in the country is undermined by their demographic situation within South Asia, where they are outnumbered by Tamils at least 4 to 1. Historical evidence of an ancient Sinhalese civilization which flourished about 1,500 years ago, and which was eventually overrun by Tamil invaders from India reinforces an image of a race in decline, a group that has had its day in the sun and which is threatened by the immense growth of other non-Sinhalese people in South Asia, principally the Tamils. A resurgence of Buddhism which stresses the unique religious role of the Sinhalese has added to their sense of isolation. While the separatism and insurgency of the Sri Lanka Tamils provide a present threat to the Sinhalese, the latter's sense of decline and religious isolation reflects fear of the Tamils generally, especially the 40 million residing in India's Tamil Nadu State. [redacted]

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This fear derives in part from the favoritism shown the Tamils under British rule. In the early 19th century, after the British brought the entire island under control, the Tamils flourished. The existence of Tamil communities in India, South Africa, Singapore, and other areas of the British Empire enabled the Ceylon Tamils to use their ethnicity to great advantage within the commercial networks of the Empire. English-language schools tended to be located primarily in Tamil areas, with the result that Tamils dominated the civil service and the professions. The crushing of Sinhalese independence combined with British favoritism towards the Tamils could not fail to reinforce Sinhalese feelings of being outnumbered and oppressed. [redacted]

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The early governments of independent Sri Lanka contained a broad mix of the various ethnic groups comprising the national population. With time, however, the government has become heavily dominated by the Sinhalese, and it has taken steps to eliminate what it has viewed as the privileged minority status of the Tamils. Perhaps the most important of these steps has been the transformation of the army into a virtual Sinhalese-only force, and the creation of an academic "standardization" system which has restricted the entrance of Tamil students into the universities and, hence, into the professions. From the Tamil perspective, the government's actions have made the Tamils an oppressed minority, and the perceived oppression has most greatly affected younger Tamils now seeking their place in the society. It is the alienation of these younger Tamils that has fueled the current insurgency. [redacted]

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Geo-demographic Regions and Insurgency

Sri Lanka is divided into two climatic areas which have had important implications for the demography of the country. The north and east of the country, the area sought by Tamil

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insurgents for an independent state, is a part of Sri Lanka's Dry Zone. The southwest, dominated by the Sinhalese, is the Wet Zone. The rate of population growth in the Wet Zone reached its maximum level before World War II. In much of the Dry Zone, by contrast, population growth remained slow until 1946, and did not peak until the mid-60's. [REDACTED]

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Malaria was a key factor affecting the time at which each zone experienced maximum population growth. The Wet Zone was virtually free of malaria. The death rate was reasonably low there by the 1930's, and the rate of population growth reached 2.5 percent or more annually. In the Dry Zone, however, where malaria was widespread, the death rate remained very high until 1946, and the birth rate was moderate. In 1946, extensive spraying of DDT in the Dry Zone substantially reduced the incidence of malaria. The reduction of malaria served not only to lower the death rate in the Dry Zone, but also to eliminate the suppressing effect of malaria on human fertility. [REDACTED]

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The presence of malaria in one part of the country, and its absence in another, thus helped to contribute to two different spurts of population growth. The first produced a "bulge" of young adults in the Wet Zone that peaked around 1971. The second produced a Dry Zone "bulge" of young adults peaking around 1982. Both the cause and the manifestation of these two episodes of growth were associated with areas of the country, rather than with ethnic groups. The Wet Zone, however, tended to be dominated by Sinhalese, while the Dry Zone contained many Tamil-dominated areas. Thus, there was an indirect association between "spurts" of growth and ethnicity. [REDACTED]

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The initial Sinhalese-dominated "bulge" can be associated with a major insurgency approximately two decades later in the early 1970s. At that time, the insurgents were Sinhalese between the ages of 17 and 25, and their activity was confined almost exclusively to the Wet Zone. The second bulge can be correlated with the current insurgency which includes Tamil youths and has been confined exclusively to the Dry Zone. [REDACTED]

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Both insurrections appear to be related to the inability of youths and young adults to find positions in the society. The numbers of the young seeking employment or admission to the universities was large relative to the ability of institutions to absorb them, but the structure of the society also played a major role. The Sinhalese insurrection occurred at a time when Tamils continued to receive residual benefits from their status under British rule. The Tamils occupied positions in the professions, in elite secondary schools, and in other prestigious areas out of proportion to their actual numbers. The Tamil insurgency has occurred at a juncture when anti-Tamil legislation and policy has severely affected the ability of younger Tamils to obtain employment or admission to the universities. [REDACTED]

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Implications

Just as the demographic pressure fueling the Sinhalese insurrection in the early 1970's faded, so the Tamil "bulge" associated with the current insurgency will wane in time. The present conflict between the Tamils and the Sinhalese, however, threatens to engulf increasingly large segments of the population. Major anti-Tamil riots, such as occurred in Colombo in 1983, potentially draw into the conflict Wet Zone Tamils not part of the demographic "bulge." Passions have been inflamed to the point where the government, dependent on Sinhalese support, probably cannot take any action other than a "hard-line" position against the Tamils but Colombo lacks the military force to put down the insurgency. [REDACTED]

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The key to future developments may lie with India. To date, India's policy has been ambivalent. On the one hand, New Delhi cannot appear to ignore the sentiments of the of 45 million Tamils living in South India and on the other, the spectre of a Tamil separatist movement cannot fail to make policy-makers in New Delhi uneasy since India faces a much greater potential threat than Sri Lanka from regionalized minority groups. [REDACTED]

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A settlement managed by New Delhi would be contingent on the ability of the Gandhi government to defuse the hostility between ethnic groups. This will not be easy because the Sinhalese view India as a Tamil spokesman. Thus, an understanding of the demographic and economic roots of the conflict becomes a crucial factor in the outcome. If India could "sell" non-ethnic factors as a root cause, and convince the government of Sri Lanka to address these factors, the prospects for a peaceful settlement would increase. [REDACTED]

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SUBJECT: Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: Demographic Factors

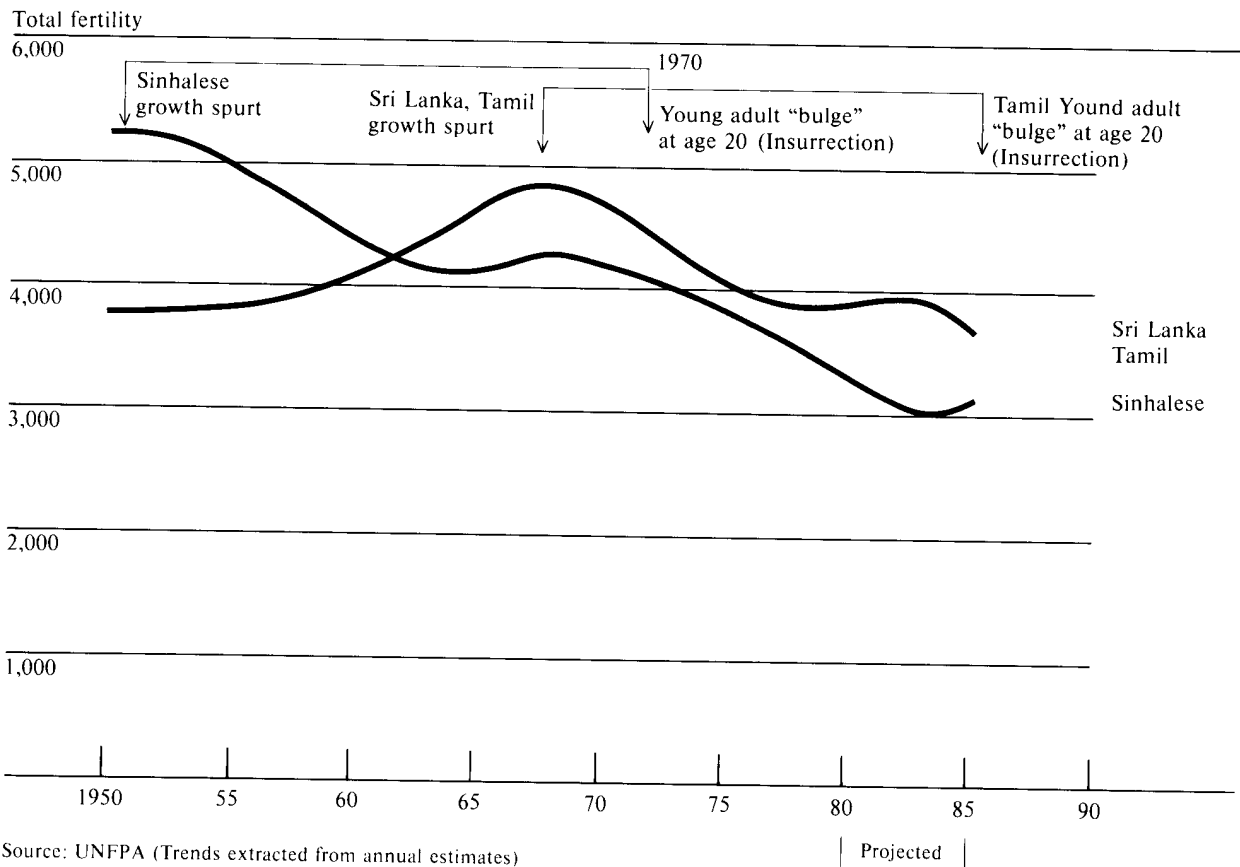
OGI/GD: (7 June 1985)

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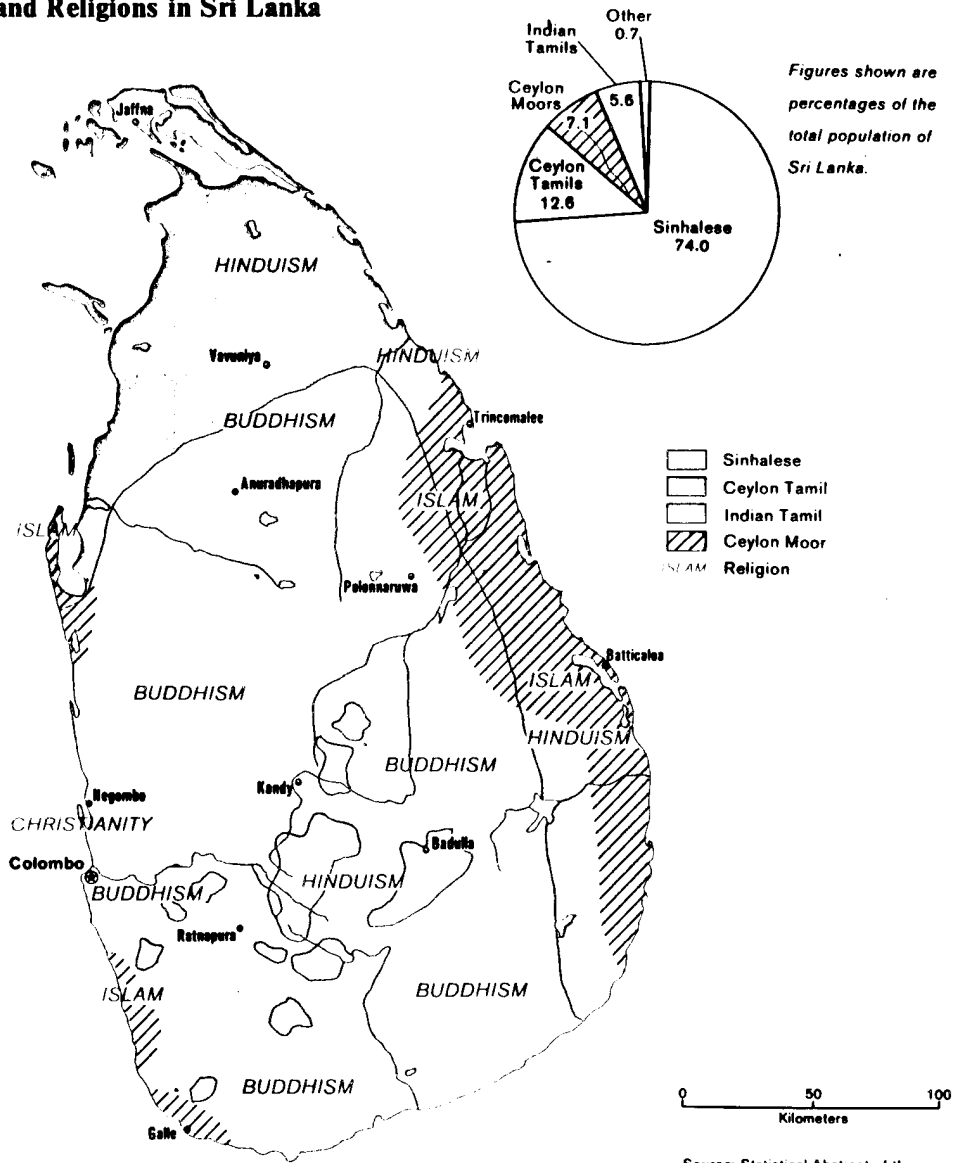
Relationship Between Fertility and Insurrection



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Figure 4
Ethnolinguistic Groups and Religions in Sri Lanka

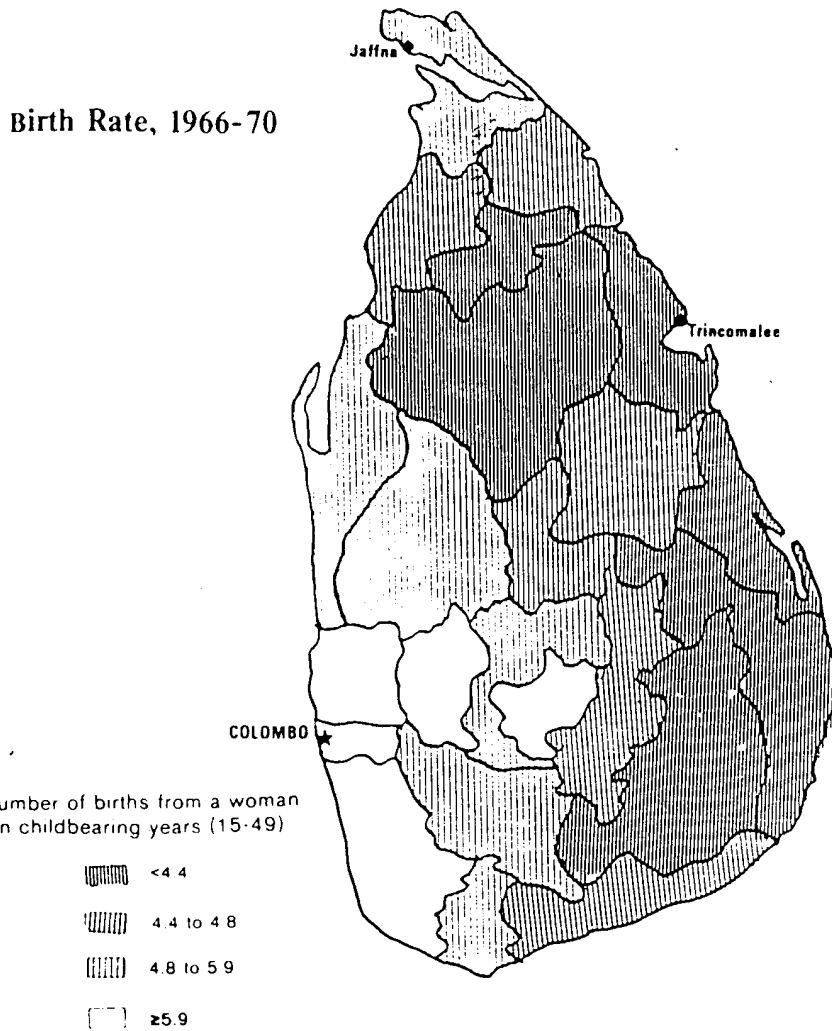


Source: Statistical Abstract of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, 1982

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