

**From Bombs to Blogs:  
Sri Lanka – a Forgotten Conflict?**

Ian Macduff\*

**Introduction:**

In mid-2007, Dr Paikiasothy Sarvanamuttu, Executive Director of the Centre for Policy Alternatives in Colombo, presented an overview of the current situation in Sri Lanka to opinion and policy makers in the United States and United Kingdom. Some elements of the situation will be outlined later in this paper, but we can note here factors such as<sup>1</sup>:

- The use of bombing in Colombo, the capital, with – typically – civilian casualties;
- The use of child conscription by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and the other Tamil faction (“Karuna”) – allegedly with the complicity of government forces;
- The LTTE’s use of human shields;
- The Sri Lankan Army’s apparently random attacks on Tamil areas, with again civilian casualties;
- The almost complete failure of human rights protections;
- The fostering of a “culture of impunity” in the face of such abuses and threats;
- The government’s forced resettlement of parts of the Tamil population;
- The displacement of large groups of civilians – including the Muslims in the East of the country;
- The abduction and killing of Red Cross workers; and
- The ineffectiveness of the Cease Fire Agreement, the Commission of Inquiry and the International Independent Group of Eminent Persons

Apart from such a catalogue of evil, more often than not with civilians caught in the crossfire, Dr Sarvanamuttu made the points, first, that there can be no military solution to this conflict and second, that while much of this is known by the policy makers in the major international powers, little is done to seek a political solution or to respond to the situation exacerbated by the failures of the current regime.

---

\* New Zealand Centre for Conflict Resolution, Faculty of Law, Victoria University of Wellington

<sup>1</sup> P Sarvanamuttu, “Coming back home to a truth more dangerous than fiction,” <http://www.groundviews.org/2007/06/06/coming-back-home-to-a-truth-more-dangerous-than-fiction>

This paper takes one key theme from the discussion of the symbolism of Gernika – the power and importance of the memory of conflict – and explores this in the context of one ongoing and escalating conflict: Sri Lanka. The aim is not to draw parallels between the historical example of Gernika and the nearly three decades of lethal conflict in Sri Lanka. Rather, the aim is to look at one situation where civilians are the principal victims of bombing and other forms of brutality, and where the conflict continues largely outside the field of vision of the international community.

As indicated by the opening paragraph, notwithstanding a Cease Fire Agreement (CFA) signed between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE, and notwithstanding the assertions from both sides that *they* have not breached the CFA, there has been a bloody and brutal escalation of conflict since August of 2006. This escalation has been marked by a higher incidence of (civilian) deaths than in the preceding decades of conflict<sup>2</sup>; by abductions<sup>3</sup>, extrajudicial killings, the recruitment of child soldiers, sexual predation, major civilian displacements, bombing of Tamil sites by the government forces and of government troops and civilians in the major cities by the LTTE; the killing of local humanitarian aid workers; the forced removal of Tamils from Colombo<sup>4</sup>; and massive

---

<sup>2</sup> The figures generally quoted, and sourced in human rights organisations, are that since August 2006, some 4000 people have died and over 300,000 have been displaced. See also ReliefWeb report on “Forgotten Conflicts: Forgotten Children”: “As the media focus remains on the Middle East there are other countries where children are experiencing conflict. In the last week violence in eastern Sri Lanka has escalated. It is estimated that over 20,000 people are having to flee their homes due to the fighting. Over the last week Save the Children has provided sleeping mats, sheets, towels, hygiene kits and children’s clothes to over 1,200 of these families.” <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/YAOI-6SN94C?OpenDocument> 11 Aug 2006

<sup>3</sup> Including high profile abductions (and probably the killing) such that as of Prof S. Raveendranath, the Head of the Eastern University of Sri Lanka in Batticaloa. Sri Lanka’s President Rajapaksa is reported to have told families of those abducted, referring to the Mahanama Tillekeratne Commission on Abductions, that many of the claims are false and that those who have disappeared are likely to be “lovers who have eloped, or men and women who had left their spouses after a domestic dispute.” <http://www.hindustantimes.com/StoryPage/StoryPage.aspx?id=4e09cf9f-a0fa-4b2f-8fba-2da2a4ed4885&&Headline=Killing+of+Red+Cross+staff+ahead+of+EU+meet+worries+Lanka>

<sup>4</sup> Email to President Rajapakse from Center for Human Rights and Development (CHRD), Center for Policy Alternatives (CPA), Free Media Movement (FMM), INFORM Human Rights Documentation Center (INFORM), Institute of Human Rights (IHR), International Movement against All forms of Racial Discrimination (IMADR), Law & Society Trust (LST), Rights Now (RN): “According to the information we have received, in an operation that commenced in the early hours of the morning, police and army officers visited various lodges occupied predominantly by Tamils in Colombo and forcibly removed Tamils from these guesthouses. In several instances, eyewitnesses reported that these were not from the local police stations. . . While we are full cognizant of the current security situation and the need to maintain close surveillance of the city and its environs, in terms of the human rights principles that guide us in our

human rights abuses. The renewed conflict is also marked – as will be discussed later – by the emergence of a Tamil faction led by a former LTTE commander, said by the LTTE to be supporting the government<sup>5</sup>; and the expression of major concern on the part of the small Muslim population that they are neither considered by the ongoing – if interrupted – peace process nor protected from attacks by government, LTTE and the Karuna faction.<sup>6</sup>

In the face of this, the international community has continued with the peace process, although the Norwegian-brokered peace talks have effectively been derailed by the escalation. The Japanese government has been a principal supporter of the Norwegian process and its peace envoy, Yasushi Akashi, has returned<sup>7</sup> to continue talks with the government – if not the peace talks themselves, then at least talks about the prospects for reviving the peace talks.

The origins and dynamics of this conflict have been extensively explored in numerous publications and it is not the purpose of this paper to traverse those factors. Rather, the aim is to pick up two of the themes of the Gernika Congress, first, concerning those places which, as “other Gernikas”, were still suffering bombing and civilian casualties, and second, looking at one example of a conflict that was forgotten or invisible – largely off the international radar, notwithstanding the ongoing efforts of nations such as Norway, Japan and India to find a way back to peace. In exploring these themes, this paper seeks to touch on four factors, again arising from and reflecting the symbolism of Gernika: first, the use of bombing as a strategy of conquest, terror, domination, disruption and the invariable civilian costs; second, the ironies of memory and remembrance in

---

work as human rights defenders, we are convinced that the above process is NOT capable of guaranteeing security and rather creates further polarization between the different ethnic communities that share this island, and heightens the sense of marginalization and alienation of Tamil people of this country.” (email correspondence to author, 8 June 2007)

<sup>5</sup> Top LTTE military commander Vinayagamoorthis Muralitharan formed the “Karuna faction” in March 2004. Both Karuna and the government deny the claim that it is supporting the government. Conflict between the LTTE and the Karuna faction flared up following the breakaway and during the period of ceasefire. Karuna has, recently, asked the Norwegian negotiators to make him a party to any peace deal, a request resisted by both the LTTE and the government.

<sup>6</sup> See International Crisis Group, “Sri Lanka’s Muslims: Caught in the Crossfire,” *Asia Report* No. 134, 29 May 2007.

<sup>7</sup> As of June 2007

cases where, for reasons which will be explored, the conflict is largely ignored or neglected; third, the priority, in the face of these threats, of an ongoing commitment to democratic governance and participation, often challenged and circumscribed in circumstances of violence; and fourth, the emergence of a grassroots movement that may hold some of the keys to the peace process through the provision of reliable information and the promotion of dialogue across the boundaries of identity groups. Two questions come to the fore: in the face of such widespread violence and human rights abuses, how or why do conflicts remain underreported and largely invisible; and, in such conditions, what are the prospects for a return to dialogue and positive peace? While many observers are not optimistic about the current situation in Sri Lanka, I wish to suggest, in the latter part of this paper, that there are steps being taken at a grassroots level that might point the way to political solutions.

### **Forgotten Conflicts:**

As Dr Sarvanamuttu commented, the current facts of the conflict in Sri Lanka are, by and large, known to the leaders and policy makers in the major powers, even if not known more widely by the general public. The renewed conflict, now nearly three decades old, receives only occasional publicity – but even then, the bombings in Colombo, the assassination of aid workers, the displacement of civilian populations or the abuses of human rights<sup>8</sup> are typically relegated to the margins in the media. Sri Lanka is, of course, not unique in this; indeed, even more tragic and graphic examples can be seen in the Congo where the humanitarian crisis matches any of the appalling news coming out of Darfur and – in simple numerical terms – surpasses that of Sri Lanka. In what is probably the deadliest conflict since the Second World War<sup>9</sup>, the combination of hunger, violence and disease has killed in excess of three million people since 1998. Yet this conflict,

---

<sup>8</sup> Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu, “At the end of the day, a country of little strategic importance in the global balance of power, but with tremendous economic potential in a globalized world, cannot risk international isolation and no government of all of its people can fail in its responsibility for the protection of the human rights of, any of them”. <http://www.groundviews.org/2007/02/22/isolation-and-international-relations/>

<sup>9</sup> See Finbarr O’Reilly, “Congo death toll: 2,500 per day: No end in sight for deadliest conflict since WW II” [http://www.geocities.com/bureaupolitiquefsd/25\\_05\\_03.html](http://www.geocities.com/bureaupolitiquefsd/25_05_03.html)

along with others in Africa, or the political and humanitarian crisis in Myanmar, and the renewed conflict in Sri Lanka remain largely off the international radar.

Two broad aspects of conflict and memory can be identified. One involves those post-conflict contexts where either a veil of collective amnesia keeps the past at a distance<sup>10</sup>, though private memories of conflict and repression remain; or conscious attempts are made to initiate healing, reconciliation, and possibly justice<sup>11</sup>, through tribunals and commissions<sup>12</sup>. This aspect of “the politics of memory”<sup>13</sup> involves the struggle with the past, the reconciliation of contemporary needs with the rectification of historical injustices<sup>14</sup>, and the attempt to find the balance between “too much memory [and] too much forgetting”<sup>15</sup>.

The other aspect has less to do with the conscious process and politics of remembering than with the fact of invisibility – or forgetting – of some conflicts and humanitarian crises. Former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan commented, in 2006, that<sup>16</sup>:

“We have conflicts that we call the 'forgotten conflicts.' Forgotten conflicts in the sense that no one seems interested in them, however hard we try. We've had experience with some conflicts which, for some reason, catch the public imagination and the public responds very urgently. Others, nobody seems to care. It's not just conflict situations - sometimes even humanitarian situations, natural disasters.”

---

<sup>10</sup> The current (mid-2007) debate in Spain concerning a law of historical memory is indicative of the dilemmas of overcoming such “amnesia”, the unspoken *pacto del olvido*.

<sup>11</sup> That “peace” and “justice” may not be compatible goals in these processes is the subject of extensive reflection in the international conflict literature. See, for example, I. W Zartman & V. Kremenyuk (eds) *Peace versus Justice: Negotiating Forward- and Backward-Looking Outcomes*, (New York & Oxford, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2005).

<sup>12</sup> For a bibliography on truth and reconciliation commissions, see K. Avruch & B. Vejarano, “Truth and Reconciliation Commissions: A Review Essay and Annotated Bibliography,” *OJPCR: The Online Journal of Peace and Conflict Resolution*, 4: 2, 37-76 (2002)

<sup>13</sup> Ifi Amadiume & Abdullahi An-Na’Im (eds), *The Politics of Memory: Truth, Healing and Social Justice*, (London & New York, Zed Books, 2000)

<sup>14</sup> E. Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices*, (Baltimore & London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> M. Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence*, (Boston, Beacon Press, 1998), p. 118. See also M. Minow, *Breaking the Cycles of Hatred: Memory, Law and Repair*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> Kofi Annan, Oliver Tambo Lecture, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, 30 October 2006, <http://www.un.org/apps/sg/sgstats.asp?nid=2277>

Where, as in the case of Sri Lanka, the conflict is one of those that appears to have fallen off the geo-political map, the tasks seem to be either those of finding a way of regenerating international attention or – more likely – generating internal processes that move beyond the military and violent options to a reconstructive politics. It would too ambitious an exercise to attempt, in this paper, to chart a path to peaceful solutions in Sri Lanka; but what I hope can be done is to indicate some of the features of this conflict that lend themselves both to the patterns of international neglect and – ironically – to internal solutions.

In a review essay on the role and potential of mediation in intractable conflicts,<sup>17</sup> Kevin Avruch suggests that there are five types of “forgotten conflicts”:

- i. Neglected conflicts – those that have ‘failed to register on the radar screens of the international community’;
- ii. “Orphan” conflicts – those that once had, but have now lost international attention;
- iii. “Captives” – the conflicts that, ironically, suffer from a surfeit of international attention; occasionally superpower proxy conflicts;
- iv. “Dependents” – conflicts which also have outside attention; but tend to be dependent on the fate of other, neighbouring conflicts; or on the role of diasporas; and
- v. “Wards of the system” – those adopted by international agencies, but which often linger “in a sort of comatose life-support mode for a long time”.

The dynamics of neglect are, broadly, the reduced priority that particular conflicts have for the international community; the lack or loss of strategic importance of the region of the conflict; the (usually flawed) assumption that neighbour or regional states can and will address the conflict; and the (usually correct) assumption that the conflict has become intractable.<sup>18</sup> Intractable conflicts, while diverse in origins, duration and objectives, share certain characteristics: they are typically violent, protracted, internal or

---

<sup>17</sup> K. Avruch, “Stopping the Unstoppable Wars,” *SAIS Review*, Volume 25, Number 1, Winter-Spring 2005, pp. 193-197, at 194 [reviewing Chester Crocker, Fen Osler & Pamela Aall, *Taming Intractable Conflicts: Mediation in the Hardest Cases*, [Washington, DC, USIP, 2004]

<sup>18</sup> See H. & G. Burgess, “The Meaning of Intractability,” at [http://www.beyondintractability.org/m/meaning\\_intractability.jsp](http://www.beyondintractability.org/m/meaning_intractability.jsp)

intrastate, risk spillover into wider conflicts (including neighbour states), and involve parties who, once the conflict is ended, will need to continue living together.<sup>19</sup>

In the South Asian and South East Asian regions, there is also a tradition of scrupulous avoidance of intervention in the affairs of neighbour states, borne in large part of the relatively recent post-colonial development of independent government and emerging democracies, and a fierce protection of sovereignty.<sup>20</sup> The one significant national power in the region, India, is also cautious about intervention having become briefly and disastrously involved in the Sri Lankan conflict in the 1980s<sup>21</sup> – and having lost a Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, to an LTTE suicide bomber. Neglect, in this sense, is less an indication of lack of compassion than of the power of other priorities.

If we narrow the analysis still further, we can suggest that the neglect, or lack of visibility of some conflicts, arises from the location of such conflicts in the balance of international priorities (strategic, economic, humanitarian); or the fact that most of such conflicts are intrastate, involving either non-state actors fighting against the state, or conflicts between factions of non-state actors – typically struggling for control of the state or of a degree of claimed autonomy. At the risk of some simplification, in the first case, the neglect reflects an *unwillingness* to become engaged in the conflict; in the second, a perceived *incapacity* to deal with the unpredictability of guerrilla war, suicide bombers, child soldiers and unstable political allegiances. Neglected, orphan or forgotten conflicts also have two – often-interconnected – aspects: humanitarian and security<sup>22</sup>. In the former, neglect may reflect both the limitations of resources and “compassion burnout”; and in the latter, the neglect may be a part of what Dan Monk refers to as an “economy of

---

<sup>19</sup> See Christopher Mitchell, *Intractable Conflicts: Keys to Treatment*, Gernika Gogoratz Work Paper No. 10, 1997, p. 6

<sup>20</sup> See D. Dickens & G. Wilson-Roberts, *Non-Intervention and State Sovereignty in the Asia-Pacific*, (Wellington, Centre for Strategic Studies, 2000)

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, R. Ganguly, *Kin State Intervention in Ethnic Conflicts: Lessons from South Asia*, (New Delhi, Sage Publications, 1998), Ch 6.

<sup>22</sup> See François Grunewald and Laurence Tessier, “Grey zones, lasting crises, forgotten conflicts: humanitarian challenges”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, No. 842, p. 323-351; <http://www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/html/57JR5N>

attention”<sup>23</sup>, a reflection of the choices that are made for strategic, commercial or political reasons as to the focus of attention. As the Institut de Drets Humans de Catalunya suggests in relation to its own programme on forgotten conflicts:<sup>24</sup>

“Este programa se ha bautizado con el nombre de conflictos olvidados para recoger la doble realidad que en muchas ocasiones caracterizan a la mayoría de conflictos. Por un lado, la falta de atención mediática y la consecuente desinformación por parte de la sociedad civil internacional, concretamente en Cataluña. Y, por otro lado, el desamparo que padecen estas zonas frente a la inactividad o incapacidad de la comunidad internacional.”

As the preceding brief comments have suggested, the neglect of some conflicts reflects not merely an unwillingness, which would seem to underscore the lack of consistent concern and compassion in international affairs, but also the incapacity of the international community to intervene effectively, which points to the particular challenge of conflicts such as that in Sri Lanka. The tasks of intervention, prevention and peacekeeping are especially complex in conflicts waged by and between non-state, or sub-state entities, where the lines and factions reflect shifting allegiances; where the state itself is characterised by weak, partisan and corrupt governance; and where the non-state actors aspire to take over or to exercise the functions of the state, whether in the territory at large or in a demarcated part of it. If “forgetting” implies a degree of culpable neglect, it can also imply an element of helplessness or – in the face of the murky world of intrastate conflict – a lack of experience and strategies on which to base effective intervention.

A third factor, which we cannot go into here, is that in cases such as Sri Lanka, where the government claims to be “fighting terrorism” – and the LTTE are listed in many countries as a terrorist organisation – the international community is loath to interfere, and indeed is more likely to lend its support to the government, even where there is clear evidence of major human rights abuses. Similarly, any international criticism of the government, for

---

<sup>23</sup> Colgate Conversations podcast “Forgotten conflicts around the world” with Dan Monk, Director of Peace & Conflict Studies Program at Colgate University,  
<http://www.colgate.edu/DesktopDefault1.aspx?tabid=2389>

<sup>24</sup> Institut de Drets Humans de Catalunya, “Conflictos Olvidados”,  
[http://www.idhc.org/esp/125\\_conflictos.asp](http://www.idhc.org/esp/125_conflictos.asp)

example of its current practices of clearing Tamils from Colombo<sup>25</sup> is likely to be seen as indicative of support for the LTTE. In addition to neglect and helplessness, then, there is a dilemma, created by complex, intrastate conflicts, of the appearance of partisanship and of support for the (corrupt) state or for (violently-pursued) claims for identity-based autonomy.

### **From bombs to blogs: Putting Sri Lanka back on the [virtual] map – Information Communications Technology and building local dialogues for peace**

“[G]lobalization and the information revolution are empowering decentralized networks that challenge state-centered hierarchies.”<sup>26</sup>

The combination of international neglect and the apparent helplessness of the international community seem to suggest a poverty of resources and strategies for dealing with conflicts such as Sri Lanka’s. It is scarcely surprising – though ultimately unacceptable – that the view is sometimes expressed that all the international community can do is to allow some conflicts to burn themselves out.<sup>27</sup>

If, however, we take one characteristic of most internal conflicts – that they involve non-state actors – there may be a clue to the kinds of interventions and actions that can facilitate the movement towards peace and reconstruction. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the rich field of multi-track diplomacy and the growing role of Track II and Track III agencies – that is, the non-governmental, unofficial, non-military, and often grassroots actors.<sup>28</sup> However, as many authors and practitioners now suggest from a growing field of experience, the key to taking the steps towards peace is the engagement

---

<sup>25</sup> See <http://www.groundviews.org/2007/06/07/arrogance-at-it's-peak---expulsion-of-tamils-from-colombo>

<sup>26</sup> J Metzl, “Network Diplomacy,” Information Revolution and World Politics Project, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, [http://www.ceip.org/files/Publications/network\\_diplomacy.asp?from=pubdate](http://www.ceip.org/files/Publications/network_diplomacy.asp?from=pubdate), reprinted from the *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, Winter/Spring, 2001. For additional resources on the Internet and democratisation, see publications at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: [http://www.ceip.org/files/Publications/Pub\\_by\\_topic.asp#anchor](http://www.ceip.org/files/Publications/Pub_by_topic.asp#anchor)

<sup>27</sup> Just which conflicts are left to burn, and which “fires” are attended to takes us back to the dynamics of attention and neglect.

<sup>28</sup> See generally J. Diamond, “Multi-Track Diplomacy” [http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/multi-track\\_diplomacy/](http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/multi-track_diplomacy/); and the resources at the home page of the Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy, <http://www.imtd.org/>

of the widest range of parties in the peace process: the “helplessness” of the international community, referred to at several points in this paper, derives in part at least from the assumptions of the traditional, top-down, state-led, diplomatic and military interventions. The plethora of intrastate, identity-based, secessionist, and ethnic conflicts – of which Sri Lanka is but one example – has led to the generation of new theories and practices of intervention and peacebuilding, resting primarily on building dialogue, confidence and capacity in the groups affected by conflict.<sup>29</sup>

The remainder of this paper will explore one ongoing experiment in that process, involving the use of innovative – and often simple – technologies in the effort to reduce misinformation, build confidence, and gradually restore cross-communal dialogue.

For a number of years, the communal – or ethnic – voices on either side of this conflict have used Internet technology, but more often to present partisan views of the conflict. The Tamil website, <http://www.eelam.com/>, for example, presents a view of the “extreme frustration at the unchanging attitude of successive Sinhala regimes towards resolving the burning Tamil national question and, in particular, at the deceitful handling of the current peace efforts by three successive Sinhala regimes”. Similarly, another Tamil website, <http://www.tamilnet.com/>, presents accounts of the conflict which are, understandably, disposed to seeing the Tamil population as victims of ongoing governmental and – more specifically – Sinhalese – attacks.<sup>30</sup>

Conversely, websites such as <http://www.lankapage.com/> and <http://www.lankaweb.com/news/latest.html> tend to be more pro-government and specifically anti-Tamil in their reporting – and concerned to argue that the negotiations

---

<sup>29</sup> See Mitchell, fn. 18 above; and J. P. Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, (Washington, DC, USIP Press, 1997), *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures*, (Syracuse, Syracuse Univ. Press, 1995); H. Miall, O. Ramsbotham, & T. Wodhouse, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1999); L. Kriesberg, *Constructive Conflicts: From Escalation to Resolution*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Oxford, Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

<sup>30</sup> Significantly, this website also reports (on 21 December 2006) the comments of Eric Solheim, the Norwegian International Development Minister closely involved in the ongoing negotiations, to the effect that the late Anton Balasingham, the LTTE’s chief negotiator and theoretician, was a “man of integrity”. This view can only reinforce the Sri Lankan Government’s view that the Norwegian delegation is pro-LTTE.

are a fundamentally flawed process because they are based on the assumption that the Tamil Tigers are a legitimate negotiation partner. Other websites, such as <http://theacademic.org/>, are more neutral in their reporting though, as will be the case in most war reporting, the language of the news is often charged and likely to be perceived as partisan – even in such simple matters as the use of words such as “rebels” to describe the LTTE.

If the principal use of the web for recent years has been partisan representation of the nature of the conflict, more recent developments are far more hopeful and illustrative of the capacity of the same technology to build intercommunal co-operation and trust. A few brief examples will suffice to illustrate this. These examples also illustrate the potential for collaboration between non-governmental organizations and grassroots movements to provide – as far as possible – neutral information and a safe forum through which to engage in dialogue. In this collaboration it is also clear that attention is being turned specifically to the question as to the potential of ICTs in humanitarian and peace operations. Beyond being a resource that might incidentally be used for the storage or provision of information, or for the facilitation of communication, the technology itself is now the subject of governmental and non-governmental attention<sup>31</sup>.

In 2005, for example, the Swiss Government initiated a project called “ICT for Peace”, the aim of which is to focus on the provision and application of information technology in areas of conflict. This initiative arose from the deliberations of the World Summit on the Information Society that, recognizing the negative impact of conflict on development and the attainment of the UN’s Millennium Development Goals, seeks to make constructive use of the technology.<sup>32</sup> This project, ICT4Peace, is one of the agencies, along with the Swiss Peace Foundation<sup>33</sup>, that has been working with local and grassroots

---

<sup>31</sup> See generally D Stauffacher, W Drake, Paul Currión & J Steinberger, “Information and Communication Technology for Peace: The Role of ICT in Preventing, Responding to and Recovering from Conflict,” (2005; UN ICT Task Force & ICT for Peace <http://www.ict4peace.org/>); Gordon Smith, “Reinventing Diplomacy: a Virtual Necessity”, <http://www.usip.org/vdi/vdr/gsmithISA99.html>

<sup>32</sup> See <http://www.ict4peace.org/>

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.swisspeace.org/>

agencies in Sri Lanka, in particular, the Centre for Policy Alternatives<sup>34</sup> to foster the capacity of civil society to engage in constructive inter-communal activities.

Five brief examples, in ascending order of technical novelty, will suffice to illustrate the steps that can be taken to use modern communications technology, including the relatively simple technology of cell phones, to pursue these goals.<sup>35</sup>

(i) First, the Sri Lankan Foundation for Co-Existence (FCE), is currently running a “pioneering early warning and response system”<sup>36</sup>, involving

- i) a community-based network of volunteers forming peace committees, identifying peace and conflict indicators; and
- ii) a team of 20 field monitors with motorbikes and mobile phones, monitoring the ground situation, reporting daily by phone and SMS or email to an Information Centre based on Colombo; and
- iii) at the Information Centre, a process of verification and collation of information for dissemination to legislators and decision makers.

Several observations can be made about this experiment. First, it is an example of collaboration between Sri Lankan grassroots initiatives and international, government-funded NGOs: the FCE here is working in association with the Swiss Peace Foundation. Second, it involves a co-ordination of both basic technology – small motorbikes and mobile phones – and more elaborate early warning systems for conflict prevention and mitigation: the project works with Swiss Peace’s “FAST” early warning system, developed for and implemented in over twenty countries in Africa, Asia and Europe.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.cpalanka.org/>

<sup>35</sup> For a more extended discussion, see Sanjana Hattotuwa, “Daring to Dream: CSCW for Peacebuilding,” (Conley Tyler, Melissa, Katsh, Ethan and Choi, Daewon (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Third Annual Forum on Online Dispute Resolution*. International Conflict Resolution Centre, University of Melbourne in collaboration with the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. [www.odr.info](http://www.odr.info), March 2005); “Untying the Gordian Knot: ICT for Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation,” (paper presented to Third Annual Forum on Online Dispute Resolution, Melbourne, Australia, 2004).

<sup>36</sup> See *Peace IT!*, No. 1/2006, p. 2

<sup>37</sup> see <http://www.swisspeace.org/fast/>: “FAST International is an independent early warning program covering 20 countries/regions in Africa, Europe and Asia. The objective of FAST International is the early

Third, it involves collaboration between grassroots and community-based groups, local Track II agencies (here, the FCE), and government agencies: the aim of the conflict monitoring is to provide timely and accurate information on likely flashpoints in the conflict for central decision-makers.

(ii) The second example from Sri Lanka again involves relatively simple and established technology – radio – and its use as a vehicle for the voices of those affected by the conflict and as a source of information for all the parties. The “Voices of Reconciliation” radio project<sup>38</sup>:

“aims to enhance social, political and cultural cohesion in Sri Lanka through podcasts and radio productions that feature the ideas and opinions of citizens rarely featured in mainstream media. Content is in Sinhala, Tamil and English with a special focus on civil society initiatives and perspectives on peace, reconciliation and democracy.”

(iii) The Voices of Reconciliation Radio can be accessed through and is associated with the third initiative – as we move up the scale of technological complexity but remain relatively accessible: an initiative of InfoShare and the Centre for Policy Alternatives is the establishment of “Groundviews”, an open-access, unmoderated, tri-lingual website. This, too, is associated with another web-based initiative, “Voices of Peace”. Groundviews is Sri Lanka's first and so far only tri-lingual citizens’ journalism website. Launched in December 2006, it features articles focussing on issues of humanitarian access, human rights, peace, democracy, constitutional reform and governance. Recent articles have addressed issues ranging from the recruitment of child soldiers, to populist mobilisation and the process of business recovery in Jaffna, the northern city most badly affected by the decades of conflict and displacement.

---

recognition of impending or potential crisis situations in order to prevent violent conflict. FAST International aims at enhancing political decision makers’ and their staff's ability to identify critical developments in a timely manner so that coherent political strategies can be formulated to either prevent or limit destructive effects of violent conflicts or identify windows of opportunity for peacebuilding.”

<http://www.swisspeace.org/fast/methodology.htm>

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.radio.voicesofpeace.lk>

In commenting on the role of websites such as Groundviews, Sanajana Hattotuwa says<sup>39</sup>:

"'Citizen journalism' can help move the country towards peace. Through web-based technologies, even citizens in Sri Lanka who have been effectively cut out of mainstream media - bursting, as it is, with the propaganda of political elites - have found new ways of expressing themselves, their concerns, their aspirations and their ideas for resolving conflict.

Often, this new age of citizen journalism lacks the grammar of age-old diplomacy and socio-political norms - the conversation is raw, visceral, impatient, irreverent, pithy, provocative."

This source of information – this citizen journalism – contains not only ‘popular’ views of the conflict, but also academic commentary on issues such as nationalism, mobilization, and central politics, providing yet another indication of the kind of collaboration made possible through ICT.

(iv) A fourth initiative is again a development from the preceding ones and is perhaps more limited in its accessibility – though likely to be accessed by Sri Lanka’s substantial Diaspora population: the creation of podcasts on topics relating to the conflict, reconciliation, economic development, and the disparity in conditions between the regions of Sri Lanka. Podcasting is fast becoming the medium of choice for web-based self-publicity in highly wired societies, and an increasingly important mode of information delivery in online education.<sup>40</sup> That same relatively simple technology can be turned to the purposes of peace in settings where the parties in conflict need reliable information and the capacity to hear and tell their own stories of peace. Recent podcasts, accessed through the Voices of Reconciliation Radio, include topics such as the use of direct democracy by villages in resolving disputes,<sup>41</sup> the impact of the ongoing violence on the tourist industry,<sup>42</sup> discussions of rights, development and the erosion of living

---

<sup>39</sup> Sanjana Hattotuwa, "The Promise of Citizen Journalism," January, 2007, personal email and at <http://www.madrid11.net/articles/srilanka220107>

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, the highly-regarded Open University of Catalonia [[www.uoc.edu](http://www.uoc.edu)]; or the projects at Berkeley [<http://itunes.berkeley.edu/>] and Carnegie Mellon Universities [<http://www.apple.com/education/profiles/carnegie/>], in making course material and public events available online and through podcasts. See also the podcast side of Open Democracy [http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization/podcast3\\_4284.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization/podcast3_4284.jsp)

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.radio.voicesofpeace.lk/page.php?v/298>

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.radio.voicesofpeace.lk/page.php?v/310>

conditions in the predominantly Tamil north and east,<sup>43</sup> and the role of the Government in relation to the alleged recruitment of child soldiers by the breakaway Tamil “Karuna faction”<sup>44</sup>.

(v) The fifth and final example involves the use of “blogs” or weblogs. Increasingly popular as a form of placing one’s own views on the web, blogs also have a number of academic and quasi-governmental authors and “bloggers”. The risk of the blog as a form of self-publicity is that it increases the already high noise-to-signal ratio on the web: there is far more information available than we could ever need or want to have access to! However, the significant value of some of the blogs provided by, for example, legal academics, is the capacity to access recent law and commentary, and to engage in dialogue in ways hitherto simply not possible<sup>45</sup>. In the conflict setting, blogs can provide ongoing and updated information, typically at grassroots level, and supplement other and more conventional forms of information<sup>46</sup>. InfoShare, one of the bodies closely involved with the preceding initiatives, provides an excellent resource in its regularly updated blog at <http://research.infoshare.lk/>. Recent blogs from InfoShare include comments on the risks to humanitarian workers in conflict zones<sup>47</sup>; the contribution of religion to the peace process<sup>48</sup>; NGO accountability<sup>49</sup>; and a link to the Public International Law and Policy Group’s<sup>50</sup> simulation on the Sri Lankan peace negotiation process.<sup>51</sup>

What can we make of these developments? At the heart of the exercise is a response to

---

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.radio.voicesofpeace.lk/index.php?5/v/0>

<sup>44</sup> <http://research.infoshare.lk/2007/01/21/hrw-podcast-on-sri-lanka-government-complicity-evident-in-karunas-child-recruitment/>

<sup>45</sup> See for example Lawrence Lessig’s blog at <http://www.lessig.org/blog/>; for an ongoing constitutional law dialogue between Prof Gary Becker and Justice Richard Posner, see <http://www.becker-posner-blog.com/>; for an excellent and regularly updated legal theory blog, see Lawrence Solum’s <http://lsolum.blogspot.com/>. One recent development is the first mediation-related video blog, initiated and hosted by my Wellington colleague Geoff Sharp, at <http://mediationvblog.com/>.

<sup>46</sup> Note also the manner in which blogs can provide an additional and alternative voice in international fora, such as the women’s commentary from the 7<sup>th</sup> World Social Forum in Nairobi:

<http://womenwsf.wordpress.com/about-2/>; or provide a more focussed commentary on human rights, such as Mary Robinson’s “Realizing Rights: the Ethical Global Initiative”: <http://www.realizingrights.org/>

<sup>47</sup> <http://research.infoshare.lk/2007/01/26/killing-aid-workers-the-dangers-of-humanitarian-work-today>

<sup>48</sup> <http://research.infoshare.lk/2007/01/24/religious-contributions-to-peace-making>

<sup>49</sup> <http://research.infoshare.lk/2007/01/23/debating-ngo-accountability>

<sup>50</sup> <http://www.publicinternationallaw.org/about/index.html> - a “global pro bono international law firm”

<sup>51</sup> [http://www.pilpg.org/areas/peacebuilding/simulations/#Sri\\_Lanka](http://www.pilpg.org/areas/peacebuilding/simulations/#Sri_Lanka)

one of the issues identified by writers on inter-communal and ethnic conflict: the fear generated by the lack of reliable information about the nature of the conflict, the attributes and aspirations of “the other side”, and the prospects for peace and reconciliation<sup>52</sup>. In the absence of information, provided either by as neutral a source as possible or by *all* sides to the conflict, people will typically retreat into their own partisan and increasingly unchallenged and extreme views of causes and solutions<sup>53</sup>. In these examples, the uses of ICT serve at least three linked functions: first, the involvement of a wide range of participants in the monitoring of flash points and communal ‘fault lines’; second, the generation of a body of information about the conflict, constantly updated, and regularly fed up the decision-making chain; and third, the provision of relatively accessible media – mobile phones, community radio, open websites – to facilitate dialogue, especially where face-to-face communication is dangerous.

It would be naïve, of course, to imagine that this has been entirely without problems: the risk and trust involved in allowing open-access websites both underscores the need for authentic participation and dialogue *and* creates the real likelihood that the decades of conflict will spill over into the web pages. The vituperative nature of some of the postings on the Sri Lankan websites indicates the ways in which the conflict might simply be carried over into a different context. And any attempts to moderate the conversation is seen by those posters as a mark of the graphically described attributes and inclinations of the moderator. This, in a very real sense, takes us back to the earliest phase of Internet development and illustrates the ongoing challenge – in face to face and virtual communication – of finding the balance between the trust involved in open communication and the need for protection and controls.

An aspiration of this kind of experiment is that the experience of participation and engagement might foster both a shared commitment to the peace process and a sense of common citizenship. In conflicts such as Sri Lanka’s, the inter-communal and separatist

---

<sup>52</sup> D A Lake and D Rothchild, “Spreading Fear: The Genesis of Transnational Ethnic Conflict,” in Lake & Rothchild (eds). *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict: Fear, Diffusion, and Escalation*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998), Ch 1.

<sup>53</sup> See Cass Sunstein, “Deliberative Trouble: Why Groups go to Extremes,” 110 *Yale Law Jnl*, 71 (2000), available online at [http://www.yalelawjournal.org/archive\\_abstract.asp?id=342](http://www.yalelawjournal.org/archive_abstract.asp?id=342)

animosity has its political analogue in the desire for distinct and identity-based citizenship<sup>54</sup>. In both conflict-saturated and stable communities, the claims of citizenship are increasingly marked by expectations of recognition based on culture, ethnicity, or faith<sup>55</sup>. This is not the place to go into this topic, save to note that the arguments emerging from a cosmopolitan, rather than multicultural perspective<sup>56</sup> emphasise the importance of policies and practices which both recognize the interests of identity but remain grounded in the democratic principle of common citizenship.

ICT provides the vehicle and the tools for a wide range of forms of participation – from mobile phones to chat rooms, web logs, public access radio and open source software. These provide for networks and forms of horizontal and dispersed communication. Not only might ICT provide the *technology* for communication and dialogue on world affairs, peace and domestic politics; it might also provide an *organizing principle* – i.e. that of “networking”<sup>57</sup>.

From the outset in the development of Internet-based communication, it has been necessary, despite the aspirations of a relatively unconstrained means of communication, to establish norms of participation, whether these are basic rules of “netiquette” or the formal requirements of mandatory arbitration imposed on ISPs and domain name users. Internet users will, of course, participate in widely divergent and dispersed ‘communities’: the core value and appeal in the Internet is the facility it offers to access information, like-minded people and resources well beyond individuals’ physical reach or

---

<sup>54</sup> See generally R Ganguly and I Macduff (eds), *Ethnic Conflict and Secessionism in South and South-East Asia: Causes, Dynamics, Solutions* (Sage, New Delhi, 2002)

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2002)

<sup>56</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, (New York, W W Norton & Co, 2006); Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005); Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, (New York, W W Norton & Co, 2006); Eduardo Medieta, “Communicative freedom, citizenship and political justice in the age of globalization,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 31: 739-752 (2005); Ayelet Shachar, “Two Critiques of Multiculturalism,” 23 *Cardozo Law Rev*, 253 (2001); Shachar, *Multicultural Jurisdictions: Cultural Differences and Women’s Rights*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001)

<sup>57</sup> David Bollier, “People / Networks / Power: Communications Technologies and the New International Politics” (Report of the 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Aspen Institute Roundtable on Information Technology; The Aspen Institute, 2004). p. v. See also Charles M Firestone, in “Foreword” to “The Rise of Netpolitik” How the Internet in Changing International Politics and Diplomacy,” (A Report of the Eleventh Annual Aspen Institute Roundtable on Information Technology; The Aspen Institute, Colorado, 2003)

the boundaries of nations. This is, however, both a virtue and a peril. As Lim comments<sup>58</sup>:

“The Internet appeals to isolated individuals by helping them to connect with people worldwide with whom they share some commonality. It also leads these individuals to spend more time with this de-territorialized community at the expense of interaction with their immediate physical environments. In cyberspace, communities are no longer tied to nations . . .”

In the absence of the conventional shape and present of physical communities, and in the face of Internet users’ capacity to forge closer virtual links with those outside their real communities, it becomes necessary to imagine ways in which those same technologies that foster dispersed affiliations can be used to reinvent cyber citizens. The question that arises at this stage in the development of ICTs is as to the potential role of Internet communication to facilitate the new integration and to play a constructive role in peacebuilding. Will the Internet fulfill the expectation of Frances Cairncross<sup>59</sup> that it will “increase understanding, foster tolerance, and ultimately promote worldwide peace”? Can we – in the case of conflicts such as Sri Lanka’s – see the prospects of a shift from bombs to blogs?

At the very least, ICTs provide a means for reinventing and engaging in dialogue, in settings where it is not merely difficult, as a result of distance, but also dangerous, as a result of conflict.<sup>60</sup> Thus, to return to the opening themes of this paper, dialogue is the mean through which people tell their stories; and through those stories, memories are kept alive.

---

<sup>58</sup> Merlyna Lim, *Islamic Radicalism and Anti-Americanism in Indonesia: The Role of the Internet*, (East-West Centre, Washington, 2005), 44

<sup>59</sup> Frances Cairncross, *The Death of Distance* (Boston, Harvard Business School Press, 1997, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., p. xvi); cited in the CSIS Report, “Reinventing Diplomacy in the information Age,” (Oct. 1998), <http://www.csis.org/ics/dia/final.html>, p.16). See also <http://www.deathofdistance.com/>. That comment does not appear in the 2001 edition. However, as the final point in the section “The Trendspotter’s Guide to New Communication”, Cairncross suggests that “Democracy will continue to spread: people who live under dictatorial regimes will be more aware of their governments’ failures. Democracies have always been more reluctant to fight than dictatorships. In addition, countries will grow yet more economically interdependent. People will communicate more freely with human beings on other parts of the globe. As a result, while wars will still be fought, the effect may be to foster world peace.” [*op cit*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 2001 p. xvii.]

<sup>60</sup> Ian Macduff, “Mediating Distance: Online Tools for Reconciliation?” ADR Online Monthly, <http://www.ombuds.org/center/adr2002-7-Macduff.html>

“Dialogue, as we are choosing to use the word, is a way of exploring the roots of the many crises that face humanity today. It enables inquiry into, and understanding of, the sorts of processes that fragment and interfere with real communication between individuals, nations and even different parts of the same organization. In our modern culture men and women are able to interact with one another in many ways: they can sing dance or play together with little difficulty but their ability to talk together about subjects that matter deeply to them seems invariably to lead to dispute, division and often to violence. In our view this condition points to a deep and pervasive defect in the process of human thought.”<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup> D Bohm, D Factor, and P Garrett, (1991) ‘Dialogue – a proposal’ [http://www.infed.org/archives/e-texts/bohm\\_dialogue.htm](http://www.infed.org/archives/e-texts/bohm_dialogue.htm)