

Lost Lives and a Missed Political Opportunity: The Politics of Conflict and Peace in Post-Tsunami Sri Lanka

Jude Lal Fernando

This article examines the impact of a natural disaster on the political dynamics of an ethno-nationalist conflict. The humanitarian space generated by the 2004 tsunami could have revived the peace process between the Sri Lankan state and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), as evidenced by the joint mechanism that was formed for rehabilitation and reconstruction. However, the impact of the tsunami carried a potential for both peacebuilding and escalation of the conflict. The growing securitization of South Asia, led by the United States, upheld a militaristic approach and strengthened the Sri Lankan state against the LTTE. The militaristic approach to the decades-long conflict was advanced and eventually resulted in a massive war which claimed thousands of lives. The tsunami was a missed political opportunity.

Keywords natural disaster, ethno-nationalist conflict, geopolitics, securitization, humanitarianism and peacebuilding

Introduction

The magnitude of the destruction caused by the 2004 Asian Tsunami on the lives, livelihoods, and properties of the affected people, as well as on the ecosystem, sent shock waves across the world as media images covered this natural disaster for weeks. As the survivors grappled with the pain of loss of dear ones and destruction of their belongings, the rest of the world was moved by a sense of humanitarianism to come to the aid of those affected masses. These countries had already been going through a variety of socioeconomic and political crises and some of them had been experiencing wars (e.g., Sri Lanka, Aceh Sumatra in Indonesia). In what way did the natural disaster have an impact on the political crises of these countries? Could the political conflicts have been resolved with the growing sense of humanitarianism and thus contribute to greater human security,

or would these situations worsen, endangering human security?

Taking into consideration the political conflict in Sri Lanka, I would like to explore answers to the above questions and show that the 2004 tsunami was a missed political opportunity for conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The main argument of this article is as follows: It is true that a natural disaster like the tsunami that claimed nearly 36,000 lives in Sri Lanka could not have been avoided. However, it is also true that the massacre of nearly 70,000 Tamils (UN 2012, 14) in the last phase of the war that officially ended in May 2009 could have been prevented had the opportunity for political negotiations that emerged with the tsunami been seized.

The first part of this article analyzes the political and social context at the time the tsunami hit Sri Lanka. This can be examined through analysis of various conditions, including the economic circumstances, social relations (class, caste, and gender), belief systems, pattern of governance, ideological factors (ethno-nationalist), character of the state, as well as the geostrategic/military conditions of the affected landscape and the country.¹ In this article my specific focus is on the ethno-nationalist conflict which includes mainly the last three conditions in the above list: ideological factors, character of the state, and the geostrategic/military situation. These three conditions are inextricably interwoven with the ethno-nationalist conflict on the island.

The article then explores how the tsunami functioned as a conflict dynamic as well as a peace dynamic. At the time of the tsunami the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were observing a ceasefire agreement (CFA) which had come into effect in February 2002. At the same time it was also a period in which numerous attempts were being made to revive the peace process between the two parties that had come to a halt in April 2003. It was therefore a period of no peace/no war. The tsunami became a catalyst for peace by reviving negotiations on the basis of immediate humanitarian needs. However, it also became a catalyst for further conflict. Therefore, analyzing the ethno-nationalist context of the tsunami means analysis of the politics of conflict and peace on the island. As one prominent Sri Lankan human rights campaigner pointed out, the tsunami signified waves of death and peace, and “all kinds of spaces have opened up that did not exist before” (Abeysekera 2005, 52).

Finally, I examine the political process within which the peace dynamic of the tsunami was defeated legally and geopolitically (a lost political opportunity), thereby further endangering human security. I argue that this represented a lost opportunity for a non-militaristic and negotiated settlement for the decades-long, ethno-nationalist conflict in that country. As a result this meant reinforcement of a militaristic solution which resulted in a large-scale war that claimed thousands of lives. Eventually the Sri Lankan state became the most militarized state in South Asia. The analysis undertaken by this article goes beyond issues surrounding proper distribution of relief and development aid for reconstruction

in the aftermath of the tsunami. The main question is not about good and accountable or bad and corrupt governance in delivery of aid. It is about the ethics of the Sri Lankan unitary state structure and the ethics of the strategic politics (geopolitics) of major powers who backed this particular state structure to the extent of undermining the response to the humanitarian needs generated by the natural disaster and the prospects for a negotiated political settlement to the decades-long, ethno-nationalist conflict.

In conclusion, I very briefly discuss some pointers towards strengthening human security with the transformation of the ethno-nationalist political conditions of the Sri Lankan state.

Contextualizing the Tsunami within Ethno-nationalism and Geopolitics

The epicenter of the earthquake that triggered the 2004 tsunami was 1000 miles away from the island of Sri Lanka, off the west coast of northern Sumatra in Indonesia. Yet, the killer waves swallowed most parts of the eastern coast of Sri Lanka and some parts of the southern coast, while also having an unsettling impact (without deaths) on the other coastlines. According to the GoSL, 35,322 individuals were killed, 21,000 were injured, and 516,150 persons were displaced. Seventy-five percent of fishing vessels were destroyed, while 23,449 acres of arable land became salinized making vast tracts unsuitable for immediate cultivation. Furthermore, 150,000 persons lost their means of sustenance; 97 health facilities, 182 schools, 4 universities and 15 vocational training centers were damaged; and 98,000 homes were completely destroyed (de Mel 2010, 3-4; Caron 2010, 113-114). Although only 2% of the 19 million population of the country were affected (de Mel 2010, 3), the whole population felt the shock of the disastrous impact of the killer waves. Citizens responded to the disaster first through humanitarianism and civil society activism, but also through ethno-religious ideologies, and party politics.

It is quite misleading to treat the above numbers and figures as mere statistics related to the disastrous effects of a natural calamity. The statistics issued by the GoSL do not indicate which areas or groups of people (ethno-nationalist, religious, social classes, etc.) were badly affected. One could question why a government or any other organization should categorize the victims when all of them have suffered the same fate. However, although failure to categorize would appear to be humanitarian and universalistic, it conceals the power relationships among different groups and their relationship with the state. Counting the numbers of deaths, casualties and losses is not a neutral activity. The apparent objectivity of statistics is colored with a particular power dynamic or a discourse. The government's statistics did not reveal that 80% of the population of the

coastal areas of Mullaitivu District and 78% of the population of the coastal areas of Ampara were the worst affected (Goonsekere 2010, 85). The former district is predominantly Tamil and it was part of the *de facto state* of the LTTE in the north and east. The latter district was predominantly Tamil and Muslim with a Sinhala minority. Most of those who were affected in these districts had already been displaced due to 20 years of war between the Sri Lankan state, represented by different governments, and the LTTE. The coastlines of Hambantota and Galle districts in the south were also affected, with pockets of severe damage. These are predominantly Sinhala areas and the numbers of casualties were fewer than in the east. State and private owned media coverage of the disaster continuously focused on the south.

As one prominent Tamil academic pointed out, the 2004 disaster can be called “Tsunami II” for the north and east. “Tsunami I” was the devastation caused by the decades-long war in the region. In that respect, the aftermath of Tsunami II should be viewed as a continuing phenomenon of Tsunami I. Reiterating the need for a fairer assessment of the impact of Tsunami II on the region he writes: “It is, therefore, important to note that to arrive at any meaningful figures of comparative damage in the two regions [the south, and the north and east] separate assessment standards are used for each of them” (Nithiyanandam 2005, 6-9). In other words, the effects of the tsunami have to be assessed not only by the power of the earthquake and the waves it generated but also by the type of relationship that the state had with the Tamils and Muslims in the north and east. Furthermore, this relationship cannot be examined simply through a single state lens. The Sinhala-dominated majoritarian character of the unitary state has a geopolitical dimension due to the very location of the island in the Indian Ocean. Therefore, before discussing the politics of conflict and peace associated with Tsunami I, I would like to examine the origins of the formation of the Sri Lankan unitary state, the subsequent ethno-nationalist conflict which gave rise to two states, and the associated geopolitics of the 2002 peace process. Clarification of these three points helps us to examine the impact of the natural disaster on the political conflict in a nuanced way.

Sri Lanka’s Unitary State Structure

Formerly called Ceylon, Sri Lanka’s existing unitary state structure and its attendant majoritarian ethno-nationalist ideology is fundamentally a British colonial construct. The Portuguese (1505-1657) and the Dutch (1658-1796), the initial colonizers, occupied only the coastal belt of the island, which was called the Maritime Provinces. However, they maintained two distinct administrative units, one for the Sinhala region in the south and another for the Tamil region in the north, as these regions were traditionally distinct sovereign political entities in the pre-colonial dynastic period. This does not mean that these two regions had strictly carved political and administrative borders, as do modern nation states.

In the era of the Sinhala and Tamil kingdoms there were overlapping boundaries and territories, and sometimes dual allegiances and identities implying shared sovereignty in some areas. However, in 1833 the British colonial administration (1815-1948) established a unitary political structure for strategic reasons. The island of Sri Lanka lies in the heart of the Indian Ocean with close proximity to India and with one of the world's largest natural harbors, Trincomalee, located in the east of the island which is predominantly Tamil speaking. William Pitt, in a speech in the British Parliament in 1802, stated that the island is "the most valuable colonial possession on the globe," as giving to the British Raj "a security it had not enjoyed from its first establishment" (Ludowyk 1966, 19). In this sense, securing full control of the island as one single political unit operating under one single command was pivotal for the British government in controlling India, which was the "jewel in the crown." This political/military control was achieved by amalgamation of distinct regions into one unitary political structure. However, material amalgamations (mainly of Tamil and Sinhala regions) alone were not sufficient to bring about full political control of the island colony.

A process of social engineering was initiated by the British colonial officers through translation of ancient texts, anthropological research, and regeneration of archeological sites whereby the numerically greater Sinhalese were encouraged to consider themselves as racially superior to the Tamils and as the original inhabitants of the island while the rest were invaders (Agnell 1998; Jeganathan 1995; Seneviratne 2004). These ideological factors strengthened the unitary political structure whereby the Sinhalese were led to believe that the entire island and the state belong to them. The Tamils in the north and east (with the Trincomalee harbor) of the island had a closer affinity to India through Tamil Nadu than to the Sinhalese. This unitary political structure and ideology of racial superiority gradually separated the Sinhalese (who were a minority in the Indian subcontinent) from India as well as from the Tamils on the island who were a minority. This separation also insulated the Sinhalese from the impact of many anti-colonial uprisings in the Indian subcontinent. The Tamils in the north and east embraced the spirit of the Indian Independence Movement more than did the Sinhalese. There were no serious political uprisings by the Sinhalese against colonial rule after 1848. However there were cultural and religious revivals as well as racist campaigns that continually vilified non-Sinhala ethnic groups: the Muslims (1915), the Malayalis (1930s), and the Tamils (since 1948) (Jayawardena 2003). While the Tamils in the north and east, following the Indian Independence Movement, demanded *swaraj* (home rule) for the whole island, the Sinhala polity asked only for dominion status, implying a privileged relationship with the colonial government.

In 1977, the post-colonial nation-building process has been a violent consolidation of the existing political structure and national ideology that gained constitutional legitimacy. The 1972 constitution declared that the state is

unitary and the primary place among religions is given to Buddhism (meaning Sinhala Buddhism). Both the colonial and post-colonial processes resulted in discrimination against the Tamils in political representation, land, employment, education, language, industrialization, and welfare. The Tamil demands for equal rights, particularly after independence in 1948, were violently suppressed (Jayawardena 2003; Wilson 1999). This process was resisted by the Tamil polity for about 30 years after independence through non-violent protests; it later moved into an armed phase at the end of the 1970s as militarization of the region by the Sri Lankan state increased.

The Tamil grievances under a Sinhala-dominated unitary state structure were articulated through a demand for the right to self-determination, nationhood, and a homeland. This demand was ratified by the Vattukottai Resolution, in 1976, with the support of all the Tamil political parties, and it was also reflected in the results of the parliamentary elections of 1977 and 2004. On the basis of this resolution the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) won a majority of parliamentary seats in the north and east in 1977. It was on the basis of this electoral mandate that the LTTE succeeded in building a *de facto* state (McConnell 2008) in the north and east of the island by the end of 1990s, radically altering the Sri Lankan state's relationship with the Tamils in the region. As one prominent Sinhala political scientist comments, the LTTE thought and acted "like an emerging regional, or subnational, state" (Uyangoda 2007, 40). This entailed not only erecting a highly structured civil administration, but also maintaining a conventional security apparatus in the areas under its control, which led to a dismantling of the monopoly of violence held by the Sri Lankan state (Stokke 2006). At least 70% of the coastal belt in the north and east that was affected by the 2004 tsunami came under the control of the LTTE. In other words, as a result of the political conflict, by the time of the tsunami there were virtually two states on the island. In fact, as was stated earlier, the tsunami took place at a time when both parties had entered into a ceasefire agreement, but had deadlocked over the peace process. In order to appreciate the crucial and constructive political space brought about by the tsunami it is important to understand the local and geopolitical realities that were interwoven with the ceasefire agreement and the peace process between the two parties.

The Sri Lankan State and the Tamil de facto State

A few years before the 2004 tsunami, there had developed a balance of military power between the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE. By mid-2001 (prior to 9/11), the GoSL met with a series of military setbacks, including a major LTTE attack on the country's main airbase and the international airport.² The attack had an unprecedented negative impact on the foreign investment-based economic sector that had flourished since 1977, despite two decades of war. These economic and political/military realities reflected the Sri Lankan state's hurting stalemate with

the LTTE and gave rise to two major pragmatic positions among the Sinhala polity and its constituency: first, that a military victory over the LTTE was not possible and a negotiated settlement should be considered, and, second, that the economy could not be revived while continuing the war. As a result, snap elections were called by President Chandrika Kumaranatunga, which led to the formation, in December 2001, of a new government under the leadership of the United National Front (UNF) led by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

The UNF government launched a strategy consisting of three elements: a ceasefire agreement and negotiations with the LTTE, an extensive economic reform program, and a conscious attempt to mobilize international support for both of these elements (Bastian 2007, 140). The LTTE's readiness for negotiation was motivated by the need for international political recognition and accompanying economic assistance, the absence of which represented the hurting stalemate from the LTTE's perspective. This position was stated by its spokesperson Anton Balasingham: "We already have a massive permanent administrative structure in the areas under our control. What we need is international legitimacy so we can coordinate and work with the Sri Lankan government and the international community." (Aglionby 2002). The LTTE had already declared a unilateral ceasefire during the previous government, which had been rejected by the latter. After the new government was elected in 2001 the LTTE declared its second unilateral ceasefire. The new government responded positively and the ceasefire was formalized with the facilitation of the Royal Norwegian government in February 2002. The guns were made silent and the killings stopped. Expressing the Sri Lankan government's interest in promoting foreign investment through the ceasefire agreement, the prime minister, while touring the United States, stated: "I would suggest that a reciprocal force is binding our respective interests together: business is good for peace and peace is good for business" (Sri Lankan Embassy USA 2002).

The unitary state structure with its majoritarian ideology was at its weakest point in history. However, mutual cooperation and consensual negotiations promoted by liberal internationalism (particularly led by the EU) had been under strain after 9/11, and the process of securitizing conventional South Asian states was gaining momentum. The political bargaining capacity of the LTTE had generated serious geopolitical implications, particularly for those international actors, like the United States, United Kingdom, and India, who valued the strategic location of the island with its unitary state structure. However, in such a milieu the ceasefire agreement between the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE was moving towards a peace process that would encourage confidence-building measures between the two parties. This was promoted mainly by the liberal internationalism of the EU. As a result, even though differing in their interests and approaches—at least in the initial phase of the peace process—the international actors adopted a liberal peace agenda characterized by marketization and

democratization in aiming at conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Sri Lanka. As noted by Stokke:

Sri Lanka's peace process emerged from the liberal peace agenda of the 1990s. Sri Lanka's aid donors were committed to making Sri Lanka a showcase for liberal peacebuilding and found like-minded partners in the market-friendly United National government. (2012, 333)

A body called Co-Chairs, comprising the EU, Japan, Norway, and the United States, led the international community in promising development aid that would address immediate humanitarian needs of the war-affected masses in the north and east as well as boost the economy of the south which had been badly affected due to expenditures on war.

The two decades of war that ravaged the island from 1983 to 2002 claimed over 60,000 lives. At least 515,084 people were internally displaced in addition to around one million who had fled the island. Nearly 326,000 housing units were fully or partly destroyed (Elankumaran 2010, 145-146). Beaches, farmlands, and other important bases for livelihoods and social life were filled with nearly a million landmines, while the Sri Lankan security forces had acquired large tracts of civilian land without giving any access to its original Tamil inhabitants. As explained earlier, this devastation caused by war was Tsunami I. With the promise of development aid, hope increased among the Tamils for resettlement, reconstruction and demilitarization that would ensure durable peace. For the Sri Lankan government it meant a flow of foreign investment that could address growing socioeconomic grievances of its southern Sinhala constituency.

The six rounds of talks between the two parties, from September 2002 to April 2003, in major cities in the world focused on joint political structures that would cater to demilitarization, rehabilitation, and resettlement. The parties not only agreed to set up joint committees for these purposes, but actually established such committees which had several meetings. These joint initiatives were of paramount importance in overcoming the hegemony of the unitary state structure and its Sinhala-dominated nationalist ideology, which was the root cause of the conflict. Rather than discussing the final solution to the conflict, which demanded a formal transformation of the unitary state structure, the emphasis was on building confidence between the two parties through joint mechanisms, prioritizing immediate humanitarian needs. However, this approach could not last long due to some of the geopolitical factors that had a negative impact on the *parity of esteem* between the two parties which was crucial for the peace process to move forward. Understanding the geopolitical factors associated with the peace process helps clarify the relationship between the humanitarian space generated by the tsunami and the political conflict.

The Geopolitics of the 2002 Peace Process

As noted earlier, the geopolitics of the peace process had two currents: liberal internationalism led by the EU and the realist/militaristic paradigm promoted by the United States and its allies. The latter current gained predominance in the wake of the invasion of Iraq, in early 2003, which led to rapid securitization of the Middle East and South Asia. It is in this context that the strategic importance of Sri Lanka as an island in the Indian Ocean increased. The Assistant Secretary of State, Christina Rocca, reiterated the position of the United States: “Even as we advance our efforts in the Middle East, South Asia remains at the front-line of the war on terror, and regional stability remains critical.” She also stated that the United States would reform Sri Lanka’s military institutions (*Island* 2003).³

According to a joint article written by a high profile U.S. military officer and senior instructor at the Sri Lanka Military Academy, Sri Lanka is located near four major sea lanes that connect the resource-filled Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea, and Indian Ocean with the South China Sea and the Western Pacific Ocean, linking East and West. The island is “the most ideal location to fulfill a plethora of tasks in furthering not only the security interests of the United States, but those of Sri Lanka and India” (Anderson and Wijeyesekera 2011). It is this strategic importance that underpins the inherent value of the unitary state structure (as was the case during the British Empire), which is perceived to be a more stable political arrangement for the island rather than two states or a confederal arrangement. The U.S. Under Secretary of State, Nicholas Burns, affirmed this position:

The US government is not neutral on its stand on LTTE...The government has a right to try to protect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the country. The government has a right to protect the stability and security in the country... (*Daily Mirror* 2006)

Commenting on the conflicting interests and approaches of the Co-Chairs towards the peace process, a Norwegian academic wrote:

Sri Lanka’s largest aid donor, Japan, has emphasized technical state-to-state development collaboration with relatively weak links to questions of peace and a certain reluctance to employ political conditionalities for aid. The European Union and Norway have given primacy to peace facilitation and have used development aid as a tool to support this goal. The United States has been more concerned with questions of state sovereignty, security and stability than the others, due to their economic and security interests in the Indian Ocean. (Stokke 2012, 333-334)

Considering these approaches, it is easy to see how the U.S. stand took the upper hand over the rest. The first breakdown of the peace process occurred only after the sixth round of talks, which coincided with the invasion of Iraq, in March

2003. Although the sixth round of talks ended on an optimistic note, this moment marked a conflict between the militaristic paradigm, led by the United States and its allies, and the liberal international approach of the EU in international relations. Subsequently the former became predominant.

The United States decided to hold in Washington a preparatory meeting (April 14, 2003) of the planned Tokyo donor conference of the peace process. This decision effectively excluded the LTTE from the hitherto participatory process, as it was a banned organization in the United States. India, which had not attended the previous donor meeting, held in 2002 in Oslo, due to the LTTE's presence, attended the Washington event, directly joining the emerging securitizing and exclusionary process. Up to this point, both the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE had jointly made appeals for development aid as part of confidence-building measures and conflict transformation. The LTTE withdrew from the peace process due to their exclusion from the Washington meeting. There was also a persistent reluctance to allocate funds for the joint committees for demilitarization, rehabilitation and resettlement. As a result these structures became defunct. The strategic interests of the United States (joined by the UK) and of India became very evident by their continuous use of words like "undivided country" and "territorial integrity," which virtually prescribed the character of the ultimate political solution in favor of the unitary state structure. This stand strengthened the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist forces headed by the president (a member of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party that opposed the UNF prime minister's peace moves) who did not want any kind of negotiations or joint structures with the Tamil polity.

Despite unfavorable geopolitical conditions, the prospects for a negotiated peace did not entirely fade away. As the fears of renewed hostilities spread across the country, in May 2004 some parts of the predominantly Sinhala south were affected by massive flooding, displacing a large number of people. Instead of renewing hostilities after its exclusion from the donor meeting in Washington the LTTE took steps to reach out to the Sinhala populace who were affected by the floods. As an act of goodwill the organization sent lorry loads of relief to the Sinhala flood victims. The response of the Sinhala south was positive, as reflected in an editorial in the government-controlled *Daily News*:

North-South, people-to-people bridge-building is likely to receive a tremendous boost as a result of LTTE efforts to go to the assistance of the flood-affected in Southern Sri Lanka... While the negotiatory effort - to be sure - has run into some problems, the peace process, per se, could be said to be alive and well. The Northern organization's willingness to help out in humanitarian relief operations for the flood-affected is one proof of this. This is also evidence that years of ruthless blood-letting have failed to extinguish the flame of humanity in the hearts of the people, although, admittedly, the people have suffered immensely as a result of the conflict, both physically and

psychologically ... This fund of goodwill among the peoples of the land should be steadily built-up ... It is this durable, people-to-people basis which would ensure the continuance of the peace process, come what may. (*Daily News* 2003)

This was a specific moment when the humanitarianism generated by a natural disaster was utilized as a peace-building dynamic at the time of a failing peace process. It helped build the moral and civic space needed for political negotiations. Furthermore, after the failure of joint structures that were set up to address immediate humanitarian needs, there was a pressing need for a set of concrete political proposals that could engage both parties in a process for reviving the peace process. The LTTE came up with a political proposal for an Interim Self-Governing Authority (ISGA) for the north and east to expedite rehabilitation and reconstruction for the affected masses. The EU which had adopted a liberal approach to the peace process—and did not prescribe the character of the political solution as the United States and India did—appreciated this move:

This represents an important step forward in the peace process. The EU Heads of Mission hope that there will now be a resumption of direct talks between the parties aimed at reaching an agreement on a solution acceptable to all communities in Sri Lanka. (*Island* 2003)

The United States and India distanced themselves from considering the proposal as a basis for renewal of negotiations between the two parties. It is at this juncture that the Sinhala nationalist forces, who had been opposing the CFA and the peace process, rallied together under the leadership of the president to topple the UNF government and its moves for political negotiations with the LTTE. A new coalition government of the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) was formed which comprised the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front: JVP), and the far-right Jathika Hela Urumaya (National Heritage Party: JHU) led by Buddhist monks that opposed any negotiations with the LTTE. A prominent Sinhala political scientist commented:

It needs to be noted that the ISGA proposals of October 2003 were the first concrete set of ideas that the LTTE has elaborated as its blueprint for negotiated solution. The moment those proposals were unveiled, Sri Lanka's political establishment plunged into a major crisis, resulting in an open clash between the president and prime minister, dissolution of parliament, and an eventual regime change. This highlighted a core dilemma in Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict management: any settlement proposal emerging from the Tamil polity as a credible offer would far exceed what the Sinhala political class could constructively consider, precisely because it would envisage a radical reconstitution of the existing State. (Uyangoda 2007, 18-19)

The ISGA proposal was never discussed at a formal meeting between the two parties. A government hostile to the entire CFA and the peace process came into power in April 2004. There was growing uncertainty about the future of the peace process. In the absence of political negotiations ceasefire violations by both parties increased, as reported by the Nordic ceasefire-monitoring mission. The Norwegian government continued to make attempts to revive the peace process while the EU upheld its principled position of a negotiated settlement as opposed to a military solution. The local and international NGOs engaged in lobbying for a renewal of the peace process. However, there was neither war nor peace. It was clear that this limbo situation could not last long. In such a limbo situation, conditions for peace can further deteriorate and lead to the outbreak of war and violence if confidence-building measures between the two parties are not adopted. It was at this uncertain moment that the killer waves of the tsunami reached the shores of the island. As both regions were badly affected the humanitarianism that the tsunami generated was crucial in making attempts to overcome the existing political uncertainty. We now address the question: Did the political space for a negotiated peace widen due to this humanitarianism or did the situation change for the worse, endangering human security?

Tsunami: The Politics of Conflict and Peace

On the one hand, responses to the tsunami by the two main parties, as well as by international actors, reflected the existing tensions surrounding the peace process. On the other hand, the tragedy caused by the tsunami also generated a humanitarian space that could de-ethnicize the conflict and encourage joint initiatives that could have a positive impact on reviving the peace process. The humanitarian response gained the upper hand at first, but this did not last long. It is instructive to closely examine the various responses.

Some of the Sri Lankan state owned media as well as top officials of the security forces were quick to announce (wrongly) that large scores of LTTE combatants, including their top leadership, were among the dead. The GoSL would have liked to imagine the natural disaster as a military victory over the LTTE. This response was a clear indication of the increasing opposition in the Sinhala south towards peace efforts. In contrast, the LTTE's response reflected the urgency for humanitarian assistance on the basis of de-ethnicized politics. Its naval commander stated the following, two days after the tragedy:

The Sri Lankan government should not look at this as a Sinhala or Tamil issue. It should see it as a human tragedy and help. We should now ensure that the people rescued from the Tsunami devastation are protected from diseases rather than let the enormity of the tragedy make us inactive. The government of Sri Lanka should

consider our people also as human beings. (*Tamilnet* 2004)

The United States sent its airmen, Marine Corps engineers, and Navy Seabees with hovercrafts and Marine helicopters to the areas under the Sri Lankan government (Rhem 2005). India and Pakistan followed the same approach. However, even though the stated intention was humanitarian, these gestures can be analyzed within the context of the 2002 CFA and peace process, also taking into consideration the U.S. policy for strengthening ties with the states in South Asia as a frontier with the Middle East.⁴ Evaluating the presence of foreign troops in Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the tsunami in a highly ethno-political context, the Anglican Bishop of Colombo made the following statement:

Being mindful however of current geo-politics and power struggles that particularly threaten and exploit the more vulnerable countries, it is imperative that once the task of relief is complete, these military personnel should return to their home base. (*Sunday Times* 2005a)

In the meantime, the leader of the JVP (a party that had been in the forefront of opposing the ceasefire agreement and the peace process with the LTTE) considered the presence of foreign troops, including those from the United States, as gestures of “friendship to Sri Lanka” (*News Sunday Times* 2005b).

The UN followed a humanitarian approach, in a way reflecting the position of the EU and Norway. However, the Sri Lankan government restricted the special visit made by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to the areas under its control and prevented him from visiting the LTTE-controlled areas. The EU policy statement clearly reiterated the need for “a fair allocation of resources between the northeast and the south of the country” (European Commission 2012). In practical terms the approach that the EU adopted required resumption of negotiations between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. There was an agreement among donors that progress first had to be made with the peace process (*ibid.*). The Norwegian facilitators utilized the peace dynamic of the humanitarian crisis created by the tsunami and continued to meet both parties in an attempt to revive negotiations. The awareness of this peace dynamic was not altogether absent within the Sinhala polity despite increasing opposition to negotiations with the LTTE. There were voices that understood how the humanitarian space could be transformed into a political space to revive the peace process. The head of the Sri Lankan government’s Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process (who was a former UN diplomat) signaled this possibility as early as January 2005, stating that “there is a greater base on which we [the Sri Lankan government and LTTE] can work together. After the tsunami disaster, there is a remarkable opportunity created to resume the stalled peace talks....” He also acknowledged that the accessibility to rush the urgent assistance to the north and east was hindered

during the first three days and recognized that the LTTE had shown remarkable efficiency in handling rescue and relief efforts in such a difficult circumstance (*Tamilnet* 2005). In response to this humanitarian pressure, particularly from the EU, the Sri Lankan government signed an agreement with the LTTE, in June 2005, to form a joint mechanism, called the Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS), to address immediate humanitarian needs caused by the disaster. However this was done not without serious tensions within the Sinhala polity. I will first assess the significance of P-TOMS as a step towards reviving the peace process and then move on to discuss the tensions that eventually led to a military solution.

As shown earlier, the Tsunami occurred during a prolonged stalemate in the peace process (April 2003–December 2004) at a time when fears of resumption of hostilities were spreading. When one analyzes these fears it is important to keep in mind the advancement of the military paradigm led by the United States and the UK as distinct from the liberal internationalism of the EU.⁵ Moreover, during this stalemate the government that had entered into the ceasefire agreement and the peace process with the LTTE had been defeated by a coalition government of the United People's Freedom Alliance. The US/UK military paradigm (supported by India) associated with geo-strategic interests favored the Sri Lankan state's sovereignty and territorial integrity as opposed to the LTTE's de facto state in the north and east of the island. In fact, the main prerequisite for the revival of the peace process was some kind of an agreement for a joint structure between the two parties, at least as an interim arrangement, to expedite the process of reconstruction and rehabilitation in the north and east. The history of the conflict had proven that such a process would not work under the existing sovereignty of the Sri Lankan unitary state system.

At the time of the tsunami the Sinhala nationalist groups had regained their bargaining power within the Sinhala polity. Among them there was growing confidence in a military solution due to the continuous support given to the maintenance and promotion of the unitary state structure by the United States, the UK, and India. Nevertheless, the humanitarian space created by the magnitude of the disastrous tsunami strengthened liberal internationalist trends worldwide which could not be simply overtaken by a military agenda that supported the unitary state structure in the name of the so-called Global War on Terrorism. In the eyes of the global humanitarian and human rights communities (the UN, the EU, aid and humanitarian agencies, etc.), it was clear that the north and east of the island had been doubly affected even though the Sri Lankan government and Sinhala nationalist media did not recognize this reality in public. On the one hand, the Sri Lankan government needed international aid not only for immediate relief, but also for long-term reconstruction and development. On the other hand, international humanitarianism that was evoked by the plight of the victims of the tsunami could not be tapped by the Sri Lankan government

without any reference to the north and east, however much it tried to give the figures of victims and losses of property in abstract terms. This means that without some kind of an agreement with the LTTE regarding a joint mechanism to implement relief and reconstruction work the international support, particularly of the EU, would have been reduced. It is this kind of economic reasoning that had also led the previous Sri Lankan government to respond positively to the ceasefire agreement with the LTTE in 2002 and subsequently enter into a peace process. In this sense, steps taken to enter into joint initiatives with the LTTE (which were initially refused by the new government) signified prospects of a revival of the peace process. A government official publicly admitted that the government had been engaging in “informal talks” with the LTTE in the aftermath of the disaster (*Tamilnet* 2005). Moreover, P-TOMS was supported by the main Sinhala opposition party (United National Party) which had led the previous government.

In an attempt to build support for a negotiated settlement many civil society organizations in the Sinhala south traveled to the LTTE-controlled areas with humanitarian aid. In this sense, within the increasing Sinhala opposition towards any negotiations with the LTTE the coordination of relief and reconstruction was not simply humanitarian, but a highly political move that relativized the unitary state structure. A range of academics and human rights and peace activists recognized the peacebuilding dynamic of the tsunami: “The tsunami disaster offered an unprecedented opportunity for the two parties to begin a new process of engagement and cooperation...” (Uyangoda 2007, 24). “The Tsunami created a space where the two contending parties could engage with each other on humanitarian issues” (Liyanage 2008, 152). “The post-tsunami recovery phase offered a platform for the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE to cooperate in rebuilding the country. In other words, it gave a new dimension to work on existing ceasefire agreement. New openings for new engagements sounded very positive and promising, especially for the tsunami survivors, most of whom had already been experiencing the adversities caused by violent conflict” (Divakalala 2010, 191).

The peace dynamic of the tsunami represented not the mere potential or wishful thinking of those who normatively supported a negotiated settlement. It was concretely evident through various interactions between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, both on the informal and formal levels. P-TOMS could have been a form of a shared humanitarian sovereignty that would have both de-securitized and de-ethnicized the conflict while reviving the peace process. With this mechanism the absolutism of the colonially carved and post-colonially consolidated unitary state structure, which is the root cause of the decades-long, ethno-nationalist conflict, could have been relativized. The question arises then: Why couldn't P-TOMS be sustained, or how did its peace dynamic turn into a conflict catalyst? While one group of actors were grappling with the

humanitarian urgency which led to P-TOMS another group was engaged with an urgency to consolidate their political, diplomatic, and military power in regaining the dismantled unitary state structure and its attendant exclusivist national identity. The coalition partners of the UPFA government, the JVP and the JHU, organized protest campaigns separately against P-TOMS, treating it as a betrayal of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country. Prior to the signing of P-TOMS the JVP quit the government in protest against the agreement. After the signing the JVP filed a fundamental rights application in the Supreme Court and obtained an interim injunction order against the most important clauses of the joint structure that recognized LTTE as a regional stakeholder. As stated earlier, the JVP hailed the presence of foreign troops on the island and the party leader at another occasion before the tsunami had requested the United States to fully implement its Global War on Terrorism policies in Sri Lanka. In the battle between the JVP and the JHU to build each one's Sinhala voter base, the JHU put forward a religiously defined set of demands to the government saying that without the approval of the chief Buddhist monks of the country P-TOMS should not be implemented. They also organized fast-unto-death campaigns led by Buddhist monks opposing the mechanism. Pursuing its strategic and securitizing agenda, the United States decided not to allocate funds to P-TOMS as the LTTE was party to it. This decision was first revealed by the JHU at a press conference after a meeting with the U.S. ambassador in Colombo (*Sri Lankan News and Discussions* 2005).

The collapse of the peace process and of P-TOMS took place due to geopolitical and ideological reasons rather than to economic reasons surrounding distribution of aid between the two parties. Often in literature the liberal peace model that prioritizes development (as marketization) as a means to conflict resolution and peacebuilding is criticized for contributing to the failure of peace processes (e.g., Richmond 2009). This critique is valid in the cases where global market interests predominate over the needs of those who have been affected by a conflict. In the case of Sri Lanka, it has been argued that within an ethnographically divided society distribution of development aid (associated with a neoliberal economic agenda of the global market) became a highly contested terrain to the extent of derailing the peace process (Stokke 2012). By extension this argument could be applied to the failure of P-TOMS. This analysis does not make a distinction between the two main operational dimensions of global capital, that is its free market face and the military face. It is true that these two are interrelated, but there are contexts where the military paradigm is opposed by some countries to protect markets and trade. In the case of Sri Lanka, the position taken by countries within the EU, particularly led by Germany, reflected market-based calculations. The tension between these two faces was clearly visible in the wake of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by the U.S.-led forces, which was opposed by many EU countries led by France and Germany.

One could argue that the Sinhala semi-urban and rural middle classes, who had been disillusioned by the traditional political parties that spearheaded neoliberal economic reforms demanded by the global market, rallied around Sinhala nationalist parties like the JVP and JHU in opposing the peace process and P-TOMS (Bastian 2007; Liyanage 2008). However, a closer look at their opposition reveals ideological (Sinhala Buddhist national identity) and political (unitary state structure) factors rather than economic reasons. In other words, the aim of the opposition was to claim partnership with global capital for the Sinhala Buddhist unitary state, excluding the Tamils in the north and east as equal stakeholders. So much so that the JVP went to the extent of requesting their Sinhala constituency to bear up under economic hardships for the sake of national interests. The JHU never undertook any protests reflecting the economic grievances of their Sinhala constituency. Both the JHU and the JVP laid heavy emphasis on the perceived threat posed by the LTTE rather than on economic grievances caused by continuing marketization of the economy. For these two parties the EU's equidistant approach, whereby both parties were treated with parity of esteem was the main bone of contention, not the EU's economic agenda. In this sense, the U.S./UK's (supported by India) strategic interests in the Indian Ocean, the military paradigm and its exclusionary position regarding LTTE bolstered the Sinhala nationalist forces leading the latter to realize that they had powerful allies in the world. As a result anti-CFA and anti-peace process currents spread far and wide within the Sinhala constituency awakening the hope of a military victory. This militaristic political climate was totally different from the political context that informed the 2002 ceasefire agreement. With the promise of a military victory the UPFA's candidate Mahinda Rajapaksa (vehemently supported by JHU and JVP) became president in the elections held in November 2005. War was declared first in the election platform rather than on the battlefields of the north and east. The United States/UK and India reiterated their support for the new government.

P-TOMS was in a way the last chance to revive the peace process whereby the intransigent character of the unitary state structure could have been changed facilitating a form of shared sovereignty with the Tamil polity. It also could have contained, to some extent, the growing securitizing process surrounding the Indian Ocean. However, for the same reasons it also became a theater of consolidation of power by different forces for ideological/political (Sinhala polity) and geopolitical (U.S./UK and India) reasons. In retrospect, could the P-TOMS have really stopped the final phase of the war and the large-scale massacre of Tamils by the Sri Lankan security forces?

In Retrospect: Could P-TOMS have Stopped the Massacres?

The events that unfolded after the collapse of P-TOMS reflected not only an advancement of a military option by the Sri Lankan government, but also the weakening of the EU's liberal institution-building approach towards the island which had promoted a parity of esteem between the two parties. In May 2006, only a few months after the victory of President Mahinda Rajapaksa, during the UK government's period of the EU presidency, the EU banned the LTTE as a terrorist organization. The reason given was violation of human rights by the LTTE, but the ban went against the EU's stated principle of a negotiated settlement and reflected a selective application of human rights standards to conflict zones. After the collapse of P-TOMS it was evident that, in the political vacuum generated by the absence of meaningful political negotiations, there were violations of the ceasefire and human rights by both parties. This may have been avoided if the political process had been promoted rather than the securitizing process that furthered violence. Prior to the ban, the EU consulted the head of the Nordic-led ceasefire monitoring mission, Swedish Major General Ulf Henricsson, who advised the EU not to go ahead with the ban as it would strengthen the Sri Lankan government's war drive. Henricsson revealed that the EU went ahead with the ban under pressure from the U.S. and UK governments (Henricsson 2007). The foreign minister of the Sri Lankan government at that time later confirmed the differences between some members of EU and the U.S. government in this regard:

Then, seven countries in the 25-member EU did not agree with the LTTE ban, and it became a difficulty to adopt the ban as a unanimous decision. Therefore, I met Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice several times and through the offices of Deputy Secretary of State Nicholas Burns, got the consent of those seven nations to proscribe the LTTE on 29 May 2006. (Samaraweera 2012)

The military operations of the GoSL started from the adjunct regions of the strategic Trincomalee harbor in mid-2007, which was the exact location that was recommended by the security assessment report given by the U.S. Pacific Command in 2002 (see endnote 5). As the war intensified and moved towards the north the UN agencies, at the request of the GoSL, decided to leave the region in October 2008. *The Report of the Secretary-General's Internal Panel on United Nations Action in Sri Lanka* (Petrie Report) (UN 2012) revealed that not a single Security Council meeting was held on the situation in Sri Lanka at a time that a massive war was causing heavy civilian casualties. Sir John Holmes, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator at the time, later acknowledged that "there was a bit of a diplomatic dance around it all; with everybody knowing that the end of this

was going to be an inevitable military victory for the government” (Channel 4 2012).

It has been revealed that some of the EU member states of the Co-Chairs had wanted to pressure the Sri Lankan government to stop its military operations, but that they were prevented by other international members of the Co-Chairs (Wikileaks Cable 2009). At last the Co-Chairs, which had initially adopted a policy of aiding resolution of the conflict through development aid, demanded that the LTTE surrender and release civilians to the government-controlled areas (ibid.). This was a total reversal from their position regarding the 2002 ceasefire agreement, which was built upon the balance of power between the two parties. From the EU side it also signified a shift in their position regarding the ISGA proposal and P-TOMS, which promoted parity of esteem between the two parties and a negotiated political settlement as opposed to a military option. The change in the EU’s position not only reveals the pressure arising from the United States/UK but also the inherent weaknesses of the EU’s liberal internationalism which needs to be critiqued separately.

In May 2009, just four years after P-TOMS was abandoned, the UPFA-led government officially announced its military victory over the LTTE. The official military victory marked the total destruction of the Tamil de facto state, its leadership, and thousands of combatants. The de facto state that had covered around 15,000 square kilometers during the peace process was reduced to one square kilometer in the last phase of the war with a population of around 300,000, leading to a bloodbath (Hull and Sirilal 2009). Analyzing statistics of population given by the Sri Lankan government (which still maintains a zero civilian casualty figure) the Bishop of Mannar revealed at least 146,000 people went unaccounted for during the last phase of the war (UN 2012, 38-39). In fact, the Sinhala nationalist political parties and groups who backed the presidency of Mahinda Rajapaksa did so with a view to abrogating the ceasefire agreement and regaining the unitary state structure through a military option. These parties and groups consolidated their ideological and political power within the context of their opposition to P-TOMS in mid-2005.

P-TOMS could have reduced the chances of war on several grounds. First of all, it was a joint mechanism between the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE that engaged both parties in the reconstruction of affected areas. In the presence of such institutional arrangements the space for use of violence by both parties as an extension of politics could have been constrained. The reports of the Nordic-led ceasefire monitoring mission clearly reveals how there were fewer violations of the ceasefire during the initial rounds of peace talks between the two parties and their moves towards formation of joint committees. These violations increased in the absence of political negotiations and collapse of the initial joint committees of the peace process. These violations then decreased drastically in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami. It is most probable that P-TOMS could have reduced

the violations of the ceasefire, as members of both parties had to meet to address immediate humanitarian needs and reconstruction. Furthermore these concrete engagements on the ground could have dispelled, to some extent, mutual misconceptions and misinterpretations of each other and contained Sinhala nationalist opposition towards the ceasefire agreement. As stated by the head of the government's Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process himself, such steps distanced the prospects of the country returning to war (*Tamilnet* 2005). In fact, as both the main leading traditional political parties (United National Party and Sri Lankan Freedom Party) supported P-TOMS it would have been difficult for them to oppose it in the presidential election campaign that started just a few months after the signing of P-TOMS. The benefits of the peace agenda based on reconstruction and rehabilitation would have been a shared interest for the two main traditional political parties as well.

Had P-TOMS been implemented, the involvement of the donor countries in relief and reconstruction work could have strengthened the moves towards a negotiated settlement as opposed to a militaristic option. The EU's insistence on resumption of joint initiatives (through P-TOMS) between the two parties as a conditionality for aid had a positive impact on ending the prolonged peace process stalemate and to some extent contained the U.S./UK-led securitizing agenda that boosted the Sinhala nationalist forces. The EU's external pressure for a joint structure corresponded with the pressing needs of both the war- and tsunami-affected masses (in both regions) on the ground. Furthermore, this external pressure was needed to stop a resumption of a high-intensity war. In this sense, every external pressure cannot be considered as negative, as there are moments when these pressures correspond with the need for stopping wars and for peacebuilding. In the case of Northern Ireland, for example, the pressure arising from the EU and the United States played a positive role in brokering the peace agreement between the two main parties in conflict. In the case of Sri Lanka, the EU laid more emphasis on building human security through economic development whereas the United States for strategic reasons made an intrinsic link between militarized state building and human security. The latter paradigm helped the Sinhala polity to be shareholders of global capital, excluding the Tamils. Had P-TOMS been operational both parties could have utilized global capital flowing through aid in a creative way, furthering processes of development, democratization, and protection of human rights throughout the island. In retrospect, therefore, P-TOMS could be considered the last chance that emerged to relativize the unitary state structure and introduce the practice of shared sovereignty to the island in its basic form—the humanitarian form.

In the aftermath of the official end of the war, north and east have been completely brought under the unitary state system whereby massive structural transformation of the region has been undertaken by the GoSL and its security forces through militarization, Sinhala settlements, establishment of Sinhala

Buddhist shrines, and acquisition of key commercial and trading locations. Despite alleged large-scale human rights violations by the government during the last phase of the war and its aftermath—which were raised in the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) by U.S.-sponsored resolutions (with the support of its allies) in 2012, 2013 and 2014—the Sri Lankan state structure is being strengthened by the same U.S.-led allies militarily and diplomatically. China, in a move to expand its sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean as opposed to the United States and India, has emerged as the main donor of the Sri Lankan government. Even after the regime change in 2015 the GoSL continues to categorically oppose any international investigation into the human rights violations during the last phase of the war, while declining to offer a substantial power-sharing mechanism to the Tamils in the north and east. In September 2015, the United States and the GoSL co-sponsored a resolution in the UNHRC for a domestic investigation into alleged human rights violations. While the GoSL has promised its Sinhala constituency that it will protect the rights of the country's war heroes, the U.S. State Department, in a press release, has hailed them as those “who conducted themselves with honor and professionalism” (U.S. Department of State 2015). It is within the above international context that the missed political opportunity of P-TOMS and instead the advancement of the military paradigm have to be analyzed and understood.

Conclusion

The impact of a natural disaster gives rise to an immediate sense of humanitarianism as happened in the aftermath of the tsunami in Sri Lanka. This sense generates a moral space within the public domain that has the potential to bypass various social, political, ethnic, ethno-nationalist, religious, as well as international divisions signifying the need for an *idealpolitik*. However, people do not always live in a Platonic type of moral space, but rather within different types of power relationships. In that sense, the impact of a natural disaster can also be determined by the existing power relations among different social and political classes, ethno-nationalist communities, states, and global actors which signify *realpolitik*. Neither *realpolitik* nor *idealpolitik* can operate without political power, which is defined by certain material capabilities. In that sense there is an overlapping area between these two paradigms. The differences between the two are based on values, interests, and approaches of the actors involved.

In assessing the impact of the tsunami on the ethno-nationalist conflict in Sri Lanka it is important to assess the capabilities of the parties involved and their values, interests, and approaches. The military balance of power that existed between the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE—the latter having a conventional army and a highly organized civil administration with popular support—was

instrumental in the bargaining that produced P-TOMS. This balance of power built a symmetrical relationship between the two ethno-nationalist communities overcoming the dominance of the exclusivist unitary state structure. In Aceh Sumatra, the existing asymmetrical relationship between the two parties in conflict at the time of the tsunami led to the advancement of Indonesian troops into the region and to dismantling the capabilities of the militants who had been claiming independence. This eventually led to a peace deal between the two parties on the basis of autonomy (which the militants had rejected before the tsunami) for the region rather than total independence. The militants in Aceh Sumatra could not consolidate their power amongst the masses affected by the tsunami by controlling and distributing aid due to strategic moves made by the Indonesian military. Whereas in Sri Lanka the LTTE utilized its full capabilities in attending to immediate humanitarian needs and gained further popular support from the masses. The tsunami did not destroy their bargaining power at the negotiating table as in the case of the militants in Aceh Sumatra. In fact, by the time of the tsunami the political tension in Sri Lanka had been not between a weak militant entity and a powerful state, but between two strong political entities that exercised two forms of state power. The main issue between them had been interim joint mechanisms (such as the ISGA) between these two entities as measures of confidence building. The tsunami accentuated the need for such mechanisms based on the balance of power.

It would be misleading to analyze the power configurations of the local actors through a single state lens. The symmetrical relationship between the two parties in Sri Lanka was promoted by the liberal internationalist model of the EU which had global economic capacity, whereas the United States aimed at an undivided territorial sovereignty in Sri Lanka as part of a geostrategic structure, which favored the Sri Lankan government. This contributed to an asymmetrical relationship between the government and the LTTE. The moment of the tsunami was utilized to further strategic interests. This does not mean that the local power dynamics, particularly within the Sinhala polity, did not play a role at all in dismantling P-TOMS. There is interdependence between the internal and external factors in our age of capitalist globalization. The impact that these factors had on the situation has to be assessed by the degree of their capabilities in changing power relationships. It was evident that the capabilities of the geostrategic structure led by the United States/UK and India brought to bear more power on the situation than the liberal internationalism of the EU, which was later weakened by the former actors. Furthermore, a major war against the Tamil *de facto* state could not have been waged by the Sri Lankan government purely on the basis of the Sinhala nationalist ideological and political power had they not been empowered by the global military paradigm in many concrete ways. Power has to be defined not only by ideological and political forces but also by economic, diplomatic, military, technological, and geostrategic capabilities.

The massive death toll could have been avoided had the last attempts towards a joint tsunami-response mechanism been sustained and promoted considering that at the time the joint mechanism was being negotiated the war drive within the island was not powerful.

There is plenty of literature on the issues of governance questioning transparency and accountability of distribution of tsunami relief. Within a clientelistic and paternalistic system of governance in a country like Sri Lanka distribution of tsunami aid was never transparent. In fact, the word “tsunami” gained several popular meanings given by the public implying how it was a blessing in disguise for those in power to fill their pockets. Construction contracts were given to party supporters. Areas to be reconstructed were prioritized along party political lines. Many scholars also lament the missed political opportunity surrounding the tsunami. However in all of these analyses the missing element is questioning the ethics of the geostrategic political structure of Sri Lanka, and the values, interests, and approaches of the global military paradigm that maintained this structure at the expense of thousands of human lives.

There is a need for a revival of the genuine humanitarian and human rights community in the world, particularly with a geopolitical consciousness, not simply to question the ethics of governance, but also of state structures associated with geostrategic politics that promote a military paradigm in resolving ethno-nationalist conflicts. This public consciousness should aim at pressuring countries that are less inclined towards the military paradigm to invest their economic capabilities in helping to overcome asymmetrical power relations that determine the impact of natural disasters. The moral space created by the humanitarian urgency does not bind different groups of people for a long duration. Shared memories of pain wither away quickly if this moral space is not transformed into a political force through idealpolitik, which also requires some material capabilities as well as ethical and political leadership.

Notes

1. For a gender analysis of the impact of the tsunami in Sri Lanka, see Neloufer de Mel, et al., eds. *After the Waves: The Impact of the Tsunami on Women in Sri Lanka*, Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 2010.
2. To put the country on a “war footing” the defense budget had to be increased from Rs 48 billion (1999) to Rs 80 billion (2000) which was unbearable as the country's foreign exchange reserves had dwindled since mid-2000 (Kelegama 2001, 2665).
3. Since the end of the Cold War Sri Lanka's strategic importance has increased for both trade and warfare as the Indian Ocean and its adjacent waters have become a central theater of global conflict and competition in this century. The U.S. *Marine Corps Vision and Strategy 2025* places a high value on the Indian Ocean in the emerging power dynamics between the United States and China, China and India, and India and the United States

(Kaplan 2009, 25).

4. There were two main tsunami-affected locations that drew the attention of the U.S. government more than other places in Asia. These were the conflict zones in Aceh Sumatra in Indonesia and the north and east of Sri Lanka, which had coastlines that are strategically pivotal in the growing conflict between China and the United States. The U.S. government rapidly deployed large numbers of servicemen with a range of sophisticated aircrafts, helicopters and naval vessels in Aceh Sumatra immediately after the disaster on the basis of its already established economic and strategic ties with the region. Signaling the intention behind humanitarian support, the U.S. ambassador to Indonesia later stated: “One thing the Indonesians are never going to forget is who was there first” (U.S. Department of Defense 2005).
5. In fact, in October 2002, just eight months after signing of the ceasefire agreement, at a time when there was popular support for a negotiated settlement, the U.S. government sent a team of naval officers to Trincomalee harbor to conduct a security assessment. The report they presented to the Sri Lankan Defense Ministry clearly detailed the ways and means of winning a future war against the LTTE (Athas 2003; Moorcraft 2012, 110).

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Jude Lal Fernando is Assistant Professor at the Irish School of Ecumenics in Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and the Director of the Centre for Post-Conflict Justice in TCD. He was a visiting Professor at the Tampere University in Finland and Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto, Japan. Some of his most recent publications are "The Geopolitics of Peace and Conflict in Sri Lanka: Negotiated Peace versus Victor's Peace" (*Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 2014) and "The Role of Christianity in Peace and Conflict in Asia" (*Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*, 2014). Email: fernanla@tcd.ie

