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## Ransomed in the last redoubt

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A veteran Sri Lankan monitor, Lord Naseby sees an end in sight to the country's bitter ethnic strife – even if a worrying number of civilians remain trapped in the northern conflict zone. I have known Sri Lanka since 1963 when I worked there. The purpose of my visit in January was to assess the political situation and to do some private touring to revisit places I had not seen for 45 years.

One has to remember that tension between the minority Tamil community (18 per cent) and the other ethnic groups goes back to British rule when the civil service was purposely recruited from the minority on a sort of divide-and-rule strategy. One could go back to the first century AD and right through the centuries as the people of South India invaded, destroying what are now World Heritage sites at Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. I visited them both and what a wonderful job of restoration has been done by the Sri Lanka Department of Culture and Unesco. Post-independence, the tension increased under the two Bandaranaike governments in the '50s and '60s, when Sinhalese was made the only official language. Gradually it eased until today when both Sinhalese and Tamil are official; indeed I noted many road and other government signs in both languages. Moreover, it is now a requirement of people entering the civil service to be able to write and speak both languages. The language issue has now virtually been solved, but it caused today's problems. In 2005 President Rajapaksa was elected. He is astute and clear-headed: either the Tigers come back into the democratic fold of a united Sri Lanka or they have to be wiped out. Prabhakaran, the leader who is believed to have murdered, amongst hundreds, Rajiv Gandhi, the Indian president, played for time but foolishly fell out with his lieutenant, Karuna, who controlled the Eastern Province. When Karuna saw there was no future in Eelam (the native Tamil homeland) and came over with his fighters to the government side, the Tigers were effectively finished in the East. In 2008 when I saw the president, he said the army was now well trained and it would slowly engage the Tigers to weaken them until territory fell into their hands. This year I arrived just as the Tiger capital of Kilinochchi was taken. Remarkably, this advance was achieved without a single reported death of a civilian. Each day more and more ground is taken; the A9 road to Jaffna was reopened after 10 years. The only sinister element is that the Tigers have forced the Tamil civilians to go with them to provide a human shield. The UN estimates the numbers at 250,000 but others state 100,000, however nearly 50,000 have got out, despite the Tigers shooting some. Appeals have been made by the UN, the four Co-Chairs, the Red Cross and the Sri Lankan government to allow civilians to leave as the area of jungle held by the Tigers gets smaller and smaller – but to no avail. People ask why there can't be a ceasefire: the answer is that this terrorist group has held Sri Lanka to ransom for 25 years. They can surrender or be wiped out. The Tigers do not represent anyone – certainly not the Tamil people. What will happen when the Tigers are defeated? The Tamil people are extremely industrious. They will rebuild the north, providing the international community really does respond with the aid that has been talked about for years. Tony Blair's government promised to me that, once there was peace, Britain would be generous. I remain totally confident that elections will be held as soon as humanely possible and Tamils will be democratically elected to Parliament. I also believe that the sticking points of devolution to all the provinces will be overcome. I confess I do not understand why the prime minister and foreign secretary have decided to appoint a special envoy when we have a highly competent High Commissioner. It's about as sensitive as the foreign secretary telling the Indian government that the Mumbai terrorist attacks were due to the Kashmir issue. Author: Lord Naseby Lord Naseby is a Conservative peer and chairman of the all-party British-Sri Lanka group. Courtesy: housemag.co.uk