

LTTE narratives in Tamilnet: Independent media or Tiger proxy

Abstract

There has been much speculation over Tamilnet's relationship with the terrorist group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, and while Tamilnet fulfills a vital role in providing news coverage of a conflict theater that is subjected to the government's draconian censorship, it has been frequently argued that Tamilnet is an elaborate media front designed to disseminate Tiger narratives.

This paper focuses on this alleged role of Tamilnet, not with the objective of labeling it a terrorist proxy, but in a bid to separate pro-Tiger narratives that may be of strategic use to the LTTE, from other news covered by the cyber news service.

Ubayasiri, Kasun

Queensland University of Technology

“Tamilnet is the unofficial mouthpiece of the Tigers in English. It is a kind of news agency chronicling the conflict as perceived by the LTTE. The site is a ‘must hit’ for any serious Sri Lanka watcher. A senior official in the Presidential Secretariat told Frontline – my first port of call on the internet is Tamilnet. Though it is brazenly pro-Tigers, it is a good guide to know the mind of the Tiger leadership tucked away in the safe havens of the Wannai jungles.”

Journalist Muralidhar Reddy

Frontline (June 2-15, 2007)

“The LTTE operates only one website, that is the Peace Secretariat ... Tamilnet is not a LTTE organ but it does report the truth.”

Naresh Master, LTTE Media Unit chief

July 2006

Introduction

It has been argued that Tamilnet; has consistently sided with the LTTE, frequently denying a news voice to other Eelamist political actors; has openly admitted its pro-Eelamist stance while covertly promoting distinctly Tiger propaganda such as the *Inside Report*, was established by its pro-Tiger chief editor Sivaram, allegedly through Norwegian funding from Tiger and Eelamist financiers¹. As such it can be argued that Tamilnet is not only pro-LTTE but even a proxy of the LTTE.

However, through its prolific coverage of a region otherwise largely ignored by mainstream media, Tamilnet has become an accepted alternative news source for the Sri Lankan conflict, filling a news void largely created through three decades of state-imposed media restrictions.

Similarly, having argued the LTTE's strategic need to disseminate Tiger narratives frequently ignored by the Colombo-centric mainstream media, and

¹ These Eelamist financiers are also highly likely to be pro-Tiger if they continue to support Tamilnet, which despite its denials, systematically fails to offer news voice to other Eelamist political actors.

having suggested that Tamilnet was established to fulfil this strategic need, it is therefore important to isolate and compare Tamilnet narratives with core Tiger narratives to understand the relationship between the two actors.

In this context this paper focuses on how the LTTE's three key narratives – militaristic-terror, political and socio-cultural, are reported by Tamilnet.

Socio-cultural narratives

The LTTE's socio-cultural narratives include:

- (i) The LTTE's interpretation of the Thimpu principles and the undeniable existence of Eelam;
- (ii) The promotion of the LTTE-run quasi-state in the north and east as the proto-Eelam state complete with LTTE-run infrastructure such as a legal system, law enforcement agency and community services;
- (iii) The notion of the Tigers as the sole representatives of the Eelam Tamils.

Thimpu principles and the notion of a Tamil homeland

The centrality of the four-point Thimpu declaration² in the quest for Eelam has already been discussed in previous chapters. However, it should be noted that these four cardinal principles outlining the unequivocal existence of a distinct Tamil nation which occupies the geographical space of a Tamil homeland, not only provides the foundation and justification for a Tiger *armed* struggle, but is also subtly reinterpreted by the Tigers so that the notion of an LTTE-Eelam has become the dominant paradigm of Tamil nationalism.

Therefore the present argument of a Tamilnet-LTTE nexus should isolate Tamilnet's Thimpu narratives and compare them with the arguments of both the LTTE and the greater Eelamist lobby. While acknowledging the existence of two, or more, parallel Eelamist narratives, it should be noted that the *Tiger* interpretation of Eelam has become the dominant paradigm as a

² The declaration argues the need for recognition of the Tamils of Sri Lanka as a nation; recognition of the existence of an identified homeland for the Tamils in Sri Lanka; recognition of the right of self-determination of the Tamil nation; and the recognition of the right to citizenship and the fundamental rights of all Tamils who look upon the island as their country.

result of the LTTE's political and military subjugation of other Eelamists – as such the contemporary notion of Eelam is somewhat synonymous with LTTE-Eelam.

A word search using Tamilnet's internal search function suggests 409 reports containing the words *Tamil nation* (January 2008–June 1997). It is also perhaps interesting to note that a random analysis of 41 (10%) of reports suggest every report is framed through an LTTE interpretation of Eelam. In this context it can be argued that while the supposition of a Tamil nation remains a central argument in the Thimpu declaration, the subsequent claims of the Tamil nation's subjugation by the Sinhala government of Sri Lanka which has culminated in an inevitable armed struggle for Tamil national freedom can be interpreted as a Tiger argument, where the Tamil national struggle is synonymous with the LTTE's armed struggle.

While Tamilnet itself makes no comment with respect to the Eelamist lobby's need to support the Tiger cause, the news service carries a significant number of reports by so-called independent commentators urging Tamils to support the LTTE. However, there are no reports which suggest the possibility of a Tiger definition of Eelam not fully comprehending the ideological needs of a wider notion of Tamil Eelam. In one such report supporting the Tigers, Tamilnet wrote: "Extending moral support to the Liberation Tigers, on seeing the Tamils' sufferings in Sri Lanka was not a crime in any way, said Thol Thirumavalavan, General Secretary of the Tamilnadu-based Viduthalai Chiruthaika'l Kadchi ..." (Tamilnet December 17, 2007).

An impartial observer to Tamil suffering may concede the need for an Eelam which would offer all Tamils political autonomy and a geographic homeland. This argument appreciates the existence of a greater Eelamist lobby of which the LTTE is merely one part. However, though a pro-LTTE point of view, including that of Thirumavalavan, the impression is that the LTTE is the only champion of the Tamil people and its campaign is fought, not for Eelam, but for Tiger-Eelam. This pro-Tiger argument also pays no heed to the suffering of the Tamil people caused by the LTTE's politico-military campaign, which includes the annihilation of opposing Eelamist factions.

The pro-LTTE interpretations of Eelam are also evident in the analysis of a number of reports isolated through a site-specific word search of Tamilnet on Google for the word *nation*. These reports include an English translation of an article written by Sivaram (May 13, 2005)³. The article, headlined Sinhala

³ First published in the Tamil language newspaper *Virakesari* on November 21, 2004.

Nation, refusing to share national wealth – Taraki’’ claims the Tigers’ “demand for an independent administrative arrangement and funds to rehabilitate and rebuild the infrastructure of the Tamil homeland is due to the government’s failure to allocate any financial resources to any of the districts of the NorthEast (sic) province except to Amparai and Trincomalee districts where significant fraction of the population is Sinhalese. The Government Agent of Jaffna recently ... (said) ‘the Sri Lankan Government has not allocated even a single cent for the development of Jaffna district’.” However, a review of the 2004 budget by the economist Muttukrishna Sarvananthan (November 2003) suggest the “North and East Provincial Council is allocated the highest per capita expenditure of LKR 3,682 while the Western Provincial Council is allocated the lowest per capita expenditure of LKR 785.”⁴ Similarly all public servants within the LTTE-controlled areas, including school teachers, are paid by the government, while the LTTE continues to extract tax in areas under its control⁵.

Eelam: The quasi Tiger state

The LTTE’s quasi-state in the north and east, geographically occupying the confines of the purported Tamil homeland, is presented as a proto-Eelam state where acceptance of the civil administrative structure and the socio-cultural acceptance of the Tiger demarcated Eelam state, further strengthens not just the possibility of realising Eelam in the purported Tamil homeland, but the possibility of delivering an LTTE-run Eelam state.

Tiger registry of persons: Tamilnet has continued to present the LTTE administrative apparatus in the Tamil homeland, such as the LTTE-run judiciary, police force, central bank and tax office, as a template for the Eelam state. This administrative apparatus includes the introduction of motor vehicle registration and more recently a Registry of Persons.

⁴ Within the north and east the report claims “Ampara and Vavuniya District Secretariats are the recipients of highest per capita expenditure around LKR 260 while Batticaloa District Secretariat receives the lowest per capita expenditure of LKR 188.”

⁵ It should also be noted that rural Sri Lanka, irrespective of race, has frequently lamented second-rate treatment, exemplified by the Sinhala saying *Colambata kiri apita kakkiri* – directly translated as “milk for Colombo and *kakiri* (a type of tasteless watery gourd) for us”. This presumption has been at the centre of not only the northern conflict, but also the JVP uprising in 1971 and 1988-89 in the deep south.

On January 1, 2007, Tamilnet⁶ reported: “The Civil Administration in ... (LTTE) administered regions in NorthEast has launched Tamileelam National Registry of Persons⁷ ... ” which “will function similar to the Social Security Number (SSN) used in many western democracies, where the number uniquely identifies an individual ...” Interestingly, Tamilnet opted for an international and less politically volatile comparison of the LTTE identification system, instead of drawing the obvious parallel between it and the government’s own National ID card⁸, which has come under criticism from Tamil lobbyists and fundamental rights activists for its use in⁹ the registration of Tamils at local police stations. The National ID card has also been used by both the government and the LTTE to track the movement of citizens who cross the A9 highway into and out of the LTTE-controlled Wann¹⁰. Despite this chequered history Tamilnet was reluctant to raise any concerns over the LTTE National Registry¹¹.

LTTE police: Tamilnet has published a significant number of reports highlighting the establishment of an LTTE police force to “provide security and maintain order in the area” (November 19, 2002). In one such report it said the “recently opened (LTTE) Police station in Palugamam has recorded 135 complaints from the residents ... in the last two weeks ... civilians from Government controlled areas too are seeking help ... (while) villagers say that

⁶ In a report headlined “Tamileelam National Registry of Persons established”.

⁷ “The programme was inaugurated by the Commissioner of Tamil Eelam Department of Registration of Persons, S Jeyenthiran, by issuing the first national identity card to LTTE leader Velupillai Pirapaharan [sic]” (Tamilnet, January 1, 2007).

⁸ “The Registration Number will be used by the Tamil Eelam administration as the main index in most computerized administrative records of individuals including tax records, employee records, patient records, student records, and credit records”. The report also claimed government officials in the region had said Sri Lanka’s National ID card issued by the government had not been fully integrated into “other administrative computerized data records,” and was used primarily for security-related data.

⁹ All civilians in government-controlled areas are required to produce the National ID to gain entry into most government and even non-governmental offices, and more importantly are expected to produce it at the numerous military check-points set up in the south.

¹⁰ The JVP insurgents in 1988-89 took steps to collect National ID cards of the southern public in an effort to minimise the government’s ability to identify people at random.

¹¹ Considering the LTTE already maintains an elaborate registry system to identify people who enter Tiger-controlled areas, the introduction of a Tiger identification registry could undoubtedly be viewed with suspicion. The obvious omission of this sinister history of ID cards in Sri Lanka could therefore be interpreted as result of Tamilnet’s pro-LTTE stance and more importantly its support of the LTTE-run quasi-state.

the station has successfully helped solve several long standing disputes within the short time it has been functioning”.

While frequently reporting Sri Lankan police’s misconduct, Tamilnet carried no report of any such behaviour by the Tiger police. However, independent human rights group UTHR-J (March 8, 2004) highlights LTTE police corruption where crimes allegedly committed by Tiger cadres are not investigated. In one such example the UTHR-J (March 8, 2004, October 7, 2003) claims LTTE’s Sathyan and Mathan killed Navaneethan, a labourer and former member of the EPRLF, in Batticaloa on September 15, 2003, in front of a number of eyewitnesses. However, Tiger police made no arrests¹².

Tiger judiciary: The powerful position of the Eelam judiciary is visible in its ability to abolish traditional region-specific laws such as the customary marriage and inheritance laws *Thesavalamai* applicable to Jaffna Tamils, and *Mukkuwa* applicable to the Eastern Moors which have been practised for centuries. In an interview with Tamilnet the Tamil Eelam judicial head Para declared both Thesavalamai and Mukkuwa laws obsolete within the context of “modern Tamil sensibility” (Tamilnet, October 30, 2003)¹³. The mosaic of regional laws may be interpreted from a political point of view as a recognition of regional and ethnic diversity in Sri Lanka. The inapplicability of Thesavalamai to Eastern Tamils and the exclusive applicability of Mukkuwa to Eastern Moors imply ethnic heterogeneity within the traditional “Tamil homeland” – a possible reason for the LTTE’s desire to abolish both laws. K.H.J. Wijayadasa¹⁴ (2004) argues:

“*Thesavalamai* Law or the ‘Customary Rules of the Locality’ as codified by the Dutch in 1707AD are applicable only to the then Dutch occupied province of Jaffna which covered approximately an area to the North of a line joining Mannar and Malaittivu and not, I repeat not, to the Tamil inhabitants of the Eastern province. This is

¹² Sathyan pulled out a knife and stabbed Navaneethan, who fought back and protested, “I am not in any movement, why do you want to kill me?” This went on for 5 to 10 minutes in public view during rush hour. Navaneethan fighting back attempts by the goons to stab him. Finally Mathan pulled out a revolver and shot him several times. Navaneethan died in hospital (UTHR-J October 7, 2003).

¹³ The Sri Lankan judiciary is fundamentally a judicial progeny of Roman-Dutch law and English common law, with additional legal input from Kandyan law, Thesavalamai and Mukkuwa law applicable respectively to Kandyan Sinhalese, Northern Tamils with the exception of the Eastern Tamils and Eastern Moors.

¹⁴ Wijayadasa was secretary to Ranasinghe Premadasa (1984-1994) both as prime minister and president.

clear proof of the fact that the original Tamil settlers of the Kandyan Sinhalese Eastern seaboard (a narrow coastal strip of the present day Eastern province) were of recent origin and were not the descendants of the Jaffna Tamils. This is why they have always been and are even today subject to the Roman Dutch Law and not the *Thesavalamai* Law”¹⁵

Tamilnet failed to examine these complex issues of the LTTE legal system, instead accepting LTTE claims of its superiority without debate. Tamilnet also failed to show objective cynicism towards a legal system applied by what can arguably be called a totalitarian military regime, closed to external judicial scrutiny – a somewhat glaring omission considering its in-depth coverage of the Sri Lankan judiciary and its numerous shortcomings.

LTTE as sole representatives of the Tamil people

The role of the TULF in Tamil militancy and in particular the formation of the LTTE has been discussed at length in previous chapters, and it has also been cited that the TULF has experienced political fragmentation with some of its members aligning themselves closer with the LTTE, while others have moved to support the Sri Lankan government. In this context it should be noted that the split in the TULF’s political ranks, with the vocally anti-Tiger Anandasangaree¹⁶ on the one side and the pro-Tiger Sampanthan on the

¹⁵ It can also be noted that Thesavalamai would have been codified by the Dutch based on customary law in Jaffna, as practised by the Tamil aristocracy comprising of *vellala* landlords. The law therefore is based on the rigid caste system of the region which places the *karayar* fishers in a socially inferior position. Therefore considering the Tiger leader and a majority of his senior cadre, including Para, are of the purported “low castes” it could be argued the “modern Tamil sensibility” referred to by the Tiger judicial head may not be exclusively egalitarian in its approach and suggests the LTTE’s persistent need to break the Northern Tamils from the *vellala* aristocracy. In this context it should be noted that far from creating an egalitarian society the LTTE is merely replacing the aristocratic cultural views with a political and cultural will of their own. This supposition is further supported through Para’s comments on “modern Tamil sensibility”, which arguably plays little or no attention to Muslim sensibility in the region.

¹⁶ Anandasangaree is arguably one of the last political survivors of the traditional Tamil non-violence movement, a position some argue has emerged as a response to the personal tragedies he has suffered as a direct consequence of the conflict. These include the killing of his elder brother Rajasangaree, the Chavakachcheri Citizens Committee chairman, by the EPRLF in October 1988 for speaking out against IPKF atrocities and the killing of his younger brother Gnanasangaree by the LTTE in Kilinochchi in February 1988 for his public criticism of the Tigers. Two of Gnanasangaree’s sons were subsequently killed for criticising their father’s killing. Ganesangaree’s son Yogasangaree, elected as an EPRLF Member of Parliament for

other, has provided an ideal window from which to study Tamilnet's coverage of the two senior Tamil politicians.

A word search of *Sampanthan* and *Anandasangaree* and *Anandasangari* on Google's site-specific search of the Tamilnet website (November 2006) reveal 606 reports on Sampanthan and a mere 94 on Anandasangaree and 67 on Anandasangari. It should further be noted that while Sampanthan is directly quoted by Tamilnet on a regular basis Anandasangaree is rarely accorded a news voice.

As a case in point Tamilnet reported a mock funeral choreographed by the TNA in parliament on January 16, 2006, staged as a protest against parliament's latest extension of the national state of emergency. "Government forces are getting increasingly aggressive against Tamil civilians ... This must be stopped," Sampanthan later told Tamilnet¹⁷. The protests continued for three more days: "Tamil parliamentarians continued their sit-in-protest in the well of house, holding a mock funeral while Mr. M. K. Eelaventhan lying on the floor acting as a corpse"¹⁸ (Tamilnet, January 19, 2006). The protest and Sampanthan comments received wide publicity on Tamilnet.

However, when a three-year-old Tamil girl was killed in a Tiger assassination attempt on EPDP's Sivathasan in Colombo, Anandasangaree challenged the TNA to condemn the killing (personal communications August 10, 2006). "... TNA members have enough experience in handling mock funerals inside the Parliament's Chamber. Why can't they organise one to protest against the killing of a child just three-years-old" (*Daily News*, August 10, 2006). Anandasangaree's condemnation of the attack and his challenge to the TNA both failed to make the Tamilnet news line-up.

Anandasangaree's primary point of political departure from his pro-Tiger TULF colleagues lies with his argument that the LTTE is not the sole representative of the Tamil people. The TNA's political position, along with its leader Sampanthan, suggests the acceptance of an LTTE-Eelam which can

Jaffna district in 1989, was killed in the LTTE assassination on Padmanabha in June 1990, Madras (DBS Jeyaraj in the *Sunday Leader*. November 19, 2006).

¹⁷ In an article on Tamilnet (January 17, 2006) headlined: "Tamil MPs protest in parliament against killings in NorthEast" (Available: www.Tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=16897)

¹⁸ "Several Tamil MPs were seen covering the body of Mr Eelaventhan with white clothes from head to toes. Thereafter all Tamil MPs sat surrounding Mr Eelaventhan and held 'Oppari' according to Hindu rituals at a funeral house, parliamentary sources said."

be interpreted as open support of the LTTE as the sole representatives of the Tamil people, placing the LTTE at the apex of an activist pyramid, shored up by other subsidiary pro-LTTE representative groups (including the TNA) at the base. Thus Tamilnet's support of Sampanthan and the TNA suggest the news service also subscribes to the concept of the LTTE being the "true representative" of the Tamil people, which in turn implies Tamil politicians such as Anandasangaree, and former militants turned politicians such as the EPDP cadre, do not represent the interests of their Tamil constituents.

Similar patterns of bias are observed throughout Tamilnet with pro-LTTE actors being given media prominence over Tamil politicians who oppose the LTTE. A word search of Tamilnet for citations of key Tamil players using Google's site-specific search are tabulated in table 1

Table 1: Tamilnet's news voices – pro and anti-Tiger

Sampanthan [TNA leader Rajavarotheyam Sampanthan]	606
Joseph Pararajasingham [Batticaloa district TNA MP]	288
Mavai Senathirajah [Jaffna district TNA MP]	201
Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam [Jaffna district TNA MP]	94
Thamilchelvan ¹⁹ [Political wing leader S P Thamilchelvan]	451

¹⁹ Hits for other variations of spelling: Tamil Chelvan 7, and Thamil Chelvan 14.

Daya Master [LTTE's media co-coordinator]	27
Marshall [alias of Military spokesperson Irasaiah Ilanthirayan]	30
Ilanthirayan	121
Anton Balasingham [Theoretician and political adviser]	316
Kousalyan [Batticaloa-Amparai political wing leader E Kousalyan]	90
Soosai [Sea Tigers Special Commander Colonel Soosai]	80
Bhanu [Batticaloa-Amparai Special Commander]	27
Pottu Amman [Intelligence Chief]	12
Douglas Devananda [EPDP leader]	198
Dharmalingam Sidharthan [PLOTE leader]	3
Dharmalingam Sidharthan	4
Anandasangaree [TULF leader Veerasingham Anandasangaree]	94
Anandasangari	67

While Tiger supporters such as Sampanthan (606), Joseph Pararajasingham (288) and Senathirajah (201) scored high in the search, vocal critics of the LTTE consistently scored lower with Devananda (198) scoring the highest;

and Anandasangaree (161) and Sidharthan (7) ranked lower despite them being Eelamist Tamils themselves.

It is also worth noting that while pro-Tiger MP Kumar Ponnambalam, gunned down in 2000, was cited in 52 Tamilnet reports, another Tamil leader, the TULF MP and vocal opponent of the LTTE Dr Neelan Thiruchelvam, allegedly killed by the Tigers in 1999, was cited in only eight reports. Kumar Ponnambalam was also the father of TNA MP Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam.

The portrayal of Tiger iconography as Tamil nationalism symbolism

Having discussed Tamilnet's role in the LTTE's transition from guerrilla to civil administrator, it is important to discuss its media narratives which present Tiger symbols as icons of Tamil nationalism.

The LTTE's deliberate attempts to claim Chola ancestry through the adoption and reinterpretation of the "roaring tiger" emblem have already been discussed in the chapter on Sinhala and Tamil nationalism. In this context the roaring tiger, two rifles and a ring of bullets is not the symbol of the Cholas or for that matter Tamil nationalism, but a symbol of the LTTE designed to promote Tiger legitimacy as a contemporary manifestation of a Chola continuum. The roaring tiger symbol has also been adopted as the central feature of the LTTE-Eelam nation's national flag.

On February 15, 2005, Tamilnet reported that Mannar Bishop Right Reverend Rayappu Joseph had said there was "nothing wrong in the Tamil nation raising its national flag. The Tamil national flag is not the Tigers' flag but it is the Tamil people's flag." Similarly Tamilnet has published more than 120 reports referring to the LTTE flag as the "Tamil national flag" or the "Thamileelam national flag".

On November 26, 2005, Tamilnet published a series of guidelines "on (the) use of Tamileelam National flag". The report was a reproduction of an article published in the LTTE organ *Viduthalai Puligal* in February 1991. Tamilnet argued the flag was appropriate as a national flag of Eelam due to its symbolism drawn from Dravidian antiquity, claiming "LTTE leader Pirapaharan [sic] selected the Tiger as the Tamileelam national insignia to present an image rooted in Dravidian civilization symbolizing martial valour and the uniqueness of Tamil language and culture." Blurring the boundaries between the historical Tamil civilisation and the LTTE's quest for Eelam, the report said: "The Tiger symbol illustrated the martial history (Veera varalaru)

and national upheaval of the Tamils. Our national flag is the symbol of the independent state of Tamileelam to be created, rooted in the martial traditions (Veera marapuhai) of the Tamils.”²⁰ The martial traditions of the Tamils include the “sacrifice” of the LTTE martyr – drawing upon the historical sacrifice of the Chola warrior, in turn circularly justifying the LTTE and its place in Chola-Dravida history.

In August 2006 the Sri Lankan government-owned *Daily News* questioned the hoisting of the roaring Tiger flag at a children’s sports festival organised by the WTO in New York. In a report headlined “LTTE defies US ban” and citing a pro-LTTE website²¹ the *Daily News* argued the LTTE had defied the US ban on the LTTE “by the hoisting of the so called official LTTE flag” (*Daily News*, August 1, 2006). The following day Tamilnet reported the *Daily News* had been given a “civic lesson when they confronted the US Embassy’s press officer, Evan Owen, on the legality of American Tamils hoisting the Tamileelam flag in a New York,” claiming the US constitution upheld the “the right to assemble and freedom of speech.”²² Tamilnet’s report concluded by arguing “the Tiger symbol of Liberation Tigers of Tamileelam (LTTE) created in 1977, was designated as the National Flag of Tamileelam in 1990, without the letters inscribing the movement’s name. The Tiger flag, with the above designation, has become a civil flag already in 1990.”

Narrative of justification: aggressors and victims

Civilians in the north and east, mostly of Tamil origin, have suffered immense hardship in more than two decades of conflict. According to UNHCR’s Ray Wilkinson (2003), more than a million Sri Lankans are

²⁰ The information is drawn from the February 1991 issue of LTTE organ *Viduthalai Puligal*.

²¹ The reference is made to a Tamilnet report headlined “New York Tamils hold sports festival for children” (Tamilnet, July 31, 2006).

²² Owen’s comments were also published in the *Daily News*. The report was followed by a comment from the US embassy in Colombo, in the following day’s *Daily News* headlined: “No evidence of LTTE link with NY event - Embassy official”. The report said US Embassy press officer Evan Owen had said the US government “couldn’t have prevented the Tamil sports festival in New York as there was no evidence to indicate the organisation behind this event had any links with the LTTE” ... “There has been no mention in the news story that this organisation had any links with the LTTE,” (*Daily News*, August 2, 2006). The report also said Owen had stated that hoisting the flag had not contravened any US laws. The *Daily News* report was in turn picked by Tamilnet, in a report headlined “Raising Tiger flag not illegal in US – Embassy”.

considered “internally displaced” – “One in every 18 Sri Lankans, including Tamils...Sinhalese and members of the country’s sizeable Muslim community”. The displacements have been a result of the armed conflict between the government and Tamil militants, predominantly the LTTE. Tamil civilians in the northern and eastern conflict zone have been pushed out of their homes in successive military offensives conducted by Sri Lankan troops and the IPKF. A sizeable Sinhala population that lived in the Jaffna peninsula and an even large number of Sinhala border villagers have fled their homes following repeated LTTE massacres. Similarly a sizeable Muslim population from the eastern districts of Batticaloa and Amparai have been forced out by both military action and threat of Tiger attack. Thus it would be impossible to direct the blame of aggression on any one armed group. However, Tamilnet has continued to present only the government forces as aggressors, the civilians as victims and the LTTE as their only defence.

A more balanced assessment of the situation in the north is reported to some extent in independent publications such as the frequent bulletins and reports published by the UTHR-J, a vocal critic of both the government and the LTTE. In a June 2006 bulletin titled “*Flight, Displacement and the Two-fold Reign of Terror*” the group claims:

“The escalation of conflict in recent months has heightened the travails of civilians in the North-East. Extra-judicial killings, conscription of children and adults, and displacement are taking a tremendous toll. Once again, refugees have been driven to flight across the raging seas to India, and some have perished in the attempt. The state’s failure to control its forces in the face of LTTE provocations, to enforce discipline or accept responsibility for their actions has greatly increased civilian suffering.

“In the Vanni where the LTTE’s military conscription of both adults and children is an intimate reality, fathers are huddled in their homes with their children fearing to go out, lest they are dragged into a van by thugs and are not seen again. Their mental agony is beyond description. When the security forces exhibited an acceptable level of discipline, the people had more options. Today that discipline has been severely eroded. The terror they face is at least two (if not three) fold and for the most vulnerable there are no options. Some of the recent tragedies, apart from their poignancy, are reminders of the multi-faceted history of the Tamil people and the current sources of terror”

“ ... Meanwhile violence was increasing in Trincomalee. After the Government and the LTTE again unleashed their combined terror in Trincomalee in April 2006, the LTTE told Tamil civilians repeatedly in especially the poorer areas, words to the effect, ‘We will continue our (especially landmine) attacks on the armed forces, and are telling you now that we will not be responsible for the consequences you would face’. Many of them began moving to India by sea after travelling overland to Mannar. The Tigers came back every few days and asked menacingly those who remained ‘Haven’t you gone?’ ”

UTHR-J also provides information on a large number of specific LTTE terrorist attacks on Tamil civilians in the north and east, somewhat negating the argument of the state being the only terrorists in the region. In one such report the UTHR-J (July 21, 2005) said on April 24, 2005, “LTTE gunmen on a motorcycle fired wildly on a religious festive procession in Batticaloa, injuring the chief trustee and apparent target Rasamanickam Mathiyalahan (31), who had trouble with the LTTE over tsunami relief ... Also injured were the children Miss Suhanya Ravichandran (13) and Miss Nithyananthana Jeganathan (12).” Tamilnet, however, wrote merely that “A man said to be a former Sri Lanka military intelligence informant was seriously wounded when a gunman opened fire on him in Batticaloa”²³. While Tamilnet provided details of three other victims, it placed the emphasis on Rasamanickam Mathiyalahan’s alleged involvement with SLA intelligence, an unsubstantiated allegation frequently used by Tamilnet to justify LTTE killings despite rarely identifying the killers as Tigers.

However it must be noted that while Tamilnet’s narrative justifying an LTTE arms struggle runs synchronous with that of the LTTE’s official stance, Tamilnet provides a far more refined and subtle argument, which lacks the superficial crudities and the emotive language of the Martyrs’ Day speeches. In this context Tamilnet aims to present a cause-and-effect conflict where the Sinhala government, through its military and traitorous Tamil paramilitaries, are involved in subjugating and terrorising the Tamil people, which in turn forces a military response from the LTTE.

²³ As per Tamilnet report on April 24, 2005 headlined “Four injured in Batticaloa shooting”. (Available: www.Tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=14737)

Guilt transfer and spurious justification of LTTE violence: While the 2002-2007 Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) was intended to prevent troop movement across demarcated military lines²⁴, it is widely believed both groups successfully penetrated the CFA borders to carry out militant attacks – a mode of conflict described by the LTTE political leader Thamilchelvam as a “shadow war” (personal communications July, 2006). While Thamilchelvam did not acknowledge the LTTE also broke the CFA, it can be argued through an analysis of the overall conduct of both parties that neither the government nor the LTTE fully committed to the ceasefire. These CFA violations include a number of political assassinations carried out by SLA Deep Penetration Units (DPU) inside the Tiger border and by the LTTE in Colombo. Between 2002 and January 2007 Tamilnet carried 77 reports highlighting DPU ceasefire violations. Broadly there were two types of reports:

- (i) Those suggesting DPUs were killing innocent civilians: These include reports such as the November 27, 2007, report alleging

²⁴ CFA stipulations with respect to demarcation of military lines and separation of forces states;

“1.4 Where forward defence localities have been established, the GOSL’s armed forces and the LTTE’s fighting formations shall hold their ground positions, maintaining a zone of separation of a minimum of six hundred (600) metres. However, each Party reserves the right of movement within one hundred (100) metres of its own defence localities, keeping an absolute minimum distance of four hundred (400) metres between them. Where existing positions are closer than four hundred (400) metres, no such right of movement applies and the Parties agree to ensure the maximum possible distance between their personnel.

1.5 In areas where localities have not been clearly established, the status quo as regards the areas controlled by the GOSL and the LTTE, respectively, on 24 December 2001 shall continue to apply pending such demarcation as is provided in article 1.6.

1.6 The Parties shall provide information to the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) regarding defence localities in all areas of contention, cf. Article 3. The monitoring mission shall assist the Parties in drawing up demarcation lines at the latest by D-day + 30”.

The February 2002 Cease Fire Agreement between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE clearly outlined the boundaries controlled by the two groups, with official checkpoints established at Mandur, Paddirupur, Kaludaveli Ferry Point, Anbalantivu Ferry Point, Mamunai Ferry Point, Vanvunateeuvu, Santhiveli Boat Point, Black Bridge, Sitandy Boat Point, Kiran bridge, Kinniyadi Boat Point, Valachenai, Makerni, Mahindapura, Muttur, Ugilankulam, Omanthai.

a DPU attack had killed seven schoolgirls²⁵; a November 25, 2007, report of a DPU attack on an ambulance which killed two people²⁶; the purported DPU killing of Father Nicholaspillai Packiyaranjith of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) on September 26, 2007;²⁷ and the Kilinochchi resident's condemnation of DPU attacks on March 30, 2007.

- (ii) Those reports detailing the DPU targeting of senior LTTE cadres which included: the June 10, 2006, killing of LTTE's Mannar district Commander Lieutenant Colonel Mahenth²⁸; Batticaloa-Ampara district's political wing leader Nizaam's killing on June 15, 2001²⁹; and Colonel Shankar's killing on September 26, 2001. The DPU killings were highlighted as spurious justifications for a number of reprisal military assassinations in the south including SLA Deputy Chief of Staff Major General Parami Kulatunga. Reporting the death Tamilnet said: "Sri Lanka Military spokesman Brig Prasad Samarasinghe has charged the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for the suicide attack, which comes in the wake of SLA Deep Penetration Unit (DPU) attacks, targeting senior LTTE commanders in Vanni."

²⁵ "Seven school girls, riding in a HiAce van engaged in rural first aid service, were killed on the spot at Iyangkea'ni on Kokkaavil-Thunukkaay Road in Vanni Tuesday at 11:30 a.m [sic], in a Claymore attack carried out by the Sri Lanka Army (SLA) Deep Penetration Unit (DPU). The driver of the van and three male volunteers were also killed in the attack, according to Tamileelam Police in Ki'linochchi" (Tamilnet, 2007).

²⁶ "Sri Lanka Army Deep Penetration Unit (DPU) attackers, in two separate Claymore attacks on Sunday targeted civilians in Oddisuddaan, 22 km southwest of Mullaitheevu town and Mudkompan, 20 km northwest of Ki'linochchi town in Poonakari (Pooneryn) division Sunday, Tamileelam Police officials said" (Tamilnet, 2006).

²⁷ "Rev. Fr. Nicholaspillai Packiyaranjith, 40, the Mannaar district coordinator of Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) was killed when Sri Lanka Army Deep Penetration Unit (DPU) attackers launched a Claymore attack on his Hiace vehicle, at Kalvi'laan on Maangku'lam-Ve'l'laangku'lam road, Wednesday evening, Tamileelam Police officials in Mallaavi said" (Tamilnet, 2007).

²⁸ "Lieutenant Colonel Mahenth²⁸ ... was killed along with three LTTE cadres in a Claymore attack carried out by the Sri Lanka Army soldiers on Vellankulam-Thunukkai Road on Saturday morning" (Tamilnet, 2006)

²⁹ He was "killed in a claymore mine blast Thursday around 11.30 a.m. at Vaathakkalmadu in Nallathanni Odai, about 36 kilometres south west of Batticaloa" (Tamilnet, 2001).

On April 25, 2006, army commander Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka was seriously wounded in an LTTE suicide attack. Tamilnet reported the suicide attack on the army commander in a mere three-paragraph report headlined "Bomb explosion in Colombo, Army Commander wounded". The attempted assassination prompted the government to bombard LTTE positions in the Wann. Tamilnet claimed: "Sri Lankan Kfir jets have been bombing LTTE-controlled Sampoor, Ilakkanthai and Kattaiparichchan villages in Muttur, Trincomalee district from 5:00 p.m Tuesday. Casualty details are not available at the moment," suggesting the air force attacks had targeted villages in the Tiger-controlled civilian regions and not Tiger military targets, as the government claimed. In another Tamilnet report published the same day headlined "Has Sri Lankan Government declared war? – Elilan asks SLMM³⁰", Tamilnet claims more than 150 government artillery shells fired by the military had wrecked several villages in Muttur east, while air force Kfir jets had bombed more than six civilian locations in the region. Another report claimed "more than sixty shells fired by the security forces exploded in several villages, including Kaddaiparichchan, Chenaiyoor, Koonitheivu, Soodaikuda, Kadatkarachenai," adding the pre-school and the science laboratory of Chenaiyoor Central College were among the buildings damaged in the government assault. A day before the LTTE's assassination attempt on the army commander, Tiger ideologue Anton Balasingham claimed the Colombo government was edging towards war. (Tamilnet, April 23 2006).

While Tamilnet, unlike the Tiger leader, does not directly claim a Sinhala-Buddhist military chauvinism, the political rhetoric is visible in a number of Tamilnet reports which cite pro-Tiger sources. In this respect, on April 23, 2006, Tiger ideologue Anton Balasingham spoke of Colombo's military mindset'; on February 5, 2005 the Saturday editorial of the popular Tamil daily newspaper *Uthayan* was reproduced on Tamilnet saying President Kumaratunge's continued procurement of weapons "reveal(ed) a mindset obsessed with military chauvinism"; on October 16, 1998, All Ceylon Tamil Congress leader Kumar Ponambalam was quoted in a Tamilnet report saying the mindset of Sinhala-Buddhist fundamentalism was central to Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict. A *Tamil Guardian* report reproduced in Tamilnet said

³⁰ The report said the LTTE's Trincomalee district leader Elilan had "denied a statement made by the SLA that it had retaliated to an attack by the LTTE on the Sri Lanka Navy Tuesday with air strike and artillery attack. Elilan told the SLMM, 'We did not fire a single shot against the Sri Lankan troops Tuesday. Hence the air strike by the SLAF, artillery attack by SLA has to be considered a serious blatant violation of the Ceasefire Agreement'."

“The fundamental problem here is the international community’s stubborn refusal to accept, even when it is thrust in their faces, the racist oppression that underpins ethnic politics in Sri Lanka and, consequently, the impossibility of reforming the Sinhala state ... The vast majority of Sinhalese are behind President Rajapakse’s militarist project which is as much about ‘crushing Tamil rebellion’ as ‘defeating Tiger terrorism.’ And yet, for three decades now, even as the Tamils have been protesting state terror, the international community has repeatedly called for a solution ‘within a united Sri Lanka’. Indeed, the adamant refusal to see the violence in Sri Lanka as a cycle of oppression followed by resistance was reflected again last week (with the government’s withdrawal from the peace process).”

The strategic need for spurious justification and guilt transfer, and the mainstream media’s role in fulfilling these needs through the graphic coverage of violence that links the attacks to the government, has already been discussed in previous chapters. Therefore, it is sufficient to argue that Tamilnet *also* fulfils the strategic need of disseminating these narratives. In one such recent report on the Fort railway station bombing which killed 14 civilians on February 03, 2008, Tamilnet produced graphic coverage on its website and concluded “(T)he blast comes a day before Sri Lanka’s 60th Independence Day celebrations amid speculations of Colombo embarking on a full fledged war on Vanni, stepping up aerial bombardment and artillery barrage”. This juxtaposition suggests the bombing was a result of Colombo’s military campaign, rather than part of a cycle of ongoing violence.

The arguments of spurious justification and guilt transfer in Tamilnet have also been used to justify LTTE military action. In one such report on August 22, 2006, Tamilnet claims Tiger political wing leader Thamilchelvan had noted that the government had “launched a major military offensive in Trincomalee against the Tigers and thereby triggered defensive measures by the Tigers resulting in an escalation of hostilities” On August 02, 2006, Tiger military spokesman Irasaiah Ilanthirayan alias Marshall reportedly said: “(The) operation against Sri Lankan military camps in the early hours were intended to disrupt Sri Lanka’s indiscriminate onslaught against Tamil civilians”, claiming there was an “urgent humanitarian need” that compelled the LTTE to undertake what he described as “defensive actions” to counter the government’s indiscriminate bombing and shelling of civilian areas as part of their Mavil Aru offensive.

Continued harassment of Tamils: Based on Google’s site-specific word search for *Tamils arrested* Tamilnet produced more than 80 reports on the subject. The reports detailed arrests of Tamil civilians by the police or the army in the south following suspected LTTE attacks. In one such report on February 04, 2008, Tamilnet reported 17 Tamils had been arrested in a cordon and search operation in the Colombo suburb of Nugegoda, claiming “the majority of them, workers at business establishments and staying in lodges, were taken into custody ... by the Sri Lanka government security forces at Nugegoda.” The report added: “Nearly three hundred houses were searched, and more than eight thousand persons were interrogated during the search operation.”

It should be noted that over-zealous government forces in the south have conducted mass arrests on numerous occasions, including the arrest of around 300 Tamil youth following an LTTE attack on the Kelanitissa power station in November 1997, and the arrest of another 300 ahead of the 2007 independence celebrations. While this type of large-scale ethnically motivated harassment cannot be condoned it should be noted that government reports have frequently claimed authorities have uncovered explosives or LTTE operatives during these cordons and searches. Tamilnet for its part has rarely reported these findings or the results of the mass arrests. Once again, having reiterated the over-zealousness of the government forces and the exclusive arrests of Tamils, it is perhaps important to note that Tamilnet’s coverage, biased as it may be, also provides an important “service”, whereby media coverage of the arrests and specifically the identities of those arrested can reduce the possibility of them disappearing in custody – a practice not uncommon in Sri Lanka.

While single reports of this nature are not particularly suggestive of bias, Tamilnet’s reluctance to address LTTE police interrogations, abductions and killings in the same manner should be noted. The UTHR-J has documented a number of such incidents, including one on February 3, 2005, in which “T. Muregusu (27) of Pattalipuram, Mutur, was tortured and killed by the LTTE police in Sampur under Siranjeevi ... and his body was dumped near a tank 200 yards away. The local people later smashed the police station” (UTHR-J March 28, 2005). The incident was not reported by Tamilnet.

Tamilnet has also produced a number of reports on the SLA’s harassment of civilians in military-controlled parts of the island. The reports range from LTTE accusations of military “atrocities” to purported civilian protests against SLA, STF, and Navy “atrocities”. In one such report on August 11,

2006, Tamilnet claimed there was a mass protest against the military presence in parts of Jaffna in the wake of alleged abductions by the SLA. While the SLA's conduct is far from exemplary and numerous allegations against the forces are pending investigation by human rights watchdogs, the same is true for the LTTE – an angle Tamilnet is reluctant to report.

A significant number of reports of this nature were also attributed to the various Catholic Bishops of the region, including Mannar Bishop Right Reverend Rayappu Joseph. While there is little doubt that the military has committed a significant number of atrocities in the region, Tamilnet's exclusive reportage with no reference to similar atrocities such as the LTTE's abduction and forcible conscription of children can be construed as a definite bias.

Tamilnet's criticism of the military presence in the north and east has also been presented through two key sub-narratives which are of direct strategic consequence. In this context Tamilnet has been:

- (i) Critical of the establishment of High Security Zones (HSZ) and their impact on civilian movement; and
- (ii) Fishing bans along the coastal waters.

The argument on HSZ: Having gained control of significant tracts of land in the north through the government's takeover of the Jaffna peninsula in 1996, the military has set up an elaborate network of check-points and High Security Zones to curb LTTE movement within government-controlled parts of the Jaffna peninsula in a bid to minimise Tiger attacks on military targets. The military-imposed travel restrictions in most parts of the conflict zone has therefore seriously limited civilian movement across military sectors – a move government officials insist is vital to prevent LTTE infiltration into "cleared" areas. A report published by the UTHR-J argued "it is also well-known that newly resettled areas are quickly prone to forceful LTTE infiltration that puts an additional strain on the Army" thus supporting the military's argument against a free flow of civilians across the border.

Despite the alleged security concerns Tamilnet has championed the relocation of internally displaced persons (IDP) in the HSZ. In one such report on December 27, 2002, Tamilnet reported the LTTE rejected the SLMM's justification of the HSZ on the grounds of security as "unacceptable," saying "this adjudication simply reinforces the SLA's

position on the illegal military occupation of public property". On May 28, 2004, Tamilnet reported that in a memorandum to Sri Lanka's president the Jaffna District Humanitarian Agencies' Consortium (JDHAC) had said: "The retention of the high security zones in the Jaffna district after the expiry of the State of Emergency in the country is considered illegal ... The ceasefire agreement signed on February 22, 2002, has been holding for the last twenty-seven months. But the State armed forces are still preventing the internally displaced families from returning to their houses and agricultural lands where they lived for generations."

Fishing bans: Tamilnet has also published a number of reports outlining military-imposed fishing bans in the region, but once again shows great reluctance in discussing what led to the regulations – namely the LTTE Sea Tigers' use of small boats with outboard motors to attack naval targets. A search for the key words *restriction* and *fishing* on Google's site-specific search revealed 97 reports on the subject.

At this juncture it is important also to note that Tamil militants have harnessed political sympathy in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu to smuggle weapons across the Palk Strait, a practice continued by the LTTE even now. Mumbai-based reporter Arun Ram (December 13, 2006) wrote: "As the war in Sri Lanka intensifies, the (LTTE) may be getting a little help from across the Palk Straits, especially from Tamil Nadu, intelligence agencies believe" Defence columnist Iqbal Athas (February 19, 2006) claims: "Proof that the LTTE was smuggling in military and other hardware has come in the form of two major detections in the Palk Straits ... The first was the Navy's discovery in the island of Kachchativu of a consignment of 65,000 electronic detonators in 38 packages on January 29³¹ ... and on February 11, a Navy patrol intercepted a multi-day fishing trawler reportedly smuggling in several items including explosives.³²"

A report published by the *Jane's Intelligence Review* stated:

³¹ "They bore the markings of a factory in Hyderabad in India. Four persons, said to be fishermen, were arrested in this regard. The coxswain of the boat had been released only after the tsunami in December 2004 having served a sentence in the Jaffna prison after being found guilty of smuggling dynamite," (Athas, February 19, 2003).

³² "On that day, two navy Dvora fast attack craft (FAC) – P 497 and P 473 – had been on patrol in the Palk Straits, south of the Delft Island. FAC P 497 which had been some seven nautical miles apart from P473 had spotted a lone trawler some seven nautical miles north east of Talaimannar. It was spotted speeding towards the island of Iranativu" (Athas, February 19, 2003).

“(I)n terms of the overall success of the LTTE, the Sea Tigers' logistics fleet is the most important part of its armoury. It operates two classes of vessels: a fleet of around 11 ocean-going freighters and fast-moving coastal transit boats. Ships from the ocean-going fleet rendezvous with the fast coastal transit boats about 200 km off the northeast coast of the island. The Sea Tigers have also adapted a wide range of craft for suicide missions. They have used SBS-type Arrows, torpedo riders of Second World War design and speed racing style boats. For missions further out to sea, they have used logistics craft, modified FGB-type craft and even *fishing trawlers*. They have also developed a small, fast-attack craft coated with angular panels, which, Jane's sources have suggested, might be a crude attempt at stealth technology ...” (Murphy, May 12, 2006).

Therefore, it can be argued the LTTE's continued use of small craft and in particular fishing trawlers for weapons smuggling and tactical assaults have necessitated strict regulations on fishing in the region to enable the Navy to spot LTTE vessels and to minimise inadvertent naval attacks on civilian craft. The argument, while not detracting from the hardships faced by the local fishermen, suggests both the LTTE and the government are responsible for the difficulties faced by civilian fishers – the LTTE by camouflaging its Black Sea Tiger craft as fishing vessels and the military bureaucracy for failing to find a compromise. However, this complex explanation of dual culpability is ignored in Tamilnet's coverage, where the blame is placed firmly at the feet of the Sri Lankan government.

The cumulative effect of Tamilnet's selective reportage is a continuing narrative of government and military harassment of Tamil civilians both in the south and in government parts of the north and east; and a deliberate government strategy of disrupting civilian life in the north and east. This in turn provides a Tamilnet narrative which mirrors the Tiger leader's rhetoric on the heartlessness of the occupying force.

Peace themes

The chequered history of peace negotiations between the government and the LTTE and the strategic role of peace negotiations and disarmament themes has already been discussed in previous chapters. It has also been argued that while the Tigers have shown an interest in entering peace negotiations with every successive government, the LTTE has, on most occasions, unilaterally withdrawn from negotiations.

While it may appear the LTTE was naïve or perhaps overly optimistic in assuming it would be able to secure Eelam simply through political negotiation, it has already been discussed that these calls for peace were part of a much more complex political process, and a vital component of the LTTE strategy. Therefore, the LTTE's decision to declare a unilateral ceasefire in December 2001, days after the election of the Ranil Wickremasinghe government, came as no surprise when seen in the context of the LTTE's strategic calls for peace over the years. The LTTE has on numerous occasions entered peace talks, made declarations of a unilateral ceasefire and entered into bilateral peace agreements with the government, only to almost predictably break the agreements and resume hostilities. Successive Sri Lankan government also have a history of entering into and reneging on bilateral agreements (ie Bandaranaike-Chelvanayagam, Senanayake-Chelvanayagam, P-TOMS).

In 2002 Norwegian peace negotiators with limited experience in conflict resolution entered the Sri Lankan political arena – a theatre littered with failed peace attempts and ill-fated international interventions³³. Plagued by the diplomatic immaturity of the Norwegians, an obstinate and often indecisive Sri Lankan government, and a shrewd LTTE, the 2002 peace process faced many stumbling blocks and led, some argue predictably, to the eruption of hostilities in 2006 and the Government's eventual withdrawal from the peace process in 2008.

With respect to the present discussion on LTTE strategy and Tiger media narrative, it should be noted that the 2002-2008 peace process was the first peace negotiation which was played out in the cyber media since the introduction of the internet as an alternative news source in the Sri Lankan theatre in the late 1990s. It should be noted that the 2002 peace process also resulted in the LTTE launching its official website, the Peace Secretariat, at <http://www.ltteps.org/> – the first of its kind to be openly acknowledged by

³³ There is little documentary evidence explaining why the Norwegians entered the northern political quagmire, but it has been suggested the Nordic peace negotiators' involvement in the Sri Lankan conflict commenced in the late 1990s. Dr Jehan Perera suggest President Kumaratunge had officially announced in 1998 that the “Norwegian government would be acting in a third party capacity to help resolve Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict” (Perera, April 2002). Similarly South East Asian-based Tamil reporter KT Rajasingham has written a series of articles in the web-based *Asian Tribune* newspaper claiming that Norwegian peacemakers, led by Erik Solheim, started meeting the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) leaders in London and in the Vanni jungle beginning from 1998, “very discreetly”. With the LTTE's declaration of a ceasefire on December 2001 and the Government's reciprocation with its own ceasefire, the Norwegians finally received an ideal opportunity to directly mediate peace negotiation in Sri Lanka.

the Tigers. The Tigers' official web portal, while significant, is unable to contribute to the *covert* dissemination of a pro-LTTE agenda, which underscores the necessity of Tamilnet's conflict coverage through a more subtle and palatable pro-LTTE perspective. The 2002 peace talks, which commenced almost five years after the introduction of Tamilnet, provides an ideal opportunity to study Tamilnet's subtle dissemination of Tiger peace narratives in its reportage.

Tamilnet's peace narratives include these main arguments:

- (i) That it is the LTTE which initiated peace;
- (ii) That the Tigers are committed to peace; and
- (iii) That the Sri Lankan government has been reluctant to fully embrace peace.

LTTE-initiated peace: Despite their ultimate failure the peace negotiations brokered by the Norwegians are noted for securing the longest military truce in the three decade-long conflict. – a longevity that may, however, also be attributed to a number of geopolitical factors, including the US led post-September 11 "War on Terror".

While the Bush government's ill-planned and militarily over-stretched War on Terror continues to stumble on aimlessly, it can be argued the concept of a global war on terrorism may not have been a promising prospect for the LTTE – an organisation already listed as a terrorist group by the US State Department. The LTTE, however, has openly denied the War on Terror played any part in its decision to enter negotiations with the Sri Lankan government, with the LTTE leader claiming during his historic April 2002 press conference in Killinochchi "(T)he LTTE initiated peace moves before the September 11 incident". While Tamilnet has been reluctant to address this issue in its news coverage, it has published a number of opinion pieces that reiterate the Tiger leader's argument. In one such report by Visuvanathan Rudrakumar³⁴ titled "The LTTE's Flexibility in the Current Peace Process", Rudrakumar claims the peace process was initiated by the LTTE 10 months prior to September 11. However, while it may be true the LTTE was exploring numerous peace options as part of its grand-strategy prior to September 11, concrete moves for a unilateral ceasefire coincide very neatly with the US's War on Terror and the election of pro-American Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe.

³⁴ Viswanathan Rudrakumar is a practising attorney in New York, USA, and is a participant of the Norwegian-sponsored Peace Talks.

Tamilnet's portrayal of the LTTE's push for a peaceful resolution does seem to present a skewed overview of the complex politico-military relationship between the government and the LTTE. It should be noted that Tamilnet published a number of reports promoting the narrative of an LTTE-initiated peace, but failed to provide any analysis of the LTTE's subtle moves to undermine the peace process, even at this early stage, through loaded demands and conditions including calls for the talks to be held in South India – a region that has a chequered history for its arming and training of the Tigers. In Tamilnet's report headlined "LTTE suggests India could host talks" it is suggested the LTTE had sought temporary residence for Tiger political adviser and chief negotiator, Anton Balasingham, and his spouse Adele in Chennai, and to host Norwegian-facilitated talks in a South Indian city such as Chennai, Thiruvananthapuram or Bangalore" (Tamilnet, January 08, 2002). Tamilnet fails to provide any analysis of this politically volatile multi-layered request. If the Indian government were to accept the offer, it could necessitate the pardoning of key Tiger operatives, including its leader, who is wanted in India in connection with the Rajiv Gandhi killing. It would also mean the now ailing Wannai-based Balasingham would be able to undergo medical treatment just across the Palk Strait instead of travelling to the UK. The political nature of the Indian request, however, was likely to rub salt in old political wounds which could prolong agreement over a venue for the talks. The suggestion of a South Indian venue is also likely to place the Sri Lankan government under pressure from its ultra-nationalist political allies who view the Tamil Nadu government as the godfathers of Sri Lankan militancy – thus crippling the government's ability to conduct meaningful negotiations.

The call for peace talks to be held in South India is suggestive of a wider Tiger strategy of calling for peace talks and stalling its actual commencement through a series of seemingly innocent yet politically loaded demands, designed to suggest the government's reluctance to enter into discussions.

LTTE commitment to peace: An analysis of the Tamilnet website for the key phrase *LTTE committed to peace* through Google's advanced search option reveals nearly 350 hits – articles that outline both the government and the LTTE's commitment to the peace process. On the surface the coverage shows no sign of bias and presents a façade of civic and developmental journalism. However, a more detailed analysis of the content suggests a number of major narratives: that the LTTE *is* committed to peace and it actively engaged in the peace process; the government *says* it is committed to peace, but there are doubts over its sincerity; the government has failed to fulfil its part of the agreement, such as the disarmament of the paramilitaries;

the south is unable to create the environment of political stability needed for meaningful negotiations.

In this context a Tamilnet report headlined “LTTE committed to peace – Pathuman” (the LTTE’s military commander in Trincomalee) justifies the retention and training of more cadres: “We are firmly committed to peace. But keeping a strong, well trained military force is essential for achieving legitimate aspirations of the Tamils”, said Pathuman at the passing out parade for new LTTE recruits (Tamilnet, September 20, 2002). In another report Balasingham expresses the LTTE’s commitment to peace at the opening of a LTTE judicial complex in Killinochchi. The expansion of the judiciary, while not contravening the ceasefire agreement, places serious pressure on negotiations and southern public opinion on peace as it sends a signal of continued separation from the south (Tamilnet, March 12, 2003).

In contrast Tamilnet remained critical of government recruitment and armament. A report headlined “Massive rise in Sri Lankan firepower amid peace” published on Tamilnet on December 04, 2004, claimed the Sri Lanka Air Force had doubled its manpower since the 2002 ceasefire agreement.

Government violation of the 2002 Ceasefire Agreement: An internet search of the Tamilnet website on Google’s advanced search option presents 194 hits containing the key words *ceasefire* and *violation* which include more than 150 individual reports. A statistical analysis of the news reports suggests more than 80% of the reports cover alleged ceasefire violations by government troops, pro-LTTE comment on government CFA violations and even a few reports by government officials outlining the dangers of government forces violating the CFA³⁵. However, allegations against the LTTE are conspicuously absent from the coverage. A small but significant number of reports, include Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) rulings that are favourable to the LTTE, including a report headlined “Gopalapuram memorial, not a ceasefire violation – SLMM” (February 15, 2003), in which the SLMM ruled the construction of an LTTE war memorial at Gopalapuram junction in Nilaveli village, about 16km north of Trincomalee town, was not a violation of the CFA. The verdict was once again reiterated in a second report two days later headlined “Gopalapuram War memorial case dismissed”.

³⁵ These include comments by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe who was allegedly quoted in Tamilnet saying the “State forces’ cease-fire violation would harm (the government)” (Tamilnet, March 14, 2002); and a report quoting Minister John Amararatunge seemingly supporting the positive actions of the LTTE stating, “It is learnt that LTTE has been engaged in establishing its police stations to reduce ceasefire violation” (Tamilnet, November 18, 2002).

While Tamilnet coverage gives the illusion of government forces predominantly being responsible for CFA violations, statistics provided by the SLMM present a very different view. Based on SLMM records, it was established that government forces were culpable for 346 violations of the CFA between February 2002 and December 2006, while the LTTE was responsible for a staggering 3827 violations for the same period.

Child soldiers: Numerous military actors in the Sri Lankan conflict theatre have been frequently accused of recruiting child soldiers (children under the age of 18), a practice which has led to significant global media interest. Unlike other narratives which Tamilnet seems keen to promote, damaging claims of child recruitment raised by international child-welfare watchdogs is one narrative Tamilnet has been forced to counter.

The body of collected material showing LTTE’s consistent use of children in the war has made it impossible for Tamilnet to blatantly deny child recruitment, forcing the cyber news service to adopt a two-pronged media message suggesting:

- (i) That children willingly joined the LTTE, and that the Tigers had perhaps been a little remiss in maintaining a strict age limit. Furthermore the Tigers were re-forming their recruitment practice to ensure children did not join;
- (ii) That pro-government paramilitaries have been actively involved in the forcible recruitment of children, at times with the help of government forces.

On March 14, 2006, Tamilnet reported that LTTE police chief Nadesan (now the political wing leader) accused the government of “... shedding crocodile tears. The Sri Lankan government, which readily bombed Tamil schools and caused severe malnutrition amongst our children during the war, is now talking about child soldiers and engaged in a propaganda campaign against the Tigers on child recruitment.” Nadesan, who is unable to outwardly deny the use of child soldiers, instead attempts to discredit the LTTE’s critics, in this instance the Sri Lankan government, by turning the spotlight on the government’s own alleged violence against children. Following allegations of the LTTE recruiting children displaced or left orphaned by the December 26, 2004, tsunami, Tamilnet reported LTTE women’s political wing-leader Thamini as saying “(T)he media was irresponsible to spread unconfirmed rumours about LTTE recruiting child soldiers among the affected people.” Tamilnet was also able to create the illusion of a balanced coverage, publishing numerous, widely available reports produced by UN agencies and

human rights watchdogs on child soldiers, but were careful not to question the LTTE over the reports' findings, rather simply stating the reports exist.

On the rare occasion when the LTTE does speak of its recruitment policy, answers are well-scripted and generic, as in a 2007 report in which the Tigers stated simply: "A functioning de-facto state like the LTTE is entitled to recruit those above the age of 17 but not send them to the battlefield (until they are 18)." (Tamilnet, February 14, 2007). Tamilnet also produced a number of reports on the LTTE's return of child soldiers to their families as part of efforts to tighten its own recruitment policy. In one such report on April 13, 2004, Tamilnet said the Tigers had returned 269 of their cadres to their parents, among them 168 underage combatants.

Following Karuna's split with the LTTE in 2004 Tamilnet published a number of reports suggesting that while the LTTE had recruited a significant number of children in the past, Karuna, who was now a government ally, had been a major offender.

Conclusion

Based on the above discussion it is not only clear that Tamilnet consistently provides greater media exposure to pro-Tiger political actors compared with Tamil politicians who oppose the LTTE, but it is also clear that this strategy bolsters the illusion of the LTTE being the sole representatives of the Tamil people – a narrative congruent with narratives identified in the Tiger leader's annual speech.

Similarly a significant number of key narratives outlined in the Tiger leader's speech are clearly visible in the Tamilnet media narrative, placing the web page in a position of great strategic importance to the LTTE. In this context it can be argued that Tamilnet has successfully woven a narrative harmonious with the LTTE's narrative of justification for violence, without openly claiming to be a Tiger front or media proxy – a strategic move which has given the cyber news service some credibility despite allegations of its involvement with the LTTE. The Tamilnet narrative in turn, like that of the LTTE as analysed through the Tiger leader's speeches, attempts to widen the rift between the Tamil and Sinhala linguistic collectives, perpetuating the argument of the physical existence of a Tamil homeland defined by historical and contemporary ethnographic data.

Thus the argument of justification suggests the LTTE is merely reacting to a military conflict that has been imposed on the Tamil nation and the Tamil people by successive Sinhala governments. The Tigers in turn are portrayed as the political vanguard of the Tamil people simply doing what is best for

the Tamils and their long-term freedom. In this context Tamilnet, like Prabhakaran, suggests the LTTE is ready for peace and any difficulties during the peace processes are put down to the government's reluctance to fully commit to peace.

Therefore it can be established through congruence of narratives that Tamilnet plays a crucial role in furthering the LTTE's narratives of justification which are otherwise stymied through state censorship and purported mainstream media bias.

While the LTTE as a post-modern terrorist group is fragmented and specialised to such an extent that some members of the group are not required to bear arms, Tamilnet as a post-modern media organisation is geographically dispersed with the political allegiances of its reporters and its editorial policy coming unnervingly close to Tiger propaganda without ever fully compromising its position as a media outlet with journalist merit.