

Fighting for Peace: Serving During the Sri Lankan Civil War

As a USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development) officer serving in Vietnam during the firefights and bombings of the Tet Offensive, David J. Garms experienced violence and conflict innumerable times. The memories of this experience stayed with him throughout his career, even in subsequent foreign service postings, which were calmer in comparison. However, as we see in this “moment in U.S. diplomatic history,” his Sri Lanka assignment in 1986 served as a reminder of his past experience serving in countries affected by violence.



I took the picture in 2004, it shows a LTTE bike platoon north of Kilinochi (2004) Qz10, en.wiki 1980s Sri Lanka suffered from widespread violent, ethnic-based conflict involving the Velupillai Prabhakaran-led Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE, Tamil Tigers) and the Sinhalese-run Sri Lankan government. Although the Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord of 1987 was expected to create an end to the conflict, it continued until 2009. An estimated 100,000 people died as a result of this 25-year-long conflict. Amidst a violent setting, Garms played a role in helping rally financial support for peace and development in Sri Lanka.

David J. Garms joined the Peace Corps from 1964–1966, implementing agricultural programs in a small village in India. Following his work in the Peace Corps, he joined USAID and served in Vietnam, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Malawi, Sri Lanka, and Italy. David Garms recounts his adventures overseas in an interview with David Ruether on March 5th, 2021, which is preserved in the ADST archives.

Read David Garm's full oral history [HERE](#).

Drafted by Sophia Vita

Moments about the Sri Lankan Civil War: [The Sad Legacy of the Sri Lankan Civil War](#), [The Aftermath of the Sri Lankan Civil War](#) and [Other Takes of the Sri Lankan Civil War](#).

Excerpts:

"I was able to come up with a total of seventy-five million dollars for our pledge in less than three weeks."



Displacement in the Vanni (2009) trokilinochchi, Flickr

Rallying Financial Support:

During my time on the Sri Lankan desk, the most significant thing was the Indo-Sri Lanka peace accord, where Rajiv Gandhi and J.R. Jayewardene signed this accord to bring peace in the northeast with the Tamil Tigers. Thousands of Indian troops were sent to the northeast and reportedly, many Indian Troops were killed. After this heavy loss and with no peace in sight, Sri Lanka's President Ranasinghe Premadasa requested the Indians to leave. Then an interesting thing happened, I asked some Sinhalese about this. They viewed it as our guys beating up on the Indians. There's not a lot of love lost between the Indians and the Sri Lankans.

In response to the accord, the World Bank organized a pledging conference in Paris. I led the effort to come up with the U.S. pledge amount. I coordinated with the State [Department], AID, OMB [United States Office of Management and Budget], the embassy in Sri Lanka, USAID in Sri Lanka, and the Sri Lankan embassy in Washington. I was able to come up with a total of seventy-five million dollars for our pledge in less than three weeks. Fifty million was for grant funding and twenty-five million was for PL 480 Title I funding. I went to Paris for the pledging conference and the Minister of Finance, Ronnie de Mel, thanked me personally. I learned later that this was at the request of the Sri Lankan ambassador with whom I had a very good working

relationship. Three months after that, I went to Sri Lanka to discuss the implementation of the accord with the Ministry of Finance, the embassy, and the USAID mission. While in Sri Lanka the Ministry of Finance organized a luncheon for me. Again, this was at the request of the Sri Lankan ambassador. In 1986, after the United National Party won the election, President J.R. Jayawardene pushed for a market-based economy and major reforms. Our focus was on the private sector. We created a stock market and provided technical assistance for the privatization of government parastatals. We also provided funds for the Mahaweli region. Our emphasis there was on rice production with hybrid, high-yielding seeds developed at IRRI in the Philippines.

"Parts from the vehicle landed in your yard. And a friend of mine who lived nearby, found himself picking up body parts and undertaking the gruesome task of burying them."

Violence Close to Home:

After about three months and while I was there, the Tamil Tigers increased their activity. [Velupillai] Prabhakaran was the head of the Tigers. Another Terrorist group was the JVP [Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna], which translates into English as "the people's liberation front." It was a Marxist terrorist group that focused largely on increasing attacks in the south. The JVP received weapons from the Tigers, which was in an effort to start a second front. President Premadasa asked his Ministry of Finance And the Ministry of Defense to take on the JVP because he said he couldn't handle two insurgencies at the same time. And the government organized, well, it was apparently government policy but it was very under the radar, a program of sponsored death squads that went out and targeted JVP. It was reported that in the middle of the night, white vans would come out and capture these JVP officers. And after that, no one would ever hear from them again. And my wife, Barbara, told me of one case where she knew for sure that there was a guy who talked critically about the Sri Lankan government. The white van picked him up and he was never seen again.

During my time in Sri Lanka, the Tamil Tigers and the JVP assassinated several government officials. They assassinated the minister of defense, the minister for the Mahaweli, and the commander of the navy. The general in charge of the northeast was also killed. What happened was a vehicle with a bomb went to the headquarters for the northeast and detonated the bomb. Parts from the vehicle landed in your yard. And a friend of mine who lived nearby, found himself picking up body parts and undertaking the gruesome task of burying these. So, it was a very shocking situation

Q: The embassy and AID must've been very security conscious?

We've met almost every day to talk about security. And we were particularly concerned because we had a technical assistance team in Mahaweli. And the Mahaweli borders the northeast province. We kept talking every day to get updates on the security situation. At one point the ambassador was almost ready to bring all technical consultants back to Colombo, but he didn't do that. I kept in touch with the consultants every day.

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Peace Corps

India Volunteer, 1964–1966

Education

MPA at University of the Philippines, Manila, 1978

PhD in Philosophy at LaSalle University, 2005

Joined the USAID Foreign Service 1967

Go Cong, Vietnam — Rehabilitation Officer 1967–1968

Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Maldives — Senior Foreign Service 1985–1988

Rome, Italy— Chief Program Officer 1993–1996