

Sri Lanka

GEOGRAPHY

Sri Lanka, formerly known as Ceylon, is an island nation in the Indian Ocean, separated from India by a narrow strait. It is about the same size as Tasmania. The northern part of the island consists of flat and gently rolling plains, while the south central region varies from hilly to mountainous. The climate is very warm all year round (average about 30°C), except in the milder highlands. Monsoon rains drench the southwest (in May-August) and the northeast (in October-January).

PEOPLE

Most of Sri Lanka's 20.4 million people live in the southwest and centre of the island, three-quarters of them in rural areas. The largest cities include Colombo (the capital), Kandy, Galle and Jaffna. Sri Lankans include Sinhalese and Tamils, as well as Moors and smaller numbers of Burghers and Malays. The Tamils live mainly on the Jaffna peninsula in the north. Sinhala (74%) and Tamil (18%) are the two national languages, while English is widely used in urban areas as a "link language". Most Sinhalese are Buddhists and most Tamils are Hindus; about six percent of Sri Lankans are Christians and seven percent are Muslims.



Map courtesy of The General Libraries
The University of Texas at Austin

HISTORY

The Portuguese, the Dutch and the British took it in turns to invade the island between 1505 and 1948. They were interested first in spices and later in plantation crops such as tea and rubber. Independence from Britain was gained peacefully in 1948. The traditional name "Sri Lanka", meaning "resplendent island", was adopted formally in 1972.

The Boxing Day tsunami in 2004 devastated Sri Lanka's coastline, killing more than 30,000 people and leaving approximately 450,000 people displaced. Many of these people have since returned to their homes, with the support of rehabilitation programs coordinated by aid organisations including World Vision.

A 26-year long civil war between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ended in May 2009. The final stages of the war displaced nearly 300,000 people who have now returned to their places of origin after enduring multiple displacements and several months living in displacement camps.

ECONOMY

Economic development has been hampered by ethnic conflict, poverty and unemployment. Spending on the military during the course of the civil war left less money available for other needs. But the end of the conflict with the LTTE has opened the door for reconstruction and development projects in the country's north and east.



Chaminder and his family participate in a World Vision permaculture project aimed at improving household food production.

Agriculture employs more than 30 percent of the workforce. Due to land redistribution in the past, most rural families have at least a small plot on which to grow rice or vegetables. Tea is the leading export crop, grown on state owned plantations. Plantation workers (mostly Indian Tamils) are among the nation's poorest people.

Manufacturing, especially garment-making, has become a major income earner for Sri Lanka. The government has created free trade zones, where foreign manufacturers operate with fewer controls on their activities. At least one million Sri Lankans are unemployed.

Large areas of the native forest have been cleared, resulting in soil erosion. This deforestation also threatens the wildlife population.

LIVING CONDITIONS

Sri Lanka has made impressive progress in reducing child deaths, increasing life expectancy and achieving high literacy rates. Unfortunately, many families still live in poverty.

Most children are immunised against killer diseases such as measles and polio. However, many still suffer from malnutrition and from illnesses linked to contaminated water or poor sanitation. Malaria (spread by mosquitoes) has proved difficult to control.

Meals of rice with curry, vegetables and sometimes fish are cooked over an open fire or on a clay stove. Poorer urban neighbourhoods are crowded. Entire families may live in a single room, or several in a subdivided derelict house. The government is supporting slum upgrading and self-help building programs.

The north of Sri Lanka still bears the scars of nearly three decades of ethnic conflict and much work needs to be done to assist communities with rebuilding and rehabilitation efforts.



Through child sponsorship, many Sri Lankan children and their communities are enjoying improved access to educational opportunities.

Comparatively speaking...		
CATEGORY	SRI LANKA	AUSTRALIA
Population	20.4 million	21.5 million
Urban population	14.3%	89.1%
GNI per capita (\$US PPP)	\$4,886	\$38,692
Population living on less than \$1.25 a day (\$US)	14%	0%
Population with an improved water source (2006)	90%	100%
Adult literacy rate	90.6%	99%
Life expectancy at birth	74.4 years	81.9 years
Under five mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	15	6

Source: United Nations Development Programme
Human Development Report 2010

EDUCATION

Sri Lanka has given priority to education, and 90 percent of adults are able to read and write. Enrolment rates are high for both girls and boys, at primary and secondary levels. Schooling is free, but not all parents can afford books, and some children drop out or miss school because their help is needed at home or in the fields. Schools in isolated or low-income areas tend to be under-staffed and ill-equipped. Schools and universities have been closed from time to time because of conflict.

WORLD VISION AUSTRALIA IN SRI LANKA

- assists sponsored children, their families and communities with needs such as nutrition, access to clean water, healthcare and education
- provides training and small loans to enable women and men to increase their food production or set up small businesses
- promotes child rights
- in response to the 2004 tsunami, constructed more than 2,000 transitional homes and built or repaired 3,000 permanent homes
- in coordination with the government and other non-government organisations, responded to the needs of families displaced during civil conflict in 2009 and is continuing to help them rebuild their lives and return to normalcy.

Note: This World Vision resource may be photocopied for educational purposes, provided the source is credited. Updated November 2010.

© 2010 World Vision Australia. World Vision Australia ABN 28 004 778 081 is a Christian relief, development and advocacy organisation dedicated to working with children, families and communities to overcome poverty and injustice. Ref # 6222