



CANADA'S PERIODICAL ON REFUGEES

REFUGEE

Vol. 13 • No. 3

June 1993

SPECIAL ISSUE ON SRI LANKA

Tamil Refugees and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka

As of the next issue, Professor Michael Lanphier assumes the post of editor of *Refuge*. I have held the editor's position for over ten years. It is somehow appropriate that my final issue deals with ethnic conflict, in particular ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. In the early eighties, many refugee claims from northern Sri Lanka were denied at the time since Canada only gave status to refugees affected by the riots in Colombo. This special issue tells why. But in the early eighties, the West was unaware of the insurrection in the north and the army repression under way. My report of my field trip was published in *Refuge* as well as in the *Toronto Star* and led directly to a change in refugee policy vis-à-vis Tamils who were fleeing northern Sri Lanka.

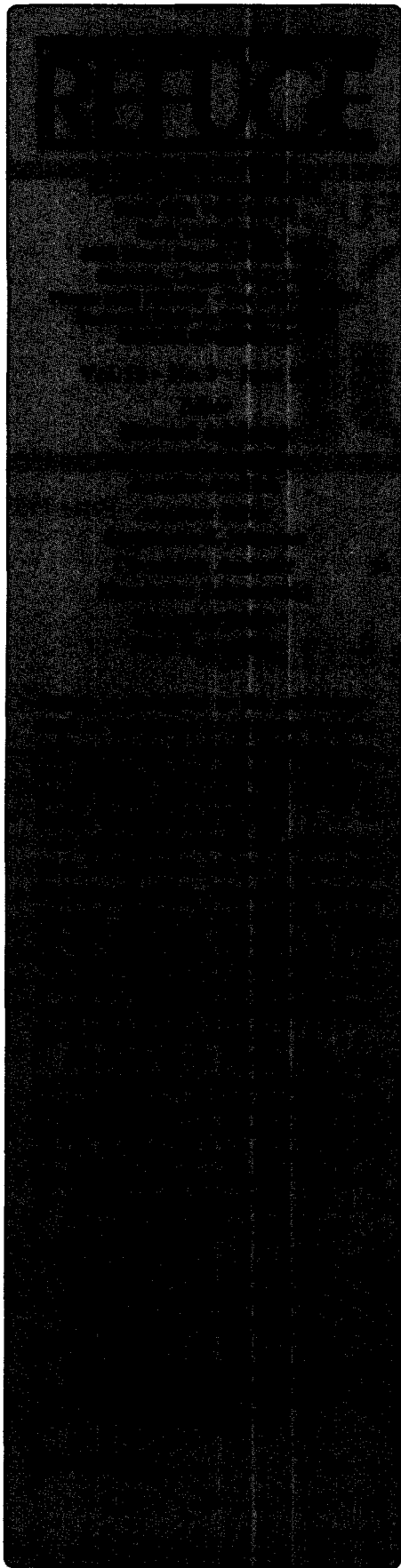
There is a second reason why this issue is important. Increasingly, the majority of refugees around the world are products of ethnic rather than ideological conflicts. Most states in the world are multi-ethnic polities with significant nontitular minorities who may have a compact pattern of settlement and strong cultural identities. When these differences are exacerbated by injustices, by

efforts that increase inequalities and social-economic disparities, or by efforts to redress those same inequalities and social-economic injustices by discriminating against a successful minority, then we have the conditions that can lead to conflict. If the political structure of a state favours the hegemony of one dominant group rather than promoting an ethni-

cally mosaic society with unity arising out of diversity, then the underlying conditions will certainly lead to open confrontation. Ethnonationalism can be used by political power brokers within a community as a basis for mobilization, particularly in a time of crisis. History can be constructed to reinforce ethnic identities *at odds with those defined as the*

Contents:

Tamil Refugees and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka <i>Howard Adelman</i>	1
The Evolution of Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka <i>Arul S. Aruliah and Anusha Aruliah</i>	3
The Fragmented Island: Ethnic Conflict and the Politics of Culture in Sri Lanka <i>Sujata Ramachandran</i>	9
Reading Between the Lines: Intra-Group Heterogeneity and Conflict in Sri Lanka <i>Kenneth D. Bush</i>	15
A Political Solution to the Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka <i>Chelvadurai Manogaran</i>	23
Mental Health Resilience of Refugees: The Case of Tamil Refugees <i>Megan Stuart Mills</i>	26
Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees in India <i>Asha Hans</i>	30
Book review: Only Man Is Vile: The Tragedy of Sri Lanka /William McGowan. Reviewed by <i>Ravindiran Vaitheespara</i>	33



other. Alternatively, historical understanding can be the basis of fostering harmonious relations with other groups.

The fact is, these conflicts are resolvable and can be prevented from developing into open violent confrontation. Early detection, fact-finding missions, mediation efforts and even interventionist techniques must be further developed.

It is important to understand that these conflicts are *not* the result of age old eternal rivalries, but are politically motivated as a result of power conflicts between *and within* ethnic groups. Civil war can be prevented. Solutions can be found. But they are based on ideologies of tolerance, on recognition of multiculturalism, on working to eliminate socioeconomic inequalities based on race or ethnicity. They are based on political structures that adopt a federal model with a great deal of local self-determination rather than a highly centralized state. Further, the international community can assist through early detection and closer monitoring of minority rights

abuses. The emerging international institutions to manage and moderate intrastate violent conflict and even to intervene for humanitarian purposes will help once these mechanisms are more developed. An international forum to address political minority issues and issues of self-determination can be a critical element to moderate the potential for conflict. New mechanisms of mediation appropriate to interethnic conflict can be developed.

However, when the conflict has gone too far and for too long a period, the only solution may be ethnic division, perhaps within a loosely federated state.

The fact is we are entering a new era in dealing with refugees—one that stresses analysis of causes rather than simply depiction of circumstances, preventive rather than simply responsive actions, international adjudication and even intervention when appropriate. They are all geared to mitigation or even prevention of refugee flows in the first place. ■

Howard Adelman

