

# Reporting Sri Lanka – The Truth That Wasn't There

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*During the Sri Lankan civil war an international media ban meant the conflict was largely unrecorded or witnessed by outsiders. Most 'news' was either rumours or filtered by the government. [Polis Summer School](#) student Jasmit Shahi reports on a talk at LSE by a young student film-maker who managed to gain access in the immediate aftermath of the ceasefire. Guy Gunaratne, (@guygunaratne) is now head of interactive video platform Storygami and Creative Director of [CODOC](#), an award winning social documentary outfit dedicated to creating spaces for critical thinking through digital media.*



Guy Gunaratne in Sri Lanka

The Sri Lankan war was a conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the militant separatists, The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (the LTTE, also known as the Tamil Tigers). The LTTE fought to create an independent state called the Tamil Eelam in the north and east of the island. After 26 years of this horrific campaign, the Sri Lankan army finally succeeded in defeating the Tamil Tigers in May 2009.

Rumours and misinformation were rampant during the final stages of this war as all international journalists had been banned beyond a certain point of the border controlled by the military. Domestic journalists were also subject to harsh and often violent repression.

Though the list of casualties, civil, military and rebel were high, the military justified it as an end to terrorism as the Tamil tigers had been holding north eastern Sri Lanka ransom for over two decades. The opposition said it was in practice a kind of genocide as the government sought to eradicate all rebel forces.

Just a few weeks after the official end of the war three independent journalists were allowed past the borders to record the aftermath. Guy Gunaratne says he still doesn't know exactly why he was given access, but as a young person from the majority Sinhalese community he might have been seen as a less of a threat. Perhaps the military thought that the young independent journalists would be easier to control as they were unaffiliated to any network. Guy was fresh out of City Journalism school.

They were given exclusive access to the 'internally displaced camps' (IDP) of Menik Farm – then the most infamous IDP camps in the world – and to the ruins of Kilinochchi – the former Tamil Tiger capital. By the end of their journey they also became the first foreign journalists to witness the aftermath of the final battlegrounds in Mullaitivu and Chalai. They captured everything they saw on 30 hours of DV tapes, audio recordings and over 4,000 photographs.

The team of three journalists created a documentary from these tapes, "[The truth that wasn't there.](#)" The film is a snapshot of a country at a crossroads, amid diverging narratives in the wake of war. This film was later picked up by Amnesty International.

What they noticed when they witnessed the scene of the war was the lack of evidence. There were no bodies, no bloodshed. The [UN](#), based on credible witness evidence from aid agencies and civilians evacuated from the Safe Zone by sea, estimated that 6,500 civilians were killed, when the Safe Zone was first declared by mid-April 2009. There are no official casualty figures after this period but estimates of the death toll for the final four months of the civil war range from 15,000 to 20,000. It was very clear that a thorough cleanup operation had been conducted

before their visit. The military was trying to depict a story which they wanted the world to believe rather than the harsh truth of the bloodshed that had been conducted.



Access to Menik Camp

For the young film-makers the experience became a lesson in the limits and ethical dilemmas of filming suffering in such a difficult location. It ended up as a story told from their point of view about a journey through a war that is still in very real danger of being forgotten due to lack of information and false rumours.

*This guest blog by Polis Summer School student Jasmit Shahi (@JasmitShahi)*

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