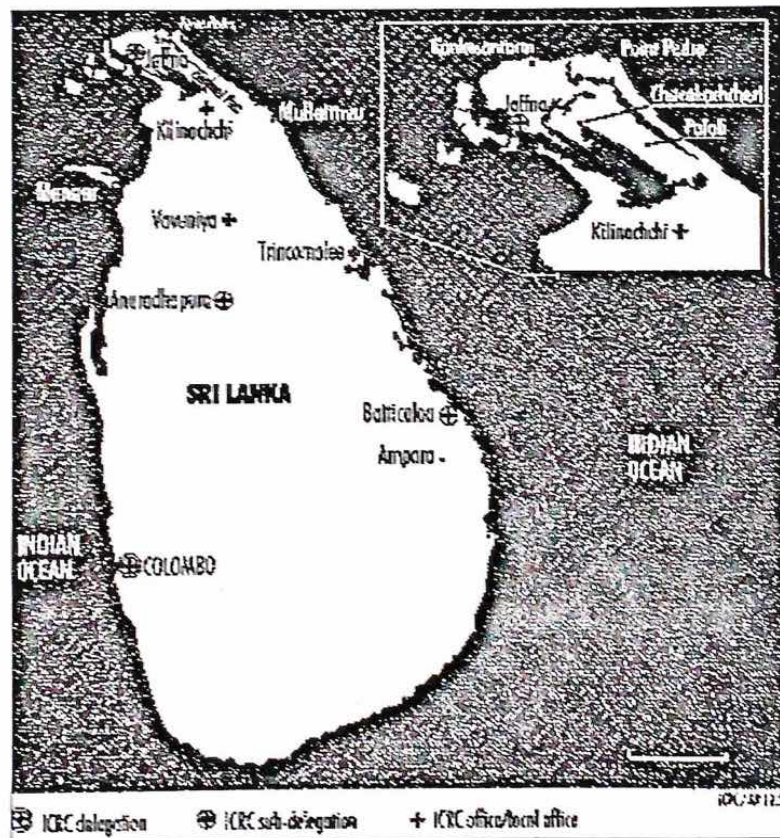


31 May 1996

Annual report 1995

Sri Lanka



Introduction

Activities for the civilian population

Medical activities

Activities for detainees

Tracing activities

Cooperation with the National Society

Dissemination

Introduction

On 6 January 1995 an agreement, which led to a cessation of hostilities two days later, was signed between the Sri Lankan President and the LTTE* leader. This was the culmination of talks held in the autumn of 1994 between the new government and the LTTE. During the negotiations the ICRC acted as a neutral intermediary in an exchange of correspondence between the two parties.

Hope that the situation in the country would finally improve was, however, short-lived. Intense fighting resumed after two vessels of the Sri Lankan navy were sunk in Trincomalee on 19 April in a suicide attack by LTTE commandos. The ICRC stepped up its activities in order to cope with this escalation of violence, particularly in the north.

The renewed outbreak of fighting had immediate effects on the delivery of supplies to the Jaffna peninsula. The government reimposed a ban on various items, including medicines, on which restrictions had been lifted during the truce. Civilians in Jaffna became increasingly dependent on the ICRC's neutral role in protecting government vessels transporting medicines, food and other essential goods.

Numerous clashes between the security forces and the LTTE broke out between July and September, particularly on the Jaffna peninsula. Tens of thousands of people fled their homes, and hundreds were killed or wounded. The Jaffna Teaching Hospital and the hospital in Point Pedro were stretched to the limit because of the heavy influx of casualties.

In October government troops launched a major offensive against the town of Jaffna. Some 300,000 to 400,000 civilians left their homes and most of them sought refuge in the area of Chavakachcheri, 15 kilometres south-east of Jaffna. The peninsula's metropolis became a ghost town. Many of the displaced were taken in by local inhabitants while an estimated 100,000 others found shelter in schools, temples and huts in a number of small camps. Their dire living conditions were exacerbated by the lack of adequate shelter. Some 250,000 civilians subsequently fled further south to Kilinochchi, Mullaittivu, Mannar and Vavuniya.

The ICRC opened an office in Point Pedro (the small port where ICRC-protected ships are unloaded) to serve as a logistics base for all relief operations on the peninsula, particularly in zones held by the LTTE. Owing to the worsening security conditions and the risk of heavy fighting in Jaffna town, the ICRC decided in November to organize the transfer of the remaining patients and medical personnel from the Jaffna Teaching Hospital to the hospital in Point Pedro. With the Teaching Hospital empty and virtually no-one left in the town, all ICRC staff was relocated and operated out of Point Pedro. At the beginning of December government forces succeeded in taking the town of Jaffna.

Following the upsurge of violence security conditions in the east of the country also deteriorated, affecting both the Sinhalese and Tamil communities. The ICRC accordingly increased its expatriate staff to carry out detention and tracing work and to provide some degree of protection to the civilian population. At the end of 1995 the situation in the north and east remained tense and uncertain. The year ended on a sour note, with no immediate prospects of reaching a settlement to the internal armed conflict.

IN 1995, THE ICRC:

- had access to 1,974 detainees in 282 places of detention;*
- transported to the Jaffna peninsula a monthly average of 8,000 tonnes of essential goods supplied by the government;*
- located 316 persons, arranged for the exchange of 22,800 Red Cross messages, reunited 83 families and transported 595 people between the Jaffna peninsula and the south;*
- assisted nine mobile health clinics and seven primary health centres run by the Sri Lanka Red Cross Society in conflict areas;*

- conducted an extensive dissemination programme throughout the country, reaching 3,000 recruits and 468 instructors in army training centres and a total of 1,883 army, air force and police personnel and 142 members of the LTTE during field sessions; also distributed some 145,000 booklets on the law of war and 17,000 manuals for instructors to members of the armed forces and the LTTE.

* LTTE: Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, Tamil opposition

Activities for the civilian population

In 1995 the protection of the civilian population remained a major concern for the ICRC. From April on several serious incidents, including the planting of explosive devices in Colombo, claimed large numbers of civilian victims. Delegates collected information on all these incidents and made oral and written representations to both parties. The ICRC reminded them of their obligation to respect humanitarian law, and in particular to spare civilians and their property during military operations.

As violence flared up again, the ICRC's role as a neutral intermediary became all the more vital for the civilian population since the institution was the sole independent link between government- and LTTE-controlled areas.

In August the government-run passenger ferry *Iris Mona* was hijacked off the coast of Mullaittivu. One passenger died in the assault, and 133 others were visited by the ICRC while they were held captive in Jaffna. When the passengers were freed, the ICRC organized their transport to the islands to the west of Jaffna or to Colombo. Two passengers and the ferry's eight crew members remained in LTTE custody at the end of the year.

Until the army launched its offensive against the peninsula's main town in October, the ICRC continued to protect the Jaffna Teaching Hospital and the safety zone around it. This zone had been established in 1990 with the consent of all the parties in order to ensure that in the event of fighting the sick and wounded would have access to medical care and the hospital area would be spared from attack. This protection ceased de facto on 14 November when all the remaining patients and medical personnel were evacuated to the Point Pedro hospital and ICRC staff temporarily moved to new office facilities in the same area.

Although the ICRC had ceased its regular truck convoys to Kilinochchi and Mullaittivu in 1994, it occasionally used the red cross emblem to protect government trucks carrying medical supplies for health facilities in Kilinochchi. At the authorities' request in the autumn of 1995, the sub-delegation in Batticaloa started to protect government convoys transporting relief supplies for civilians living in areas from which the security forces had withdrawn.

As in previous years, the Jaffna peninsula remained totally cut off from the rest of the country, and the population there was dependent on government supplies, such as food, kerosene, medicines and other essential items. These were brought in by government-chartered vessels with red cross markings and sailing under ICRC protection. After a number of incidents in July the institution suspended its protection of these ships until late August, when a temporary agreement was reached with the government.

In February the ICRC chartered a ship called the *Sea Dancer*, which made a weekly round trip between Trincomalee and Point Pedro to transport medical supplies, as well as passengers requiring medical treatment in Colombo or wishing to be reunited with their families. The supplies were provided by the government for the Jaffna Teaching Hospital and the Regional Directorate of Health Services. On 4 June the *Sea Dancer* sank after hitting a mine as it entered the port of Kankasanturai, a navy base in the north of the Jaffna peninsula. One member of the crew was killed and two others were injured. The ICRC subsequently chartered another ship, the *MV Habarana*, which made its first trip on 5 August. The transport of patients had to be postponed, however, owing to the deterioration of the military situation in the north. In October the ship also began carrying flour supplied by the government. Following the army offensive on the peninsula, the *Habarana* set sail for Point Pedro with consignments of urgently needed

offensive on the peninsula, the Habarana set sail for Point Pedro with consignments of urgently needed relief supplies for the newly displaced. The supplies included 1,500 tonnes of flour, 40 tonnes of medicines provided by the Sri Lankan government, 10,000 square metres of plastic sheeting made available by the ICRC and relief goods for international organizations working in the area. The ICRC also sent cooking pots, jerricans, soap, blankets and mats for the most vulnerable among the displaced, as well as large tents to accommodate dispensaries in the Chavakachcheri area.

Medical activities

The resumption of hostilities led the delegation to propose a "medical package" to the government in June. It included sending surgical teams to the Jaffna Teaching Hospital and the government-run hospital in Trincomalee. On condition that their security would be guaranteed, the ICRC offered to evacuate the wounded from Kilinochchi to Vavuniya. It also stated its willingness to transport wounded members of the armed forces on its ship from the Jaffna peninsula to Trincomalee, but received no reply from the government. The ICRC, nevertheless, increased its stock of emergency medical supplies so as to enable government-assisted health facilities to cope with the influx of wounded.

When hundreds of thousands of civilians fled the Jaffna peninsula in October and November and patients and staff at the Jaffna Teaching Hospital were evacuated to Point Pedro hospital, water and sanitation work became a priority in order to prevent an outbreak of waterborne diseases among the displaced. An ICRC water and sanitation engineer conducted a survey in the densely populated Chavakachcheri area to check on access to clean water and waste disposal. Urgent supplies, including three tonnes of pipes, pumps, water reservoirs and other materials, were transported to the peninsula and used to construct water distribution points.

A mobile health team of the Sri Lanka Red Cross was active in the Chavakachcheri camps with support from the ICRC. A small number of medical personnel from the Jaffna Teaching Hospital worked under ICRC protection in the town's small, overcrowded hospital. As further assistance was required, two ICRC nurses and a doctor were sent out to help cope with the influx of displaced people, to open dispensaries and support the hospital. Following a medical survey in Kilinochchi, an additional mobile health team was set up to try and meet the needs of the displaced.

Activities for detainees

During the first three months of the year the number of arrests by the security forces decreased and several hundred suspects were set free. Fifteen policemen and one soldier held for almost five years by the LTTE were also released. However, the ICRC did not succeed in obtaining access to Tamil detainees held by the LTTE.

The renewed outbreak of hostilities resulted in a significant increase in the number of people detained under the Emergency Regulations, thus prompting the ICRC to step up its detention-related activities. Delegates carried out a number of visits to places of detention under government jurisdiction throughout the country, including prisons, police stations, army camps and other detention centres. They monitored conditions of detention, focusing on the way detainees were treated in physical and psychological terms. They checked the detainees' state of health, where necessary, and arranged for them to exchange Red Cross messages with their families. Oral and written representations were then made to the authorities concerned. The ICRC also visited 85 people held by the LTTE and conducted 17 visits to detainees held in connection with the JVP* uprising of 1987-1990.

Towards the end of the year an ICRC team went to Palali army camp, in the north-west of the peninsula, to resume tracing services and to visit detainees held by the Sri Lankan security forces.

Tracing activities

At the beginning of 1995 the level of tracing activities remained stable. Delegates accompanied children and elderly people who were transported between Jaffna and Colombo to be reunited with their families,

and elderly people who were transported between Jaffna and Colombo to be reunited with their families, as well as the sick or wounded in need of specialized medical treatment in the capital. If no notification had been given to detainees' families by the authorities, the ICRC informed them of their relatives' incarceration. Members of families split up by the conflict were able to contact each other through Red Cross messages.

From May onwards, because of the sharp rise in the number of arrests and the increased number of displaced, many more people approached the ICRC in search of news of their next of kin. No tracing requests were accepted, however, as it was not possible to carry out any active search among the displaced population.

Cooperation with the National Society

As a result of internal problems which paralysed its headquarters, the leadership of the Sri Lanka Red Cross Society (SLRCS) changed twice during the year. Regular contact was maintained with the Federation to address this issue. However, the crisis did not affect the tasks carried out jointly by the ICRC and SLRCS branches in conflict areas.

The ICRC continued to support the Society's medical activities in conflict zones. Throughout the year it assisted and supervised nine mobile health teams in the north and east (two in Jaffna, two in Mullaitivu and one each in Kilinochchi, Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Ampara and on Mannar mainland), which provided medical care for civilians living far from any medical facility. The main diseases they dealt with were acute respiratory disorders, infestation with worms, anaemia, skin diseases and malaria. In addition, the teams offered health education and encouraged preventive medicine. A public health inspector oversaw hygiene conditions and sanitary installations and checked on the chlorination of wells. An additional mobile health team was set up in Kilinochchi to meet the medical needs of the displaced. The ICRC also provided both financial and material support to seven primary health care centres set up by the SLRCS on Mannar mainland and regularly supervised a training programme organized for the staff of these centres.

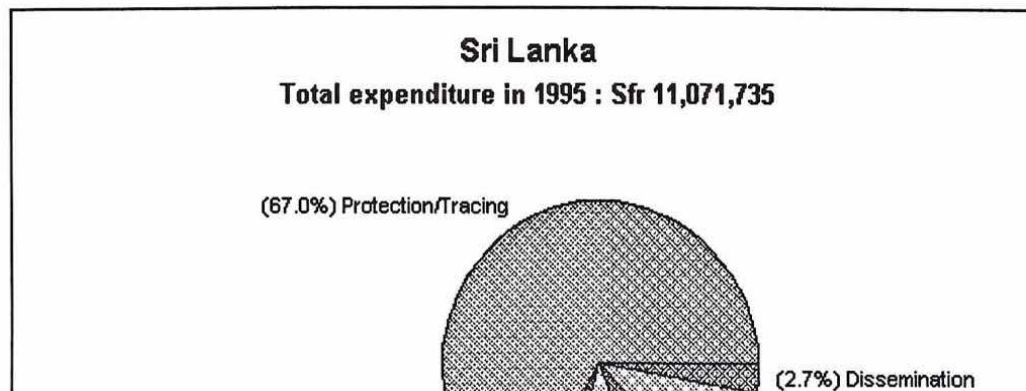
In cooperation with the local SLRCS branch in Jaffna, a small emergency stock of food was maintained to assist some 10,000 people, if necessary, during one month.

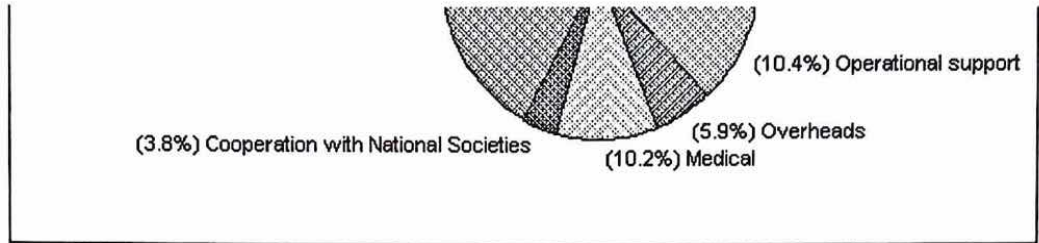
* JVP: Janatha Vimukti Peramuna party, Sinhalese opposition

Dissemination

The ICRC organized numerous sessions to promote knowledge of humanitarian law among the Sri Lankan armed forces, the police, the Special Task Forces and LTTE combatants. However, the resumption of hostilities in April made it difficult to reach combatants in the field.

In addition to the booklets on the law of war and manuals for instructors distributed to the armed forces and the LTTE, the delegation handed out 23,000 wall calendars with the slogan "Keep children out of war" and 160,000 pocket calendars on the ICRC's activities in Sri Lanka. Some 2,500 diaries containing information on humanitarian law and the ICRC's activities were also produced for distribution to officers.





[Table of contents](#)

HOME	WHAT'S NEW	SEARCH	SITE TREE
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