

## Biography for Visaka Dharmadasa

For over two decades, conflict in Sri Lanka has been "destroying our country and destroying our people," says Visaka Dharmadasa, a peace activist from Kandy. Her son, a soldier in the Sri Lankan military, went missing after a Tamil Tigers attack on a military base in 1998. The thought of her 21-year-old son missing in action continues to trouble Dharmadasa today. "If you know your son is dead, you can at least mourn him," says Dharmadasa. "But now, for me, the issue is eternally pending."

The anxiety of not knowing what happened to her son motivated Dharmadasa to work for peace in Sri Lanka through the establishment of the Association of Parents of Servicemen Missing in Action and Association of War Affected Women. She has dedicated her life to ending the conflict in Sri Lanka, she says, so that "another mother doesn't have to lose a child."

From the establishment of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1976 to their military defeat in 2009, Sri Lanka was engulfed in Asia's longest civil war. The Tamil minority rebel group, feeling persecuted by the Sinhalese-controlled Sri Lankan government, sought to establish an independent Tamil state. Security in the northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka was particularly volatile as the LTTE, carried out suicide bombings and violent attacks on the Sri Lankan military and civilian population. The conflict divided communities and put many civilians in danger. In 2002, the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE signed a cease-fire agreement; however, violence resumed shortly after the 2005 national elections. Fighting between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers was accompanied by widespread human rights abuses as both groups targeted civilians to advance their political goals. The United States and European Union condemned the Sri Lankan military for the torture, rape, and killing of Tamil civilians, while the LTTE frequently employed suicide bombings, assassinations, and kidnappings as war tactics.

Dharmadasa felt the war in her country personally on September 27, 1998, when the LTTE attacked the Sri Lankan military base in Kilonochchi. The government of Sri Lanka reported 609 military personnel missing in action—including Achintha Senarath. According to his mother, Achintha was not given any identification tags: "The army didn't think it was important! If he had been wearing an ID tag, I would have known what really happened to him."; One month after the attack, parents of the missing soldiers gathered to hold a candlelight vigil to honor their lost loved ones. The parents continued to meet to share their painful stories and discuss what action they could take to help find their missing children.

These informal meetings led to the creation of the Association of Parents of Servicemen Missing in Action (PSMIA). The first formal meeting of the PSMIA was marked by a ceremony at the Gatambe Temple in Kandy, attended by an estimated 800 people. The members of PSMIA are dedicated to uncovering the fate of soldiers missing in action, advocating for the release of detainees, and promoting peace in Sri Lanka. Dharmadasa's bold leadership of the association resulted in regulation changes regarding those missing in action, including the issue of identification tags to all soldiers and the expedited registration and tracing process of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

As the PSMIA advocated for change within the Sri Lankan military, Dharmadasa took her passion for peace directly to the Tamil rebels. She wanted to meet with the LTTE to share the importance of identification for soldiers and to promote dialogue between the rebels and the government. At first, she struggled to arrange a meeting: "The LTTE had to be convinced that I wanted to benefit the people of both sides."; She wrote to the rebel leaders, sent messages through representatives of the international community, and finally, she met with the second-in-command of the Tamil Tigers. "I took seven women—no men," she says. "He was convinced after talking to us that we were sincere." Dharmadasa believes that contact and communication are essential in the peacebuilding process and notes that the PSMIA's meetings were "the first time that a civil society group had a meeting with the LTTE. This paved the way for the ceasefire and the peace talks."

As she continued communicating with the Tamil population, Dharmadasa began to understand the deep

pains that all women felt about losing their husbands and children in the war. She believed that having a forum for women to mourn their lost loved ones together would encourage communication and reconciliation. Under Dharmadasa's direction, the PSMIA established the Association of War Affected Women, which established a network of women who have lost sons or husbands from both sides of the conflict.

Since 2002, Dharmadasa and the Association of War Affected Women have engaged in many peacebuilding activities, most notably facilitating dialogue between the government and rebel groups. Dharmadasa attributes her success to her strong base of mothers from both sides: "A mother's voice is very influential when she says 'No more bloodshed.'"

Although the Tamil Tigers were defeated in early 2009, the Association of War Affected Women and the Parents of Servicemen Missing in Action continue to work for peace by bringing communities together, providing conflict resolution trainings for women, and assisting those affected by the 2004 tsunami. Recognizing that Sri Lankan women were still poorly represented in government—they hold only 5.9 percent of the seats in parliament and few senior government positions—in 2009 AWAW initiated a campaign to make the promise of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (which calls for the inclusion of women in conflict prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding) a reality. As Dharmadasa says, "You can't just say, 'Include women, include women.' You have to show the capacities of women." With this in mind, AWAW trained 25 women leaders on how to enable and encourage women to run for political office. This group is Team 1325, a coalition dedicated to preparing women to campaign for office and become effective leaders. So far, AWAW and Team 1325 have trained 500 women and have begun workshops with 750 more women from across Sri Lanka.

While Dharmadasa continues to mourn her missing son, she has focused her work on the future of Sri Lanka by building trust between her country's divided populations. She believes that women cannot be isolated in the peace process, and her work has proven that women are vital to a sustainable and just peace in Sri Lanka. She has spent the last ten years working with the government and the Tamil rebels and says peacebuilding is her true calling. "It's not just my work. I was pushed in this situation and I know in order to save the children of my country, I have to do this." (04.2010)

**Source:**

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