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## **Tale of war and peace in the 2004 tsunami**

COLOMBO/ACEH: For two of Asia's longest-running insurgencies, the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami offered a chance for peace in each.

In Indonesia's Aceh, one of the worst calamities in history led to a historic peace agreement, and the former rebels are now in power in a province once under military rule.

But in Sri Lanka, the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) saw the tsunami as an opportunity to re-arm, before both sides girded for a final fight in a quarter-century war.

While the catastrophe that killed 226,000 people around the Indian Ocean rim dealt both regions a deadly blow, their futures on the path of conflict may have come down to human nature rather than a force of nature.

"Hasan di Tiro, the GAM leader (in Aceh), was very determined to resolve the problem, and he was looking for every opportunity to end the fight," said Singapore-based terrorism analyst Rohan Gunaratna. "He was genuinely committed to peace." Not so with Tamil Tiger founder Vellupillai Prabhakaran, who was killed in the final battle in Sri Lanka's war on May 18.

"Prabhakaran was looking for every opportunity to militarily strengthen and hand the Sri Lankan government a military defeat," said Gunaratna, who is head of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism research at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University.

Urgent climate for peace Another big difference was that the tsunami caused far greater damage in Aceh, a mere 150 km from the epicentre of the 9.15 earthquake that triggered the monster waves, creating a more urgent climate for peace. Former US President Bill Clinton told Reuters in an interview this week to mark the fifth anniversary of the catastrophe that Aceh was so devastated the only way for the people to recover was to work together.

The damage in Sri Lanka's conflict areas was not as profound and they "didn't have to do enough together, so that they couldn't conceive of going back to another way of doing things", said Clinton, the UN special envoy for tsunami reconstruction.

Clinton, along with other international donor organisations pressed hard in Sri Lanka for an "aid-sharing mechanism" that would have brought the government and the rebels together as partners in rebuilding after the tsunami in the conflict areas. Both sides came to a half-hearted agreement after months of negotiations, but it was never implemented.

Aceh's rebels offered a ceasefire on Dec 28, 2004, four days after the tsunami, which allowed the Indonesian military to help coordinate a massive emergency relief operation.

With some \$7 billion in foreign aid pledged for Aceh's reconstruction, the GAM rebels then decided to make a peace deal, with former Finnish president Martti Ahtisaari as the mediator. International backing was crucial.

"The agreement was not just between GAM and the Indonesian government," said Adnan Beuransyah, a former rebel spokesman and now a member of the provincial assembly. "We supported the agreement because it involved the EU in sustaining the peace and integration process in Aceh." When the tsunami struck Sri Lanka, the LTTE were two years into a tenuous ceasefire with the government. But they were busy re-arming for a fight that would erupt into the decisive phase of the long-running civil war in late July 2006.

The flood of post-war tsunami aid money, and the LTTE's control of portions of northern and eastern Sri Lanka meant they could dictate terms to aid agencies and eventually set up the Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO).

The TRO was later revealed to be an LTTE fundraising front that took in tens of millions of dollars which were diverted to the rebels' coffers for building up an arsenal that could match that of other standing armies.

Washington banned the TRO for funding the LTTE, which was on the terrorism lists of the United States and more than 30 other countries.

"They seized their opportunity in the reconstruction," said Iqbal Athas, an analyst for Jane's Defence Weekly. "A lot of the NGO funds gave them the opportunity to consolidate their strength on the coastal stretches." "In any case, they were re-arming, and the tsunami had no effect on those plans," Athas said.

Missiles destroyed The tsunami did cost the Tigers some of their fleet of small attack boats and several caches of buried weapons.

Prabhakaran's former deputy, Vinayagamoorathi Muralitharan, told Reuters in an interview last year the deadly waves also destroyed a particularly prized set of rebel weapons – surface-to-air missiles (SAMs).

Only a handful remained in the hands of the Tigers in the final two years of the war, and military officials said those were kept to protect Prabhakaran.

That left the LTTE prone to helicopter gunship attacks the Sri Lankan Air Force carried out against rebel positions to soften up resistance before troops advanced on the ground, which proved a deadly advantage for the government.

By August of 2005, the Aceh rebels were ready to sign a historic peace accord and

participate in the reconstruction of their oil- and timber-rich province.

In Sri Lanka by then, the \$3-billion post-tsunami aid sharing agreement, signed in June by a reluctant government under pressure from Clinton and international donors, had fallen apart, after the Supreme Court halted its implementation.

After that, the LTTE set up its TRO front and both sides hunkered down for war.

“One looked to harness the tsunami opportunity to build peace, the other group exploited the opportunity to tap into the financial resources that came as a result of it,” Gunaratna said.—Reuters