

SRI LANKA

ISSUE

The persistent ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka and the intensification of hostilities continue to be a source of concern.

BACKGROUND

After more than a decade of bloody fighting, opprobrium and international pressure owing to Sri Lanka's disappointing human rights record, the former Premadasa government finally decided that it was necessary to take action to improve its country's record in this regard. In 1993, the Government undertook a program to redeem its image which yielded some positive results: the number of missing persons decreased, extrajudicial executions virtually ceased, and access to prisoners improved.

In November 1994, Chandrika Kumaratunga was elected President of Sri Lanka. The cornerstone of her election campaign was the promise to find a peaceful solution to the ethnic conflict which has torn the country apart for so long. From the beginning of her term, Mrs. Kumaratunga showed a keen interest in promoting a peaceful settlement to the conflict and greater respect for human rights. The January 1995 cease-fire opened up the possibility of wider negotiations. The current work of a parliamentary committee to study a devolution package (involving a division of power between national and regional levels of government) suggests a willingness to seek a solution to the conflict. It is worth noting the signing of the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, the adoption of a Human Rights Commission Act, the work of the Commission investigating disappearances since 1988, the establishment of committees to examine methods of improving the judiciary. Over the past year the Government has demonstrated some willingness to work with international humanitarian assistance organizations to meet the needs of the people. Some restrictions on the media have been partially lifted.

Despite some positive developments, there are still many causes for concern. The Human Rights Commission still has not begun work and the Commissioners have not yet been named. The Government continues to censor the media, which are not authorized to enter LTTE-controlled territory. The media have access to the Jafna Peninsula only under strict military control. The resumption of hostilities in April 1995 undermined to some extent the gains made in respect for human rights. The ongoing war is one of the major catalysts of human rights abuses by both sides, and of intolerance between ethnic communities.