



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## Tamil diaspora protests in Toronto against Sri Lankan civil war, 2009

30 January

2009

to: May

2009

**Country:** Canada

**Location City/State/Province:** Toronto, Ontario

### Goals:

To spotlight the massacre and to place pressure on the Canadian and U.S. governments as well as the United Nations to take more definitive action in bringing an end to the bloodshed in Sri Lanka due to civil war.

## Methods

### Methods in 1st segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › "Stop the genocide"; "Send relief"; "we want justice"; graphic images of maimed individuals.
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

### Methods in 2nd segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › "We want peace"; "help us, Canada".
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 034. Vigils › Candlelight
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

### Methods in 3rd segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › "We want peace"; "help us, Canada".
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

### Methods in 4th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › "We want peace"; "help us, Canada".
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction

### Methods in 5th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › "We want peace"; "help us, Canada".
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

**Methods in 6th segment:**

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 034. Vigils
- 038. Marches › 3,000 people marched onto the Gardiner Expressway
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 137. Refusal of an assemblage or meeting to disperse › Demanded to speak with a government representative
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction

## Classifications

**Classification:**

Change

**Cluster:**

Human Rights

Peace

**Group characterization:**

- Tamil diaspora

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

**Leaders:**

Not known

**Partners:**

The University of Toronto Tamil Students Association, the Canadian Tamil Congress (CTC), CanadianHART (Canadian Humanitarian Appeal for the Relief of Tamils), Canadian Tamil Samooham, Canadian Tamil Youth, several unions (including United Steelworkers).

**External allies:**

Not known

**Involvement of social elites:**

Not known

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

**Groups in 1st Segment:**

**Groups in 2nd Segment:**

**Groups in 3rd Segment:**

**Groups in 4th Segment:**

**Groups in 5th Segment:**

**Groups in 6th Segment:****Additional notes on joining/exiting order:**

Joining order not known

**Segment Length:** *Approximately 3 weeks*

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**

Canadian, U.S., and Sri Lankan Governments

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**

Not known

**Campaigner violence:**

On April 29 there was a fight between some protesters and some police

**Repressive Violence:**

On April 29 there was a fight between some protesters and some police

## Success Outcome

**Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**

3 points out of 6 points

**Survival:**

1 point out of 1 points

**Growth:**

2 points out of 3 points

**Notes on outcomes:**

Successes: The Canadian Government sent \$3 billion in aid as well as called upon the Sri Lankan government to end the civil war and protect civilians

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For many years in Sri Lanka, tensions have existed between the Tamils, 12.6% of the total population, and the Sinhalese, representing 74% of the population. One of the main root causes of this conflict could be traced back to British colonization, which saw partiality displayed by the British toward the Tamils through concessions and the subsequent marginalization of the Sinhalese. Education in English was available much earlier in the northern province, which was primarily inhabited by Tamils, and thus, a greater number of Tamils were employed in the civil service sector and recruited by the British to work in government services. When Sri Lanka became independent in 1948, the majority of the population elected Sinhalese politicians to government. The newly formed Sinhalese government subsequently passed anti-Tamil legislation that favoured Sinhalese interests such as reserving the best jobs for the Sinhalese people and the passing of a Sinhala Only Act in 1956. With Sinhala as the language of the government, education system, and other institutions, the Tamils' opportunities were severely limited and they became marginalized socially, economically and politically. This discrimination fostered hostilities between the two groups.

In 1976, the collective frustrations of the oppressed Tamils spawned the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE, also known as the Tamil Tigers), a group which may be described as a sub-national separatist militant organization. One of their main objectives was to gain control of North and East Sri Lanka and transform it into an autonomous region for Tamils, free from Sinhalese rule. A wave of violence in 1983 developed into a violent and bloody civil war between the LTTE and Sri Lankan government factions. It wasn't until May 19, 2009, that the Sri Lankan government stormed the Tiger's de facto state and political capital of Kilinochchi and declared victory over the LTTE.

Violence escalated during the months leading up to the end of the civil war as government military forces stormed the Northern Province and used large-scale shelling, including on 'No Fire Zones' in which the UN and ICRC operated. This resulted in a dramatic inflation in the number of deaths, rendering government shelling as the primary cause for Tamil civilian deaths. Other offences by the Government included the shelling of hospitals and other humanitarian goods as well as the denial of humanitarian assistance. Violations by the LTTE included the use of civilians as human shields, killing civilians attempting to flee LTTE control, and the forced recruitment and labour of women, men and children. An estimated 80,000-100,000 people are reported to have been killed throughout the course of this conflict while thousands of others have been displaced from their homes.

Due to the devastating conflict, thousands of Tamils fled Sri Lanka in search of a safer environment. With approximately 250,000 Tamils living in Toronto alone, Canada was believed to be the home of the largest Sri Lankan Tamil population living outside of Sri Lanka. In response to the escalated violence in early 2009, which saw a dramatic rise in civilian deaths, the Tamil diaspora living in Canada staged several protests and demonstrations throughout the first half of 2009, seeking a response from the Canadian government. The protests were apparently spontaneous for the most part; no organization claimed responsibility for coordinating the gatherings, though countless youth and several leaders of local Tamil organizations and student groups actively promoted them. It began with thousands of Tamils gathering along University Avenue for a demonstration. Thousands came out to call attention to their dying friends and family in the war back home in hopes of prompting someone to take action to stop it.

The campaign's first major day-long demonstration took place on 30 January 2009. Approximately 45,000 people lined the streets of downtown Toronto and held hands to form a human chain. A large number of families and students participated in this protest, many of them holding graphic images of maimed individuals. Protestors in Toronto criticized the Sri Lankan government for using particularly aggressive offensive military tactics without discretion in a LTTE-controlled zone which compromised the lives of countless civilians. A few protestors interviewed expressed their anguish with the outright condemnation of the LTTE, whom they viewed as the only group willing to fight for the Tamil people and defend them against the actions of the Sri Lankan government. Protestors also wore armbands and carried banners that displayed messages such as "stop the genocide" and "send relief". Protestors called upon the Canadian government to allow unhindered access to food, medicines, and other basic essentials as well as to lift the ban of the LTTE.

On February 4, thousands of protestors gathered outside the Sri Lankan Consulate where they held a candlelit vigil and raised chants of "we want justice". That same day, the Canadian Government announced it would send \$3 billion in aid to the northern regions ravaged by war in Sri Lanka, to be distributed by five non-government organizations, including OxfamCanada, the Red Cross, and Medecins Sans Frontieres.

Another significant rally was held on March 16 from approximately 1:00 pm to 6:00 pm. Another human chain was formed with the participation of over 100,000 Canadian Tamils who lined the sidewalks of downtown Toronto and effectively blocked off Front Street, causing major traffic disturbances. The human chain blocked off the entrance to Union Station, a main transit point in downtown Toronto that serviced buses, trains, and subways. The protestors continued to emphasize raising awareness about the escalating conflict in Sri Lanka and urged the Canadian government to step up and take action against the violence. Many protestors expressed their desire for the international community to place pressure on the conflict in order to bring about a ceasefire and negotiations. The protesters waved flags representing the LTTE and chanted slogans such as "we want peace" and "help us, Canada". Some of the signs held by protestors expressed support for a separate state, while others criticized the government's move to label the LTTE a terrorist organization. Many of the protestors also condemned the Sri Lankan government for utilizing aggressive tactics that compromised the lives of countless civilians residing in the North.

Another large-scale protest was launched outside the U.S. Consulate building and effectively blocked off a portion of University Avenue. Police were forced to shut down the area from April 26 to April 29. Protestors refused to move until some action was taken to address the war in Sri Lanka. Protestors called upon the United States, Canada, and the United Nations to pressure the Sri Lankan government to cease their aggressive military advances that compromised the lives of Tamil civilians caught in the warzone. On the last day of the four-day protest, a scuffle broke out between police and protestors wherein several people were

arrested as well as a few others injured. The police pushed the protestors onto the sidewalk and re-opened all lanes the next day, on April 30.

Approximately 10,000 protestors marched from the U.S. Consulate to Queen's Park on May 9. A man was present who pledged to refrain from eating until something was done about the massacre being waged in his home country. As the fighting in Sri Lanka became more intense in the final weeks of the conflict, many of the Tamils living in Toronto lost contact with their friends and family back home, resulting in one of the diaspora's more desperate protests.

On May 10, nearly 3,000 Tamils assembled outside the U.S. Consulate and began an unplanned march around 3:00 pm. With no clear destination, men, women and children made their way onto the Gardiner Expressway, blocking all the lanes and delaying traffic for six hours. The crowd refused to leave until given the opportunity to speak with a representative from the Canadian government. The group dissolved around midnight only after protest leaders reportedly spoke with representatives from Michael Ignatieff's Liberal office and were promised that the Tamil cause would be brought up in Parliament.

Several days later, the Sri Lankan Government announced that they had defeated the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, thus ending the official civil war. In response, the Toronto Tamil diaspora held several days of candlelight vigils, still demanding intervention by the Canadian government to protect Sri Lankan civilians. However, these vigils marked the end of this campaign.

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