



SRI LANKA



A typical city street in the heart of the Colombo, Sri Lanka. The capital city streets are a constant stream of people, vehicles and small taxis called tuk tuks.

U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY JENNIFER G. ANGELO



U.S. Army Special Operations Forces are rarely operating in places that are easy to get to. This is particularly true when you look at the Pacific area of operations. The tyranny of distance applies to more than how long it takes U.S. Soldiers to get there. It also applies to the ability and inability of U.S. forces to shape or change the environment, which is often predicated on its remote location.

Such is the case in Sri Lanka. To travel from one end of the island to the other, it is more than an 18-hour drive and the diversity of the population changes from town to town — not just region to region — as do the temples, shrines and churches. The country, still healing from decades of civil war, is a study in contradictions.



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01 The sprawling Sri Lankan capital city of Colombo looks like any other bustling metropolitan city from a birds eye view with towering skyscrapers and new construction on nearly every street. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY JENNIFER G. ANGELO

02, 03 In contrast to the towering city from the panoramic view of Colombo, closer inspection reveals small, colorful alleys where children play and the elderly sit and talk or slowly work on housekeeping chores in the unrelenting Sri Lankan heat. U.S. ARMY PHOTOS BY JASON GAMBARELLA

In Colombo, the capital city, you are met with towering skyscrapers and elegant hotels; however, if you walk a few blocks away, you are in a warren of small alleyways and streets where children play cricket, while old men and women sit indolent in the heat of the afternoon; their conversations interrupted by a constant stream of tuk tuks.

It is in this complex environment, that a small PACOM Augmentation Team works to address a very diverse problem set.

UNDERSTANDING THE ENVIRONMENT

The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka is large island in the Indian Ocean. It is a presidential republic, and is a little smaller than 66,000 kilometers or just a little bigger than West Virginia. Strategically located near major Indian Ocean sea lanes, chain of limestone shoals known as Adam’s Bridge, is situated off the southeastern coast of India and northwestern Coast of Sri Lanka. It has been hypothesized that up until the 15th century people could travel from India to Sri Lanka via the land bridge, which was destroyed by a cyclone. Those travelers created the diversity



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that now exists within the small country.

More than 22 million people call Sri Lanka home, with the largest group being Sinhalese, which makes up almost 75 percent of the population. Sri Lankan Tamil and Indian Tamil make up another 15 percent, while Sri Lankan Moors comprise 9.2 percent of the population. There are two official languages: Sinhala and Tamil. English is referred to as the “link language” in the constitution and is commonly used in government circles.



From 1983 to 2002, a Civil War raged throughout the country as a result of tensions between the Sinhalese and Tamil separatists. Their disagreements set into motion a war that lasted more than two decades. In 2002, a cease fire was formalized between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam. The ceasefire ended in 2006, when intense fighting began again, which resulted in the defeat of the LTTE by the government in 2009. In the years between the end of the war and today, the Sri Lankan Government pushed for economic development projects, often leveraging loans from China to pay for them. Today, more than 79.3 percent of the country's GDP is used to cover the government's debt.

With more than 95 percent of the civilians displaced by the war resettled, the government released many of the former LTTE combatants.

SRI LANKA — QUICK FACTS*

66,000 KILOMETERS

Slightly larger than West Virginia

22 MILLION PEOPLE

4 ETHNIC GROUPS

74.9% Sinhalese

11.2% Sri Lankan Tamil

9.2% Sri Lankan Moors

4.2% Indian Tamil

2 OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

74% Sinhala and 18% Tamil
approximately 10% also speak English

4 MAIN RELIGIONS

70.2% Buddhist

12.6% Hindu

10% Muslim

8% Christian

*2012 estimates, CIA World Fact Book



While the current government is comprised of people from both sides of the fight, tension still remains and issues concerning human rights violations and other abuses during the war are still major talking points.

Religion plays a central role in the country, with places of worship abounding throughout. The majority of the people are Sinhalese Buddhist at 70 percent of the population. Ethnic Tamils are predominantly Hindu. Christians make up roughly 8 percent of the population and Muslims, many of whom are refugees, make up 10 percent of the population. Until recently, religion was not a source of conflict within the country; however, over the past several months, tensions have grown between Buddhist monks who follow Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara, a monk, who leads the *Bodu Baia Sena* or the Forces of Buddhist Power, and members of the Muslim community.

Members of *Bodu Baia Sena* believe the Muslim population is a threat to their way of life, and on Nov. 18, the two groups clashed in the town of Ginthota, which is located on the coast, south of Colombo. The clash, which resulted in numerous people injured and 19 arrested, resulted



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The Kollupitiya Jumah Mosque in Colombo (01) is located just one city block from the Church of St. Michael & All Angels, Polwatte (02) an Anglican Church in the heart of Colombo. U.S. ARMY PHOTOS BY JENNIFER G. ANGELO

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The Seema Malaka is a Buddhist Temple is located on the Beira Lake in Colombo. The temple, used for meditation and rest, is constructed on three platforms over water which are connected to the mainland by pontoon bridges.



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from a rumor that the Muslim populace had plans to attack the Buddhist temple. The Nov. 18 skirmish was the last of many smaller engagements, which are impacting the political climate and stability of the country because *Bodu Baia Sena* has a fairly large support base.

The same could be said for failure of the government to address transitional justice as it relates to finding permanent solutions for the 44,000 internally displaced people who were affected by the war and addressing claims of war crimes against government forces, which are currently under international scrutiny following a visit by the UN's special rapporteur for transitional justice in October 2017. The report acknowledged that some progress is being made; however, it is inadequate to address the issues of disenfranchisement of the Tamils, which left unchecked could also reignite the conflict.

INCREASING STABILITY

In Sri Lanka's Northern Province, about a 12-hour drive from the bustling streets of Colombo, is Jaffna, a city of less than 90,000 people, making it the country's 12th largest city.

RELIGION PLAYS A CENTRAL ROLE IN THE COUNTRY, WITH PLACES OF WORSHIP ABOUNDING THROUGHOUT... UNTIL RECENTLY, RELIGION WAS NOT A SOURCE OF CONFLICT WITHIN THE COUNTRY; HOWEVER, OVER THE PAST SEVERAL MONTHS, TENSIONS HAVE GROWN.

Jaffna is rich in history, serving a center of trade during the Colonial period. The Jaffna Port, which stands sentinel, over the coastal town, was built by the Portuguese in the late 1500s and was later occupied by the Dutch East India Company and later fell under British rule. Free from the rule of outsiders, the Tamil majority in the north grew in political power, leading to the takeover of the city by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam in 1987.

Jaffna played a central role throughout the civil war, which resulted in many people fleeing the city and the loss of industry and infrastructure. Some of the fiercest battles were fought in the district, in-





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cluding a massacre of patients and medical workers by Indian Peacekeeping forces in the late '80s and the forced removal of all Muslim residents from the city by the LTTE. Today, the city is slowly returning to its role as a center of economic influence.

Key to stability in the region, which is heavily influenced by India and China, is education. On a heavily traveled street in the middle of Jaffna sits the Jaffna Hindu Ladies College. Opened in 1943, the school serves girls from middle school to high school. With more than 2,000 students, it holds a place of great importance not only to the people of Jaffna, but also to the government. Daily, students travel from small villages and towns surrounding Jaffna to attend classes at the school, with some girls traveling more than an hour each way.

For the Government of Sri Lanka, ensuring that education is available for all of the children in the country is important, particularly so in Jaffna. To that end, the PACOM Augmentation Team operating out of the Embassy in Colombo, reached out to the Jaffna Hindu Ladies College to form a partnership. That outreach resulted in the construction of a new classroom building at the school and a proposed dormitory for those girls who travel long distances. The school has more than 50 classrooms, many of which are open-air classrooms. The buildings are older and are filled to overflowing. The construction of the school supports reconciliation and stabilization



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efforts within Sri Lanka, as well as providing better education for girls in Jaffna.

The project, which took four years to complete, was constructed utilizing money from the U.S. Pacific Command and was overseen by the PACOM Augmentation Team, and was completed in July 2017. The three-story building contains 12 classrooms and is built to U.S. standards. In addition to the classroom building, the project included the construction of a stand-alone bathroom building. The new bathrooms are enclosed and have both western toilets and the traditional Sri Lankan squat toilets. The U.S. invested \$91 million rupees or \$597,000.

01 Students perform a traditional dance during the classroom building opening ceremony at the Jaffna Hindu Ladies' College.

02 Students prepare for class to start in one of the Jaffna Hindu Ladies' College open-air classrooms.

03 A new bathroom facility for the college campus was part of the U.S. construction project.

U.S. ARMY PHOTOS BY JENNIFER G. ANGELO



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01, 02 The Jaffna Hindu Ladies College drum major leads the parade of dignitaries, including the U.S. Deputy Chief of Mission and members of the Civil Military Support Element, through a garland draped walkway lined with hundreds of students while the band plays celebratory music.

03 Students decorate the entrance to the new school building with traditional decor in preparation for the grand opening ceremony.

U.S. ARMY PHOTOS BY JENNIFER G. ANGELO

Not long after the U.S.-sponsored building came under construction, China offered to build another classroom for the school, which is just a stone's throw away from the U.S. building. In Sri Lanka, China often tries to match or beat efforts of the U.S. and its capacity-efforts. The Chinese building, although similar in design from the outside is not built to code and lacks many of the options included in the U.S. building.

On July 31, 2017, the school hosted an opening ceremony for the new building, which garnered attention across the country. The students were extremely excited on the day of the event and the teachers had a hard time keeping them focused. As American visitors passed through the school making ready for the ceremony, the girls giggled and waved shyly from their seats. As the day went forward, they became bolder and blew kisses at photographers, with a small group of girls pulling *Special Warfare* staff members aside to question them about life in America. The school band dressed in kilts and blazers despite the sweltering humidity, escorted visitors to the site with precision and pride.





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In attendance at the opening was the U.S. Deputy Chief of Mission in Sri Lanka, the Honorable Robert Hilton. Hilton was joined by representatives of the Sri Lankan Ministry of Education and by the Chief Minister of the Northern Province C.V. Wigneswaran and members of the Northern Province Ministry of Education. Shortly after cutting the ribbon, Hilton noted, “We believe there is no better investment of higher calling than educating young minds, especially young women. Sri Lanka and the United States are daily deepening our partnership, and this is another demonstration of our continued commitment.”

Despite the excitement of the day, a speaker took the opportunity to note that schools all over the Northern Province were in need because of the Civil War and called on the government to do more to rebuild the northern province, proving that the peace in Sri Lanka was hard won and will be even harder to keep. **SW**



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A member of the Civil Military Support Element greets school administrators at the Jaffna Hindu Ladies College to finalize details for the grand-opening ceremony of the new school building and bathroom facility.

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Prior to the opening ceremony, excited students ran up and down the road in front of the new school building eagerly awaiting the ceremony's beginning.

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