

Separatist politics of a tsunami: A Sri Lankan case study

Abstract:

The political machinations of post-tsunami Sri Lanka continue to divide the nation, and any hope of reconciliation between the Government and the Tamil Tigers has long been lost. Reconstruction efforts littered with allegations and counter allegations of racial discrimination continue to dominate post-tsunami politics, with both the Government and the Tigers continuing to gain a political edge through the rehabilitation program.

However a closer look at the pro-Eelamist media, in the wake of the tsunami devastation, reveal the political optimism and a hope for reconciliation may have been ill-founded from the onset. Thus an analysis of pro-Eelamist media which flooded the internet, suggest a Tiger media strategy, albeit in the form of a preliminary politico-media tactic had emerged within the first few hours of the Tsunami. This strategy of accusing the Sri Lankan government of preferential treatment to Sinhala Tsunami victims of the South and neglect of North-Eastern Tamils, was in line with the wider claims of the Eelamis media machine.

This paper attempts to outline the pro-Eelamist media strategy, and decipher the numerous narratives and sub-narratives that were carefully orchestrated by the Eelamist lobby to secure an political advantage in the international arena.

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Introduction:

The 'tidal wave' that ravaged the Sri Lankan seaboard killing more than 30,000 was the worst natural disaster the island nation had witnessed in living memory. Its ferocity had been equally felt across the country's political divide, thousands of coastal villages in both the government and tiger controlled regions had been reduced to rubble. In just a few hours the turbulent water of the tsunami had caused more damage than the past decade of war, and with emotions running high the futility of the three decade long conflict was all too clear in the minds of many. While amidst the ruin a scattered nation attempted to comprehend the magnitude of the devastation, self-reflective political optimists hinted at the possibility of reconciliation between the government and rebel Tigers.

However deeper in the subtexts of the tsunami coverage competing meta-narratives had already emerged – typifying the power struggle between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers. Through a labyrinth of media networks and outlets, pro-eelamist and in particular pro-tiger media expertly manipulated the media content, projecting an overt reconciliatory tone while further strengthening its position as an alternative power base in the North and East of Sri Lanka – the purported Tamil 'homeland'. The LTTE's self portrayal of independence, masked in the Tigers readiness to open its borders to international assistance and willingness to liaise with the Sri Lankan government, provided the LTTE with an opportunity to secure a politically mature identity in the international spotlight. The duality of the Tiger stance – overt reconciliation, coupled with a subtext of unwavering Tiger authority in the 'Tamil Homeland' was also successful in forcing Sri Lanka's coalition government into political decisions which later fractured the fragile coalition between President Kumaratunge's Peoples' Alliance and its more nationalist coalition partners.

The Government in turn was eager to assert its authority on the purported 'Tamil Homeland', while denying any suggestion of preferential treatment to southern victims in the government spearheaded relief operation. However hindered by a cumbersome bureaucracy, politically immature coalition partners and the states' own media that was far from skilful in countering the pro-tiger media machine the government failed to deliver an effective counter punch against the Tigers' political onslaught.

Thus the politically unassuming natural disaster had become a political power keg – a political dispute threatening to collide two spheres of influence that were separated by a precarious peace process, with both the Tigers and the government continuing to exert and extend their spheres of influence.

A 'nation' in distress:

Three days after the boxing day tsunami on December 29, Tiger Leader Velupillai Pirapaharan sent a message to the South for the first time in the thirty year conflict. In the statement described by the government owned Daily News as "unprecedented", the Tiger supreme expressed his condolences to the "Muslim and Sinhala brethren in the southern coastal areas, who have lost their kith and kin, and in deep sorrow". The seemingly innocuous 'olive branch' was largely ignored or was accepted at face value by the Southern media who failed to see the message's political subtext. The Daily News also spoke of a "conciliatory" tone in similar communications between the government and key rebel spokesman Thamilselvan. However buried with in the so called "conciliatory" tone was the Tigers obvious desire to project it self as an independent government or at the very least a self governing authority.

Thus the tone of Pirapaharan's speech spelt more than a simple shift in the tiger leader's attitudes towards the people he had been warring with for decades, instead in the wider context, the message titled the "National Leaders appeal for assistance" provided an uncanny resemblance to an official message sent to a neighbouring country, by a leader of a *Nation* – which read "I also take this opportunity to express my condolences and share the grief of all the people in the South Asian nations, India and Tamil Nadu in particular, on whom had befallen this disaster."

The projection of an independent “Tamil Nation” and Pirapaharan’s own role as its leader is further demonstrated in the sub-textual ‘us and them’ dichotomy in the message. The letter written in his capacity as the “*Tamil National Leader*” Pirapaharan contains a number of phrases including the reference to “our people” and “our homeland” clearly demonstrate the LTTE’s attempt to project itself as the undisputed representatives of the Tamil Homeland and its constituents.

Three days prior to the “National Leader’s” speech— less than twelve hours after the pro-eelam Tamilnet’s first tsunami report, the cyber news service reported the Tigers were planning to declare a state of “National Emergency”, a move that seemed in direct response to the government’s own declaration of a “National Emergency”. The glaring political subtext of the LTTE’s move was clearly an attempt to fortify the ‘Tamil Homeland’ image of sovereignty with the tigers as its government and a reflection of the Tiger’s belief of government jurisdiction and its state of national emergency did not extending to LTTE controlled parts of the country.

Thus the LTTE stance presented a volatile dichotomy in Government-Tiger relations during the crucial rehabilitation process, where the Tamil Tigers continued to muster international support and accept Sri Lankan government aid as an independent nation, while the government continued to view the victims of Tiger controlled regions as fellow Sri Lankans – and the Tigers one of the many facilitators of the rehabilitation process.

The Tigers self-portrayal was projected to the outside world through its elaborate external media nexus, which include the pro-Tiger European and North American satellite television the Tamil Television Network (TTN), the International Broadcasting Corporation (IBC), and more importantly the LTTE’s purported media vanguard – its labyrinth of multi-lingual web sites.

Despite the Tiger’s mammoth cyber presence the LTTE’s internet based media campaign however was launched through three main web fronts, the Tamilnet – a pro-Tiger website and alleged LTTE news organ, the Tigers official website and its peacetime arm the Official Website of the LTTE Peace Secretariat and more covertly through its humanitarian front organisation the Tamils Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO).

The Tamilnet, a prolific producer of North-East based news continued to flood cyber theatre, often quoting and reproducing statements published by the LTTE peace secretariat and the TRO. While Tamilnet journalists including its Editor Dharmaratnam Sivaram, have continued to portray the website as an independent entity the group has refrained from actively distancing itself for the tigers, arguing “if the views of the Tamilnet are the same as that of the LTTE, let the Sinhalese government be damned” (personal communications with Sivaram, 2002). However the Tamilnet’s political sympathies became all the more clear during the tsunami coverage, where the cyber news service took pains to exclude any criticism of the LTTE’s relief operation in its media reports – while independent sources including the independent human rights group University Teachers for Human Rights -Jaffna (UTHR-J), and the Batticaloa based vocal Jesuit Father Harry Miller, were extremely critical of the Tigers’ exploitation of the crisis.

The politically loaded media produced by the Tiger media labyrinth, in particular the Tamilnet also showed great maturity as a propagandas organ, targeting two distinct ordinances which coexist in the public sphere – the micro sphere that binds the Tamil diaspora and the larger public sphere represented by the wider international community. Through its subtle interventions the Tiger media therefore attempted to manipulate public opinion at a time when the worlds’ eye is fixed on the region.

The Tiger media machines ability to disseminate, multi-layered news reports was also demonstrated in an information bulletin produced by the University Teachers for Human Rights -Jaffna (UTHR-J) – an independent think tank based in Sri Lanka, which argues the Tamilnet had taken a relatively subdued approach in its coverage when compared to its purported Tamil language counterpart - nitharsanam.comi - “catering to a Tamil-reading audience of ideologically pure expatriates” (UTHR-J, 2005). Despite a lack of ‘blatant’ support for the Tiger cause, an analysis of the Tamilnet’s coverage shows the cyber news service’s ability to subtext its message for a more diverse ordinance – thus potentially generating a larger number of interpretations and political narratives.

The LTTE peace secretariat site www.ltteps.org unlike its wartime predecessor www.eelam.com– designed as a platform for LTTE press releases – provided a statistically frugal coverage compared to the Tamilnet. With its

affiliation, identity and agenda hardly a secret, the official Tiger media was also devoid of the subtle sub-textual nuances seen on Tamilsnet. This micro-divergence in the meta-narrative is typified in the coverage of Velupillai Pirapaharan's message. While the peace secretariat targeted expatriate Tamils through the personal tone of the headline "My deepest condolences to our people who have lost their beloved", the Tamilnet opted for a one which targeted the international community through its headline "Pirapaharan appeals for international assistance" – a notion presented only in the final sentence of the 380 word letter.

A Three pronged cyber-media campaign: and the evolution of media themes.

Through the Tigers continued projection of its self as the quasi government of the Tamil 'nation' emerged a two contrasting arguments that was designed to stress the LTTE's final message of irreversible damage to diplomatic relations between the government and the tigers. In line with the pro-tiger media wider thematic context the message focussed on exorcise LTTE's terrorist image, replacing it with that of a quasi government in the 'Tamil homeland', while demonising the Sri Lankan government and its alleged persecution of the Tamils.

Thus the political subtext in the media was clear – the Tigers, as an independent political entity, possess the civil administrative frame work needed to mount a relief operation in the "Tamil Homeland", and are able to muster its 'troops' as a disciplined armed force to administer the LTTE political office's directives during the humanitarian crisis. Thus projecting political and administrative strength, without compromising its image of military potency.

Secondly the media declares the government is incapable of mounting an effective relief operation with out the tigers, a notion that bolsters the Tigers image as the 'true' representatives and protectors of the Tamil people who have been forsaken by the Sri Lankan government at time of great need. The media purport the Sri Lankan government had not only forsaken the Tamils, but it continued to actively undermine aid work in the region, where the 'Sinhala' military and Kumaranatunge government's chauvinistic allies hinder LTTE relief operations.

The interlocking messages of Tiger control and government betrayal thus synthesise in a third and more potent theme – government's reluctance to reconcile even during a time of devastations, providing little hope for the ongoing peace process – the tiger spokesman Thamilselvan would later argue the government and the Tigers had "reached a stage of irreparable damage in relationships" (BBC, January 11). The subtle message in the deterioration of relations was in turn is clear, a return to hostilities could be eminent – and the blood would be on the government's hand.

While the Tigers have been slowly edging towards a return to hostilities during the latter part of the year, through the justification of their actions as the obvious culmination of government strategy of non-compliance, the tsunami crisis had provided the Tigers with an ideal opportunity to illustrate their position in the public sphere, at time when there was unprecedented international attention of the island nation.

With the Tigers poised to secure a political ground during the politically unassuming natural disaster, poor choices in governance and ill planned media comments from the government, its coalition partners and the main opposition, provided lucrative opportunities for the LTTE to secure media capital that further strengthen its position in the public sphere. The Tiger message was given even more credence with through the governments bureaucracy which was painfully slow to react with any significant urgency at time of need.

Despite some less successful attempts the government's own propaganda network, deeply fragmented and haemorrhaging under the pressure from its politically divergent allies, had also failed to effectively counter the Tigers' punch. While an equally uncoordinated opposition fumbled to secure a political edge, its members continued to provide the Tiger media with valuable political fodder.

An elaborate coverage of the Tsunami in the North and East:

However, brash generalisations aside the pro-eelamist media coverage of the tsunami initially provided a straight forward reportage of the devastation in the predominantly Tamil regions. Through its detailed coverage of the eastern region that was otherwise relatively inaccessible external media. Through their coverage, the pro-eelamist media was also able to carve a unique niche as a specialist news source during crucial first two days following the tsunami when few journalists were actually on the ground and news was still hard to come by. It also surpassed the Southern centric government media in its coverage of the humanitarian crisis in the North and East – a by product of a government media censorship policy that was set in place to minimise the flow of information from the ‘war zone’

In particular the pro-eelamist Tamilnet cyber news service provided a unique coverage of the ‘Tamil Homeland’, with detailed reports from a large number of regional towns, villages and even numerous fishing hamlets that dotted the Eastern seaboard.

The Tamilnet started its coverage less than two hours after the tsunami at 04.12 GMT, with a report headlined “At least 500 feared killed by Tsunami waves in Sri Lanka”. The report provided a brief outline of the damaged to life and property in the eastern districts of Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Amparai – and was later updated to include additional background news. However, a subtle political subtext which were later to become the bedrock of the Eelamist media campaign emerged with in the next few hours, in the otherwise unassuming coverage. The political subtext of Tiger competence, Government betrayal and a sense of irreversible damage in LTTE-Government relations was fully formed with in the next few days.

Introduction: An Image of a independence: four narratives of competence.

Having projected its independence as a ‘nation’ through the LTTE’s calls for a state of “National Emergency”, and three days later through the political tone set in Pirapaharan’s initial statement to the ‘nation’, the tigers continued to assert their authority by appealing for funding and support from the international community – continuing to bypass the Sri Lankan government.

In a Tiger statement that was reproduced almost verbatim on Tamilnet the LTTE solicited “the support of the Donor nations, UN agencies and INGOs (International Non Governmental Organizations) to consolidate their efforts and ensure that the assistance reach the needy in time”. Despite the dire need the LTTE continued to avoid actively seeking support from the Sri Lankan government – during the first few days, which could have been construed as a sign of weakness. Instead the Tigers stretched their hand towards the international community as any independent nation would.

“We appeal to the international community to provide the wherewithal to meet with the exigencies and to avoid a humanitarian crisis. The human disaster and the tragedy the survivors face are unprecedented and need immediate and effective humanitarian intervention” the statement read, once again logged in it the tone of an independent state seeking international assistance at a time of great need.

While stretching its hand to the international community the Tigers however continued to insist the relief should be channelled through the LTTE, and not the Sri Lankan government. The Tiger media also insisted its front organizations – the TRO, was the only group resourced to mount the mammoth relief operation at hand. While providing extensive coverage of the LTTE’s rescue efforts, the Eelamist propaganda machine also suggested the governments own administrative machinery in the ‘Tamil homeland’ was inturn subordinate and subservient to the LTTE.

Their calls for international support was backed by a pro-LTTE media campaign designed to promote the Tiger’s ability to provide fruitful relief in the ‘Tamil Homeland’ – relief purportedly the Tigers and Tigers alone could provide. In this context the media agenda was driven through four distinct, but interconnected narratives that complemented the Tigers position as a quasi government in the ‘Tamil Homeland’.

- i. The LTTE's competence in civil administration as a self governing authority
- ii. The Tiger's military strength and its ability to deploy its troop in non-military activities
- iii. The availability of specialist relief groups in the field, who were familiar with the specific short and long term needs of the Tamil people.
- iv. Civilian acceptance of the tiger's relief effort.

The tiger attempts to assert control over the relief operation emerged in the pro-LTTE media with in hours of the Tsunami, with the Tamilnet introducing the LTTE relief operation in its second report of the day, headlined "Tsunami official death toll hits 5000", reporting the LTTE's sea tiger wing and the Tamil Eelam police, together with volunteers from the TRO were "attending to the immediate urgent needs of the effected public".

However the propaganda narratives emerged from the crude introduction of Tiger units and front organisations into defined propaganda narratives that were to form the cornerstones of the LTTE's post-tsunami media campaign.

The Tamilnet launched its projection of the LTTE's civil administrative competence, providing an initial view of the Tiger's organisational bureaucracy and its readiness to face up to the challenge - a report headlined "Disaster Management Task Force Units setup in Northeast" - the day after the tsunami. Quoting and reproducing a LTTE peace secretariat communiqué the Tamilnet reported Political Wing leader S.P.Thamilchelvan had suggested and secured consensus to establish a North-East Disaster Management Steering Committee and Special Task Force Units, in the tsunami affected region, during an "urgent meeting with International NGO's District Secretaries and TRO officials".

The communiqué stated, it had been decided to set up two Task Force Units - one at Mulliyawalai closer to Mullaittivu and another at the Puthukkadu junction on the A-9 highway with closer access to Thalayadi - both comprising " District Secretaries, INGO's, TRO, local NGO's and representatives of the LTTE Planning and Development Secretariat".

"Similar mechanisms for the districts of Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Amparai have also been planned and details would be worked out in the respective districts soon", the communiqué continued. The Task Force coordinated by the Planning and Development Secretariat was reported to include District Political Division heads, Administrative head, LTTE Health Services heads, INGO representatives, TRO, District Consortium representative; and District Secretary and Departmental Heads in the District-government appointed civil servants who had been 'seconded' by the Tigers. Once again placing the Tiger proxy - the Planning and Development Secretariat, at the head of a mammoth relief operation, incorporating the government's own administrative networks under the Tiger nexus.

The Tamilnet continued its coverage of the LTTE relief operation the following day in a report headlined "First Taskforce Unit meets in Puthukkadu", once again exposing the subordinate role of the government's own administrators, noting the presence of Mannar and Kilinochchi Government Agents (GA), and the Jaffna GA's representative at the meeting - as part of a larger LTTE organised relief operation.

The reports provide an overall view of the LTTE relief operation's civilian command structure, with the LTTE's political wing and its enigmatic leader Thamilchelvan at the head of multi-tiered administrative network - absorbing NGOs and even the regions Government representatives into the LTTE bureaucracy. While the Liberation Tiger's Planning and Development Secretariat (PDS) - under direction from the Political Wing - was given the task of coordination a number of task forces consisting LTTE, Government and NGO actors. Interestingly, despite the centrality of the PDS in the Tiger relief operation, the LTTE's Planning and Development director Thuyavan failed to make the news, with the spotlight focusing on LTTE political leader Thamilchelvan - a politically prudent move considering Thamilchelvan had become a presumed voice of reason during the ongoing peace process. The placement of the relief operations directly under Thamilchelvan could thus be interpreted as an attempt to maximise the Tiger's chances of international assistance.

Capitalising on his international image of as moderate, the Tiger political wing leader would later argue the international community had a "moral responsibility" to ensure humanitarian aid was equitably distributed to the North and East urging the immediate relief measures would be best undertaken by the LTTE established task forces

(TamilNet, December 30, 2004). [TamilNet, December 30, 2004 Cut red tape to deliver urgent aid-LTTE18:28 GMT]

While promoting its narrative of the LTTE political wing's competence as a quasi government in the 'Tamil Homeland' the pro-LTTE media simultaneously launched a second propaganda narrative focused on its military wing.

While covertly producing a number of themes crucial to the LTTE military wing's transition from militant guerrilla force to an armed force of a legitimate government, the media message lodged in the narrative further strengthened the tigers position as self governing authority. However with the peace process balancing on knife's edge, the tigers were reluctant to completely rein in the military wing under the political office's command. Instead the media reports suggest an LTTE strategy of incorporating its military commanders as administrators of a military government.

Liberation Tiger senior combatants including Sea Tiger Wing leader Col. Soosai, Jeyanthan Regiment commander and Batticaloa-Amparai district overall commander Col. Bhanu, Trincomalee district military commander Col. Sornam, and Charles Antony Regimentiv Commander Amitab, were all give coverage in the post-tsunami pro-Tiger media. While military commanders including Soosai, Sonram and Bhanu, dressed in civilian garbs, instead of the more conventional military fatigues, were also given news voice.

In a rare interview with the London based Tamil satellite television network Deepam TVv on January 29, Soosai said the government – presumably as the tigers had done – should forget ethnic differences in assisting tsunami victims. “The Sri Lankan government should not look at (the tsunami relief program) as a Sinhala or Tamil issue,” Soosai said, in a tone akin to a political statesman than the LTTE's feared sea tiger commander. However, the report also provided a series of subtle textual references to the Tiger military force, concluding the Tigers had already deployed a battalion of its troops in Jaffna southern and Mullaithivu, and were preparing to deploy another battalion in the same region. While a battalion in typical military jargon, could consist anything between 300-1000 soldiers or 2-6 companies under a Lieutenant Colonel, the Tiger's non-traditional command structure and ambiguity of rank provides few clues to the exact number of people deployed in the field. However the term 'battalion' for all accounts and purposes gave the reader an impression of a large number of troops.

While providing an overview of the Tigers military wing's relief efforts – which the media claims had stretched its resources to the limit; government forces, who are far more resourced than the Tigers were portrayed to be frugal in their aid. The reports allege government troops were focusing their assistance on the Sinhalese and more importantly in rescuing soldiers, instead of helping the Tamil civilians who the military claims to safeguard by their very presence in the Jaffna peninsula. “The Sri Lanka army says that it is in Jaffna to protect the civilians there. If that is the case why is the SLA using its helicopters to search and rescue only its soldiers who are missing in the peninsula?” Soosai questioned.

The media also provide a sub-narrative which suggests the LTTE's sphere of concern extends beyond their geographic jurisdiction, into a wider region considered to be the traditional “Tamil Homeland” and to Tiger constituents who are housed in refugee camps outside the Tiger control. The extension of their concern in however directed through the military wing, which according to the reports seems to take a subordinate role to the political wing in this context.

December 30, the Tamilnet reported Trincomalee district military commander Colonel Sornam had visited refugees shelter in several camps in the “Sri Lanka Army controlled areas” in the district including the Trincomalee town. While focusing the spotlight on Military leader the report added Trincomalee district political leader S.Elilan and his deputy “accompanied” Sornam during the tour.(TamilNet, December 30, 2004, Colonel Sornam visits army - controlled areas in Trinco) [TamilNet, December 30, 2004 13:29 GMT Colonel Sornam visits army-controlled areas in Trinco]

On January 4, the Tamilnet once again reported the military wing's extension of its control claiming the “Tigers' top commander in the region, Col. Bhanu” had crossed into Sri Lanka Army controlled territory with a section of LTTE troops and was “coordinating rescue and relief efforts in the multi-ethnic region”. The report based on a press

release issued by the LTTE's Centre for Emergency Assessment in Kalavanchykuddy, said the rescue efforts in the region had been compounded by torrential rain and flooding, which has also increased the risk of further infection.

The TamilNet report on Bhanu, concentrates a number of sub-narratives suggesting an LTTE extension of its sphere of influence over the entire region, beyond the bounds of its immediate military control. The report's tone suggest Col Bhanu had entered the Army controlled territory, without invitation or approval from the Sri Lankan military, which in turn implies the forces are powerless to resist the "Tigers' top commander in the region". It also suggest Col Bhanu had crossed over to assist "multi-ethnic" communities who have been affected by the tsunami and the more recent post-tsunami flooding – people who are in need of immediate assistance which the Sri Lankan Military had failed to provide. (TamilNet, January 04, 2005, LTTE urges aid for Amparai as fighters conduct relief operations).

[TamilNet, January 04, 2005 07:24 GMT LTTE urges aid for Amparai as fighters conduct relief operations]

With the exception of a few groups including the tiger motorbike brigade, most cadre, like their commanding officers were shown in civilian cloths in the pro-Tiger media coverage. While the tigers are known to appear out of military fatigues, their media exposure in civilian garb on the surface seemed to contradict with the LTTE's portrayal of itself as a legitimate government and its cadre as soldiers of the Eelam state. Also, considering the civilians in many part of the North and East have lived under constant Tiger presence for the past two decades, it would be fair to assume they would have desensitised to armed Tiger presence. Hence the tiger cadre out of their traditional garb could have served little purpose in bringing normality to the tsunami victims, instead it could be seen to have a vested strategic interest.

With donor nations sceptical of aid distribution through guerrilla organisations, the civilian cloths could therefore be interpreted as a move designed to minimise international scrutiny, that many have diverted attention from the need for relief, to a the more important organisation credibility of the aid distributors.

The pro-tiger media strategy was however revealed in an Tamilnet report headlined "Sri Lanka unique in deploying armed forces at welfare centers- SLMM" – quoting the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) chief Major General (retd) Trond Furuhojde, the Tiger media argue the government rationale behind deploying armed forces in refugee camps. the report alleges Maj.Gen Furuhojde had said "Sri Lanka is the only country to deploy armed forces to manage refugee welfare centres in the aftermath of Tsunami catastrophe," during a meeting with the LTTE's Trincomalee district military commander Col Sornam and the district's political head Elilan in Muttur east, south of Trincomalee (TamilNet, January 14, 2005). The report continued Col Sornam had "expressed his deep concern over the take over of Tsunami welfare centres in the Trincomalee district by the Sri Lanka Army" adding the move had created "fear and apprehension in the minds of Tamils". [TamilNet, January 14, 2005, Sri Lanka unique in deploying armed forces at welfare centers- SLMM]

The pro-Tiger media's third narrative focused on stressing the availability of specialist aid-workers and experienced relief organisations, aimed at bolstering the Tigers calls for international aid to be directly channelled in to the 'Tamil Homeland'.

The Tamilnet's second update on the day of the Tsunami, headlined "Tsunami official death toll hits 5000" introduced three Eelamist actors – the sea tigers, the Eelam police and the Tamil Rehabilitation organisation (TRO) 'volunteers' in the second last paragraph, of an another detail account of the damage complete with gut wrenching images of dead children.

Less than four hours after first introducing the TRO in its tsunami coverage, the Tamilnet published a report headlined "TRO appeals for urgent assistance", with it reproducing a media release issued by the humanitarian organization. Acutely self-aware of the political murmurs that linked the TRO with the LTTE, the Tamilnet started its report describing the Rehabilitation Organisation as "an independent Non-Governmental Organization registered with Government of Sri Lanka". "TRO's resources are badly stretched in meeting the immediate needs of the people affected by these floods", the statement said, appealing to the international community for assistance. The press statement assured all contributions made in response to the TRO appeal on the pro-Tiger European and North American satellite television the Tamil Television Network (TTN), the International Broadcasting Corporation (IBC) would be "exclusively" used for tsunami rehabilitation.

Continuing the narrative of TRO's specialised service, the Tamilnet reported the "NGO registered with Government of Sri Lanka and working exclusively in the NorthEast, (was) preparing to provide specialized centres to cater to the unique needs of the various groups - injured, frail, expectant or nursing mothers, emotionally traumatized and children under 5 years". The report headlined "TRO to provide Specialized Maintenance Centers" on January 4, a TTRO spokesman told Tamilnet more than 90% of the tsunami affected were now living in refugee centers – including expectant and nursing mothers, the injured and the emotionally traumatized – and the TRO initiative was set to provide specialized services to those who need it.

The Tamilnet's attempt to portray the TRO simply as an NGO however fails to take into account a number of international reports that argue TRO-LTTE links. In its November 2004 report Human Rights Watch suggests the "Tamil Rehabilitation Organization (TRO), ...is effectively the humanitarian arm wing of the LTTE" (Human Rights Watch, 2004). In a commentary published by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, Queensland University professor and RAND corporation consultant Peter Chalk suggest the TRO to be one of nearly 30vi front organizations setup by the LTTE (Chalk, 2000).

The allegations of a TRO-LTTE nexus also hit the pro-eelamists in Toronto – home to the largest Tamil population outside of Sri Lanka. On December 30, the Toronto based Canadian The Global and Mail reported the TRO dual campaigns of fund raising while attempting to clear its name of any nefarious involvement with the Tigers. The report quoted Toronto's TRO director Ra j Guna-Nathan [sic] (Thiru Raj. Gunanathan) who challenged Peter Chalks intelligence report and said the TRO was "totally independent" of the LTTE. Gunanathan also campaigned for tax exemptions for TRO tsunami aid – a privilege the Canadian government had refused to accord the TRO due to its alleged links with the LTTE (Freeze, December 30, 2004).

In another article published in the Global and Mail quotes TRO's wanni based director Naren Narendran, who assures their funds are not siphoned in to the Tiger coffers, adding every penny is scrupulously accounted for, but concedes the lines "can be blurry in northern Sri Lanka". The article also provides a glimpse of the tight grasp the Tigers enforce over all aid efforts in the region (Colin Freeze, January 18, 2004).

The article quotes Maran Rajadurai, an LTTE task-force manager responsible in-charge of 8,000 refugees in 10 welfare centres, who explained "even the big aid agencies, such as the Red Cross and the United Nations Children's Fund, are directed to funnel material aid such as food and tents toward the TRO". "This way, it is the Tamil agency that distributes the goods directly to the people," Rajadurai explains. He is also quoted saying the Tigers always "give TRO the lion's share of activity" (Colin Freeze, January 18, 2004).

Meanwhile The Wall Street Journal reported "the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence was closely watching tsunami-relief operations, including TRO's work with the Tigers..." (Hookway, James and Solomon, Jay. January 11, 2005).

With the TRO reporting it had received 450 million Sri Lankan rupees, a staggering 73% of its 2003 operating cost of 617.5 million, the alleged TRO-LTTE connection also created ripples in Colombo, fearing the Tigers would capitalize on the tsunami to procure much needed equipment.

The pro-Tiger media's fourth and final major narrative focused on providing the tiger relief initiative credibility, through community approval.

On January 03 the Tiger Peace Secretariat reported UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy had said the "timely rescue and well coordinated relief arrangements are really commendable". The report said Bellamy had visited Tamilselvan at the "Peace Secretariat", where she is reported to have said "UNICEF is there with you in your endeavours to bring back normalcy in these peoples," suggesting a UN backing of the LTTE efforts giving it legitimacy. A similar report was also published on Tamilnet, however cautiously toning down the LTTE, presenting the TRO in its stead.

On January 09, 2005 the Tamilnet reported Bishop of Batticaloa-Amparai district Joseph Kingsley Swampillai, had expressed his appreciation for the relief efforts carried out by the Tamil Rehabilitation Organization (TRO) and the support given by the Tamil diaspora in meeting the immediate and urgent needs of the victims of disaster, in an interview with TamilNet Sunday.

A day later on January 10, the Tamilnet reported UN Secretary General Kofi Annan had told Tamil National Alliance (TNA) members the “LTTE and TRO deserv(ed) commendation for the coordinated effort”. The report quoted the Secretary General who said he was “aware of the coordinated structures put in place by the LTTE and TRO in the wake of the disaster and the efficacy with which humanitarian delivery” was being carried out in the region and he wished to “commend them for this valuable service”.

The pro-eelamist media narrative of public approval also harnessed positive media comments issued by Tamil parliamentarians, many of whom have openly supported the Tigers in the recent years.

Discriminative assistance: Tiger allegations of government incompetence and hindrance

Despite the LTTE’s seeming reluctance to stretch its hand to the government – the task of soliciting state support, and launching a scathing attack on Kumaranatunge’s Sinhala chauvinistic government for its neglect of the Tamil people was left to the Tiger backed Illankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi - Tamil National Alliance (TNA) politicians who had secured 22 seats in the state parliament during the previous election. While the TNA parliamentarians had little or no political clout within the “Tamil Homeland’s” political sphere dominated by the LTTE political wing, the TNA members served a dual purpose for the LTTE through their criticism of the government and approval of the LTTE relief effort, from within the democratic framework of parliament politics – a seemingly neutral voice with greater international political credibility. However the neutrality of the TNA has long been compromised, considering their endorsement of the LTTE as ‘true’ representatives of the Tamil people, where the role of the democratically elected TNA politician is subservient to that of the Tigers, and the TNA’s precarious electoral position where many of their constituents live in areas under Tiger control.

The TNA neutrality is also undermined through central role played by the United Liberation Front (TULF) – the nationalist party accused of nurturing the LTTE during its infancy; and the pro-LTTE All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC) – the All Ceylon Tamil Congress’ (ACTC) former leader Gaasinather Gangasera ‘Kumar’ Ponnambalam a staunch supporter of the LTTE during the latter part of his political career, and was posthumously awarded the title Mamanithan - Most Eminent Person by tiger leader Velupillai Pirapaharan in January 2000, for his “dedicated patriotism and for his outstanding contribution to the cause of Tamil liberation”.

Thus the TNA’s seemingly innocuous political criticism of the government becomes politically loaded media generated by a Tiger political proxy. In this context the comments made by the TNA members could be viewed as part of larger media strategy. The TNA first emerged as a political actor in the tsunami crisis in Tamilnet on December 26 (7) report quoting TNA parliamentarian Joseph Pararajasingam “urging” Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksha to attend to the immediate needs of the affected public in the east. The following day in a report headlined “Tamil MP slams Colombo for ignoring Northeast plight” the cyber news service said Pararajasingam had “slammed” the government for “callously ignoring the plight of thousands in the northeast...”. In the report the Tamil parliamentarian said the “nonchalant attitude” of the government and Sinhala parties towards the suffering in the ‘Tamil homeland’ was “appalling”. (16)

Pararajasingam was quoted saying the northeast was discussed for less than five minutes during a two hour disaster management conference held at the Prime Minister’s residence. “In fact the situation in the Northeast was taken up only after I raised the issue. They simply not bothered about the plight of our people”, he said – highlighting the Tamils’.

The report concluded with the MP saying the TNA had “therefore decided to appeal to donor countries and agencies to help directly the Tamil and Muslim people.....”, a strategic move that supported the Tigers calls for direct international intervention through its humanitarian front organization – the TRO, considering the itself TNA did not present a framework for international support. The Tigers call for direct and immediate international support, designed to bypass the government inspection and embargo process was in turn aimed at subtly exploiting the urgent need for relief as a façade for the LTTE’s military supply chains that were forced to use labour intensive

smuggling routes instead of mainstream importation channels into the country – the effects and the fall out of the strategy however were to emerge later.

Two days later, quoting TNA parliamentarian S. Jeyanandamoorthy the Tamilnet reported dislodged landmines buried along the perimeter of the Kalkudah Army Camp, was hampering rescue work in the region (19). The selective reportage of dislodged landmines posing a threat to relief operations clearly showed the Tamilnet's pro-Tiger bias considering the LTTE's attempts to down play any threat from their own land mines in the international media. "The Liberation Tigers and local volunteers have recovered 376 bodies (so far)...," he said adding the "government has not sent any medicines or emergency relief supplies to (his) electorate." (19)

A narrative of Government incompetence:

The wider narrative of the Sri Lankan government reluctance to assist Tamil victims of the tsunami complementing the TNA accusations of neglect were directed through four main sub-narratives.

- i. The Sri Lankan government's partisan relief efforts, and in particular the neglect of victims in the North and East.
- ii. Government interference with the LTTE relief operation and attempts to undermine and interrupt Tiger relief efforts, including forcible hijacking of aid.
- iii. Military efforts of capitalising on the tsunami to gain lost ground, and the use of state terror against Tamil civilians.
- iv. The role played by the governments anti-LTTE allies.

On December 27 the Tamilnet reported North East Province Governor Tyrone Fernando had met with government officials, parliamentarians and LTTE representatives to coordinate a joint tsunami relief operation. However in contrast to the LTTE organised meeting which culminated in the formation of "a North-East Disaster Management Steering Committee and Special Task Force Units" Governor Fernando's conference showed little promise. One of the few outcomes being the Governor's directive to the regions' Deputy Provincial Directors of Health Services (DPDHS) to purchase urgently needed medicines without waiting for the drugs from central supply store of the Health Ministry. While the move no doubt suggests some action on the Governor's part it also suggests his lack of faith in his own central government's ability to supply the urgently needed medicines. It also stresses an argument the Tigers have stressed in the media over the need for assistance to be channeled directly to the North and East through the Tigers instead of being clogged in Colombo's slow moving bureaucracy.

The report concludes with a humorous undertone, explaining the conference ended abruptly when Tyrone Fernando left the conference hall suddenly, after "he was informed of another Tsunami wave was to hit coastal area". [TamilNet, December 27, 2004 Governor meets NEPC officials on relief work 16:30 GMT].

The Tamilnet's coverage of the government Colombo based relief program was once gain highlighted on December 29, in report headlined "Harim Peiris, United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) Minister visit Jaffna to view damages". Once again, despite a visit by presidential advisor Harim Peiris, and Constitutional Affairs and National Integration Minister DEW Gunasekara, no real out come of the visit was reported.

The narrative of a Colombo based relief operation, and the government smear campaign's attempts to discredit the Tiger relief efforts, and genuine concerns of the Tamil victims of the tsunami who presumably had been forgotten by the Colombo regime was further illustrated in a report headlined "President Kumaratunga briefs tsunami crisis to Colombo-based diplomats" where the President was quoted saying the government was "not prepared to face such a calamity" and any reports to the contrary was the work of the "LTTE's propaganda mechanism". While the report on the surface seemed a genuine effort at balanced reportage, its positioning in string of reports establishing the woes of North-Eastern tsunami victims, merely portrayed the government to be out-of-touch.

The argument of inaction was however clenched in a report headlined *Irate Tsunami refugees jeer PM, JVP in Jaffna*. On December 30, the Tamilnet reported Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksha and “leaders of the Sinhala nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna visited” the Tamil heartland town of Jaffna “amidst strong protests by refugees from the Tsunami destroyed coastal villages of the peninsula”.

The report said the refugees had “demanded” relief from Colombo, which had not reached the region even four days after the tsunami, forcing the Prime Minister’s “entourage” to turn back. The report also said the refugees had become entangled in an altercation when “Sri Lanka army troops” providing security to the PM tried to force their way into the venue.

“The PM’s entourage then went to the Sri Lanka army’s 52 Division Headquarters in Varani wheretheir tour was disrupted again by Tsunami refugees in the area who blocked the road from the garrison” Tamilnet reported adding the delegation had to be airlifted to the Sri Lanka Army’s main garrison in Jaffna.

In a region where civilians had long lost their voice to genuinely protest, it would not be an exaggeration to assume the Tiger propaganda machine had either orchestrated the protest, or at the very least sanctioned its execution.

The neglect theme continued throughout the Tamilnet’s tsunami coverage, highlighting the lack of assistance from the government, and the substandard of the aid on the ‘rare’ occasions they reached the victims. In one such story the cyber-news service reported the refugees had protested in front of the Point Pedro Divisional Secretariat for supplying dry ration, reported to be unfit for human consumption – the report alleged the rice had be given on “humanitarian” grounds by the Sri Lanka Army stationed in Palaly military.

The pro-eelamist narrative of the government and armed forces’ attempt to actively undermine the flow of aid to the North and East emerged on December 29 with a report headlined “Authorities Hinder Help to Tsunami Affected Regions”. The report said TRO’s flow of aid into the region was stalled by “divisions of the Sri Lanka army and police as well as Sinhalese groups” who had reportedly stopped aid convoys at the Habaran junction – a Sinhala strong hold which linked the main roads leading to the tsunami ravaged Amparai, Batticaloa and Trincomalee districts.

The report said in one such case TNA parliamentarian Sampanthan had to secure the release of a TRO truck with relief materials destined for Batticaloa when it was seized at the Habarana junction by suspected JVP supporters. In another similar incident Trincomalee based “Sri Lankan” army was reported to have taken a truck loaded with aid from the Madathady junction to the Trincomalee Government Agent’s Office situated within Fort Frederick where the SLA Gajaba regiment is stationed.

The Tamilnet also reported TRO relief was slow to reach Mullaitivu and Killinochchi, as government forces insist on the trucks being unloaded for inspection.

The report continued, citing another incident attributed to an unidentified NGO, which claimed a policeman guarding a refugee camp in Trincomalee had turned back a group of Sinhalese with relief materials claiming the camps residents were “Tamils and not Sinhalese”.

“In spite of all these difficulties the TRO is fully committed to serve the victims of all communities in the northeast,” the report concluded.

The theme of harassment continued in a report headlined “Hijacking relief supply to Trincomalee should be stopped” on December 30. The allegations were made by the LTTE’s Trincomalee district political leader Elilan, at a joint LTTE-government District Task Force (DTF) meeting chaired by Government Agent Mr. Gamini Rodrigo, and attended by Trincomalee district Commanding Officer of Sri Lanka Army Major General Sumith Balasuriya. Elilan alleged he had been informed moments before the meeting twenty TRO aid lorries had been forcibly taken over by government troops – one example of a string of such events.

The report said Major General Balasuriya had “replied that he was not aware such incidents”, but assured he could ensure lorries bringing TRO’s relief materials “reach their destination if he was given the numbers of such lorries in advance”.

On December 31, in report headlined “Relief supply to Muslim, Tamil villages in Muttur sabotaged?” the news service reported government irrigation authorities had opened Kantalai tank spill gates without any prior notice, flooding the Kantalai- Allai road. The event, Tamilnet said had been interpreted as yet another attempt “to disrupt the smooth distribution of relief materials”.

The report said 38 Tamil families housed in Mulliyadi in Thampalakamam divisional secretariat were also affected by the flood water which forced them to be moved to Puddukudiruppu, where the “TRO took immediate steps to feed them with cooked meals and to provide other urgent needs”.

Meanwhile the Tiger Peace Secretariat media entered the narrative of government hindrance on December 31 with a report headlined “Humanitarian delivery to Tamils in the East – Attempts to sabotage?” – a brief outline compared to the Tamilnet’s extensive coverage of the issue. The Tamilnet’s disproportionate enthusiasm could however be interpreted as a result of the cyber news-service’s focus wider penetration in to the international community as an alternative media outlet, when compared to the Peace Secretariat which is clearly seen as an LTTE propaganda arm and is predominantly accessed by the pro-Eelamist lobby, which needs no ideological deionisation of the Sri Lankan government.

On January 2, the Tamilnet reported government troops had been accused of using state terror on refugees who had refused military assistance. In the report headlined “SLA accused of burning refugee” the news service, quoting TNA PM Sivajilingam said 15-20 soldiers had visited a makeshift refuge shelter housing 67 families in Kudathanai, Vadamaradchi, Jaffna, “allegedly to hand out food”, and had been turned back by the refugees who had already been “assisted by a Tamil aid organization”. The report said, according to the refugees, nearly 200 attackers had come around 15 minutes later, too assault men who had sought refuge in the shelter – threemen were admitted to Valvettithurai and Parithithurai hospitals. The report said the makeshift shelter, together with the refugees meager belongings had hen been raised to ground. The Tamilnet coverage followed a Peace Secretariat coverage of the alleged attack on January 1.

The attack sparked counterclaims by the military who accused the Tigers were responsible for the attack.

On January 4, in a Tamilnet report headlined “Thamilchelvan calls for end to fraudulent reports” the LTTE political wing leader denied the LTTE had been involved in the attack or as suggested by outside media the LTTE had “stolen or incorrectly distributed” aid. "In the East, nationalistic forces and organisations are engaged in spreading false rumours," Mr Thamilchelvan. "Believing this, there are press reports and rumours that aid coming to Tamil areas has been hijacked, snatched and redirected, and that the Liberation Tigers have burnt some refugees, etc."

The narrative of military intervention in refugee centers continued, with a Tamilnet report head lined “Sri Lanka Armed Forces take over refugees, harass TRO” on January 5. “In a sudden move, the Sri Lankan Armed Forces are manning the refugee camps in Amparai, Batticaloa and Trincomalee since Tuesday,” the report said.

The report also accused the Special Task Force (STF) in Thirukovil, Amparai of hijacking two tractors loads of TRO relief supplies and distributed them after removing the TRO labels. “The Sri Lanka Army (SLA) and Special Task Force (STF) have stepped up their harassment of workers of the Tamils Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO)", KP Reggie, Executive Director of the TRO, told TamilNet.

The TRO chief accused the STF of attacking and intimidating aid workers on a number of separate incidents in the region and said accused the government’s elite troops of removing TRO labels off the ration packs before distributing it to refugees.

He also reiterated the argument of state inflicted “bureaucratic hurdles” which have seriously delayed the flow of aid in to the region. Reggie said every aid consignment was stopped at the checkpoints, “ the driver then calls the the TRO office in Colombo, who have to contact the local Government Agent, the Sri Lanka Peace Secretariat, the Sri Lanka Government appointed Relief Coordination Officer and the military contact provided by the SLA in order to get the consignment released”, he said explaining one lorry had been stranded for up to ten hours the previous day at Ottumavadi near Batticaloa, and had been released only when the GA become personally involved.

The narrative of government troops gaining ground despite opposition from Tamil leaders, continued in the Tamilnet with a report headlined "Vanni TNA MPs oppose army take over of refugee camps" on January 6. The report said the TNA Vanni district parliamentarians had vehemently protested against a Presidential directive handing over the management of welfare centers to the armed forces. The news service said TRO Planning Director Lawrence Christy had also questioned the need for troop involvement when his group had been managing the centers effectively, without "discrimination". He said under the new directive TRO had been forced to hand over aid to the government forces in Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Amparai. While accepting there were "problems in implementing the President's directive", presidential advisor Harim Peiris said the directive was designed "to ensure better co-ordination in providing relief to Tsunami victims".

However the report said Parliamentarian Kishore Sivanathan interjected saying the, " President's directive ...(was not) a wise move at a time when TRO (was) doing a good job," adding the foreign aid coming to the North and East "should be distributed without discrimination". The thematic subtext is clear – the TRO has, as repeatedly reported by the Tamilnet, has been distributing the aid among all ethnic communities, the military on the other hand has continued to sabotage the flow of aid and had repeatedly discriminated against the Tamil victims. The government move would thus add to the Tamil victims' woes and more importantly it could be seen as Colombo sanctioning the partisan treatment of victims.

The Tamilnet also reported TNA parliamentarian Sampanthan had written to the President arguing the armed forces' takeover of refugee camps was counterproductive and could undermine the work done in the region so far. In the PM's letter reproduced on Tamilnet, Sampanthan said refugees were resisting the presence of armed military personnel and the "situation is tense at some Welfare Centres". (TNA decries SLA's taking over of NorthEast Welfare camps, TamilNet, January 05, 2005 16:09 GMT)

The LTTE peace secretariat entered the military takeover debate the previous day with a report headlined "rescind the order to the military to take over relief distribution," which said Tamil legislators had written to the president campaigning against a military take over of the relief operations in the region. On January 8, the LTTE political wing entered the debate with Tamilselvan "expressing serious concerns" over the government move. The political wing leader told a media conference while the government claimed they had sent adequate relief to the region, tsunami victims in the North and East had not received any government assistance during the first three days, and said relief from the south had only started to "trickle in" once groups such as the TRO had successfully managed the immediate needs of the people.

He said the "Tamil people (were) suspicious of the government's intentions" in bringing relief operations under the command of the armed forces, and said the Tamil people did not consider "the Sri Lankan military as a friendly entity in the background of atrocities committed by them during the past".

"We have formulated an effective delivery mechanism with the inclusion of the Government Agent at the district level and this is functioning satisfactorily without any confusion in the welfare centres. Understandably, the government seems to be worried about the focus of international attention, after international media started highlighting the situation," Tamilselvan told the media.

"How can one erase the collective Tamil memory of the mass disappearances and ending up in mass graves, of thousands of innocent Tamils, all arrested by the armed forces and later unaccounted for in the NorthEast. Vantharumoolai University complex, Kokkaddicholai, Kiran and several other locations in the East and Chemmani in Jaffna remind the Tamil people of the cruelty with which Tamil people were shepherded to death in these locations," he said adding the Tamil people feared the President's directive was another "trap".

The President's move thus presented the Tigers with an ideal opportunity to reiterate alleged crimes committed by Government troops in the past, at a time when international attention was focused on the region.

The pro-Eelamist lobby's extremely valid argument of the futility of deploying Sinhala speaking soldiers to assist Tamil speaking tsunami victims, at the expense of vernacular aid-workers; coupled with international suspicion of relief operations led by armed troops the Tigers were able to capitalize on the President's directive, to further strengthen the LTTE narrative of the Sri Lankan government's attempt to gain lost ground under the guise of humanitarian assistance.

The argument was clenched by the LTTE media on January 21, which quoted TNA members who argued the government was “getting ready for occupation” under the veil of humanitarian assistance. The report said the TNA parliamentarians had argued “the Emergency Regulation passed recently, and the recent purchase of arms from Iran by the Sri Lankan government confirms their view that the government is getting ready for the military reoccupation of northeast.

The narrative of the government de-labeling TRO aid packages was given further credence in a Tamilnet report which quoted Ceylon Workers Congress.

Unlike the government’s partisan assistance the pro-eelam media reported the TRO spearheaded LTTE relief was reaching all victims without racial discrimination. In a report headlined “TRO provides relief supply to Sinhala victims in Trincomalee” on January 2, the Tamilnet said the TRO had provided relief to 403 victims in two Sinhala settlements in Trincomalee. “193 Muslim families who are located in shelters in the villages of Vellaimanal and Palaiyootru were also provided with relief materials by the TRO,” the report said.

Sinhala ultra-nationalists: the role of opportunistic ‘relief efforts’

The pro-eelamist narrative of the role played by the government’s anti-Tiger allies included two main themes – the actions of the Sinhala chauvinist coalition partners such as the JVP and the inclusion of former Tamil rebel groups in the governments rehabilitation management program.

The extremist Sinhala chauvinist attitudes were played out through a series of reports focusing on the JVP and the JHU (Jathika Hela Urumaya). The JVP – a Marxist party with a strong pro-sinhala bias, the had staged two terrorist coups in 1971 and 1988-89, before once again returning into the folds of a democratic framework, while the more JHU had emerged as a ultra-Sinhala Buddhist party which had emerged from the radical Sinhala Urumaya – Sinhala Heritage – in the wake of the 2004 election. The JHU, contested by entirely by Buddhist monks managed to secure 552,724 nine seats in the 225 seat parliament, on a political platform that emphasized the territorial integrity of Sri Lanka primarily as a Sinhala Buddhist nation, which the party believed should adopt a more ‘Buddhist’ approach of governance – through a narrow and politically biased definition of basic Buddhist principles.

On December 29, in a report headlined “Authorities Hinder Help to Tsunami Affected Regions” the Tamilnet alleged JVP supported were one of the groups instrumental in hindering the aid flow in to the ‘Tamil Homeland’ and said JVP members had reportedly seized aid convoys at the Habarana junction, a node in the main transport artery into the ‘Tamil Homeland’. The narrative continued with the cyber-news agency establishing Tamil civilians in the North did not welcome the JVP, in a report headlined “Irate Tsunami refugees jeer PM, JVP in Jaffna” on December 30. the report said detailed civilian protests that cut short the Prime Ministers visit after he traveled to Jaffna with a group of politicians including “JVP’s powerful propaganda secretary Wimal Weerawansa”.

The JVP’s political credibility were further shattered, through a report quoting a newspaper article published by the Colombo based The Sunday Leader – an anti-government English weekly, which reported the JVP had redirected tsunami aid collected in Moratuwa, in the outskirts of Colombo, to “a Buddhist temple” form where it was relabeled as JVP aid and distributed to welfare centers (Relief supplies hijacked and relabelled in Moratuwa - Colombo paper, Tamilnet, January 02).

On January 11, the Tamilnet reported the JVP and the JHU had object to channeling relief through the international charity World Vision – in particular the funds raised through the Asia and the rest of the world, held in Melbourne. The report said the two parties had raised their concerns over World Vision, a Christian organization, receiving the relief aid. “JHU leader, Ven. Ellawala Madhanaada Thera, charged that the funds from the cricket match might be used for illegal purposes,” – including the conversion of more people into “fundamentalist Christianity”, the report said. The Tamilnet also claimed the JHU deputy leader Omalpe Sobhitha Thera had written to the International

Cricket Council arguing any involvement with World Vision alleged of "unethical religious conversion" could tarnish the councils name.

The Tamilnet narrative also suggested an ideological split in the governments own ranks, particularly between President Kumaratunga's followers and the radical JVP members. Quoting JVP member and Minister of Small and Rural Industries KD Lal Kantha, the Tamilnet reported the JVP had alleged the government promises of rebuilding the nation was an empty promise. "It might be possible to rebuild a town or two enlisting contractors with fanfare," Lal Kantha was quoted. Arguing the government leadership had "miserably failed to maintain with any degree of credibility the unity achieved" through the formation of the coalition government, the Minister questioned why neither the parliament nor the cabinet had been consulted on an effective plan to rebuild the nation in the aftermath the tsunami, and was even quoted saying nobody knew as to who was even answerable (Government's call for unity is an empty ballyhoo, says JVP, TamilNet, January 22).

The JVP's own power struggle with in the UPFA coalition thus provided ideal fodder for the pro-Eelamist political narrative of government incompetence, while simultaneously undermining the credibility of the JVP – a major partner in the coalition.

The JVP, and to a lesser degree the JHU also played a key role in providing the pro-Eelamist media with folder that even undermined the government's 'post tsunami development blueprint'. The "plan drawn up as a blueprint for post-tsunami development by the Task force to Rebuild the Nation (TAFREN) – one of the three committees comprising the Center for National Operations (CNO) set up by Sri Lanka's President Chandrika Kumaratunge – is assailed as being immoral, hastily produced, too centralized and conceived without adequate consultation with organizations whose support is vital for the plan's successful execution," the Tamilnet reported in a news feature published on January 23 (Colombo's post tsunami development blueprint assailed, TamilNet, January 23).

"The highly centralized structure of the CNO and its component Task Forces, TAFREN, TAFRER (Rescue and Relief) and TAFLOL (Logistics Law and Order) have already come under attack from various quarters," the report said adding the JVP had accused the Sri Lankan President of excluding them from the decision making process. The following day, on January 24, the Tamilnet reported the JVP had expressed its "strong opposition" over a government bid to include the LTTE in the post-tsunami relief, reconstruction and rehabilitation. (Don't include LTTE in post-tsunami rebuilding effort – JVP, TamilNet, January 24, 2005).

The JVP interference in the North's relief efforts came to a boil on January 31, when the Tigers walked out of a Thirukkivil Divisional Secretary (DS) planning session, after the JVPs Digamadulla MP Wasantha Piyatissa – from the deep south – attempted to participate in the meeting "uninvited". "We welcome everyone who comes to help our people. But this JVP politician used Tsunami assistance as a pretext to sow political hatred and Sinhala chauvinism. We walked out, objecting to his cheap political tactics", the LTTE's Batticaloa-Amparai district political division leader E Kousalyan, later told Tamilnet. "Tsunami devastation is not the place to advertise or promote one's political party", Kousalyan added.

The report also quoted local TNA MP Pathmanathan who argued the JVP was trying to gain a foothold in the North during the tsunami crisis. "The Sinhala chauvinist JVP is trying to exploit this disaster to gain a foothold in our areas. The party has been spewing hatred against the Tamils. It refuses to recognize even their basic rights as a people. It is obvious that they saw the Tsunami devastation as a window of opportunity to insinuate themselves into our areas." (Tigers walk out in protest against JVP, TamilNet, January 31).

The government's Tamil allies also came under fire from the pro-Tiger media, in particular the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) – a breakaway group of the former terrorists group Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF).

On January 11, in a report headlined "Kumaratunga appoints EPDP to tsunami Task Force" the Tamilnet reported the President had appointed EPDP representatives to the District Task Force (DTF) established in Jaffna, Batticaloa, Trincomalee and Amparai districts to coordinate relief and rehabilitation of victims sheltered in welfare centers. The report said the Tigers had "strongly opposed" the appointment of some EPDP members – including Dr K Wickneswaran who unsuccessfully contested the 2004 general election to the Trincomalee – arguing the EPDP had no parliamentary representation in areas such as Trincomalee.

The Tamilnet later reported on January 19, the EPDP had walked out of a DTF meeting after its member T Mathanarajah unsuccessfully attempted to bar the Tigers from discussions. The report said TNA members Sivajilingam and Eelaventhan had supported the Tigers' involvement arguing the President had invited the LTTE to participate in the North and East's rehabilitation process.

The Tamilnet continued its narrative of EPDP's illegitimate involvement on February 2, in a report headlined "EPDP's relief effort draws protest in Vadamardchy" claiming Vadamardchchi residents had demonstrated in front of the EPDP office campaigning against the EPDP's distribution of aid for "political gain". the report said the demonstrators had initially come to the EPDP office to collect relief materials, but had been subjected to checks by the government forces guarding the compound. "More policemen and soldiers were immediately deployed to quell further unrest in the area" the report concluded.

Conclusion:

The effectiveness of the LTTE's post-tsunami media campaign in breaking the Tiger organisation's terrorist image is somewhat arguable. However it should be noted that the pro-Eelamist lobby's swift media campaign and the LTTE's potent political strategy has provided the Tigers with a significant political edge.

The LTTE which had earlier agreed to a ceasefire agreement with the Sri Lankan government were able to secure some regional autonomy in the aftermath of the tsunami, in the form the controversial Memorandum of Understanding for the establishment a 'P-TOMS' (Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure) a government agreement which recognised the LTTE's civil administrative role in the North and East. the agreement signed by Mudiyansele Sumanaweera Jayasinghe, Secretary of Ministry of Relief, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation without explicit legislative approval proposed a "Regional (relief) Fund", administered by representatives of the both the government and the LTTE – therefore at least for post-tsunami rehabilitation administration both the Tigers and the Government were placed on an equal footing. The preamble of the P-TOMS MOU states the agreement had been reached "in recognition of this urgent humanitarian need and in a spirit of partnership, the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelamhave resolved to work together, in good faith and using their best efforts, to deliver expeditious relief, rehabilitation, reconstruction and development to the coastal communities in the six districts of Ampara, Batticaloa, Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu and Trincomalee and to facilitate and expedite the process of rebuilding the affected areas."

Despite assurances by President Kumaratunge and the Tiger leader (Xinhua, 2005) stating the P-TOMS was merely an administrative arrangement, not a political agreement which could have a bearing on LTTE-Government relations, critics continued to campaign against the quasi legitimacy accorded to the Tigers.

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ⁱ “LTTE’s Tamil language website *Nitharsanam*, a journal thought to have been established by the LTTE’s intelligence wing and aimed largely at an expatriate audience” (UTHR-J, 2005), is – according to the Network Solutions’ ‘whois’ data base - registered to Domains by Proxy, Inc. 15111 N Hayden Rd, Suite 160, PMB353, Scottsdale, Arizona 85260, United States; on June 23, 2004 for a one year period ending on June 23, 2005.

ⁱⁱ The Planning and Development Secretariat of the Liberation Tigers was opened on January 1, 2004, to set policy guidelines and strategies for NorthEast’s development needs. The team was lead by Thuyavan, with the LTTE Economic Advisor Dr. Jay Maheswaran, also taking up the position of PDS Senior Advisor (Tamilnet, January 01, 2004). [TamilNet, January 01, 2004. LTTE opens Planning and Development Secretariat]

ⁱⁱⁱ The Tigers' elite infantry formation.

^{iv} Charles Antony Regiment is named after the LTTE’s first attack commander and Tiger leader Pirapaharan’s close friend Charles Antony alias Lt. Seelan.

^v According to stations own website Deepam TV was first launched on June 12, 2000 by its patent company East West Broadcast Ltd (Registered No. 04952980) based at Network House, 15 Hight Street, Hampton Hill, Middlesex, TW12 1NB (source: www.ukdata.com/company-listings/numbers/04952980.html)

Deepam TV’s own office is based at the Ebury Business Centre, Unit 1 Staines Road 161 – 163, Hounslow Middlesex TW3 3JB United Kingdom. The Deepam TV also lists Mrs S Manohar as its primary contact in its British broadcasting license (Ofcom, 2005; available: www.ofcom.org.uk/static/tvlicensing/cs/404.htm)

The technical information section of the Deepam Tv website - www.deepamtv.tv/index.htm - states :

“Deepam TV is available on Eutelsat Hotbird 4 Satellite which is positioned at 13° East. Hotbird 4’s transponder provide coverage to extended community of Tamils living in Europe, Middle East and the Mediterranean coastal part of North Africa.

“From its state of the art studios in Hounslow West, United Kingdom, programmes are sent on digital 'Faculty Line' across London to BT Tower in the heart of London. On arrival the digital signal is routed, compressed and passed to an earth station at Madley in the west of England, the transmission then beamed over 22,000 miles to the Hotbird 4 Satellite located over the equator. “

According to the same source the canal is available to customers in Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Hungary, Iceland, Lithuania, Macedonia, Poland, Russia, Turkey, Andora, Bosnia, Croatia, Estonia, Germany, Holland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal, Solvenia, Ukraine, Austria, Belarus, Cech Rep, Finland, Greece, Ireland, Latvia, Moldova, Norway, Romania, Swiss, Yugoslavia in Europe; Bahrain, Cyprus, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, UAE in the Middel east and Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia in Africa

Hotbird 4 is one of Eutelsat’s (European Telecommunications Satellite Organization) 23 satellites in geosynchronous orbit, operating under the family names Hot Bird, Atlantic Bird, Eurobird, e-BIRD, and Eutelsat. Five Hotbird satellites are operational at present with plans to launch two more (www.eutelsat.org/satellites/4_2.html). Deepam Tv is one of twenty channels offered through HotBird 4.

^{vi} The LTTE is currently thought to have the benefit of at least 30 front and cover organizations in the UK, including the Tamil Center for Human Rights (TCHR), Human Rights for Tamils (HURT), Melrose Publishers, Tamil Rehabilitation Organization (TRO), Tamil Eelam Economic Development Organization (TEEDOR) [Peter Chalk. (March 17, 2000) Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam’s (LTTE) International Organization and Operations - A Preliminary Analysis, Commentary no. 77. Canadian Security Intelligence Service. Available : http://www.csis-scrs.gc.ca/eng/comment/com77_e.html]

^{vii} A coalition of Tamil political parties consisting of the United Liberation Front (TULF), the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC); and former terrorist groups - the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO) and the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), formed head of the December 2001 general election. The party holds 22 seats in the 250 seat Sri Lankan parliament following the April 2004 general elections.