PREFACE

Ethnic conflicts are essentially internalised military affairs. They emerge out of accumulated fears about the future and after long experience in the past of various types. Ethnic conflict stems from identity, when one group’s identity is seen as a threat to another’s identity and existence. It was generally considered as an internal affair of the country, where history plays a dominant role in providing a base for construction of nationalism and identity. Ethnic conflict results in material destruction and threat to civilian life, leading to humanitarian emergency situations.

Humanitarian emergency situations have become more frequent, more widespread, more complex and long lasting. The current humanitarian crises are largely caused by internal conflicts or natural disasters, resulting in the emergence of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), evoking a strong international reaction. International non governmental organisations and international relief agencies come forward to provide aid and assistance to such victims.

The international humanitarian relief agencies are guided by the principles of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), and their humanitarian activities are based on the principles of dignity and respect enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). They try to give security to all persons who are victims of conflict, which is a primary principle of UDHR. They uphold the humanitarian values and rights of civilians. Their basic functions are to provide aid and assistance to victims of conflict, to protect refugees and IDPs, to preserve
the physical integrity of the victims of conflict and to protect the inalienable human rights of civilians

An ethnic conflict gets internationalised due to intense violence, resulting in immense suffering of the civilians, creating humanitarian emergency situations. To minimize their sufferings, the involvement of international humanitarian organizations and humanitarian relief agencies is inevitable. The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is one such internationalised conflict; it has involved many international humanitarian organizations to meet the humanitarian emergency situation and to reduce the sufferings of the victims of the conflict.

The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka has attained an international dimension because of the external involvement for humanitarian reasons and conflict resolution. Many international governmental organisations (IGOs) and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) were involved in protecting human rights. To name a few: the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (OXFAM), Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE), and United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR).

The present study, “The Humanitarian Role of International Relief Agencies in Sri Lanka’s Ethnic conflict Since 1983”, is a modest attempt to analyse the origin and the various dimensions of the ethnic conflict, focusing especially on the humanitarian role and activities undertaken by the international relief agencies such as CARE, OXFAM, UNHCR and ICRC in Sri Lanka to mitigate the sufferings of the civilians.

The main objectives of this study are: To assess the ethnic violence and to analyse how it caused suffering to innocent people, resulting in a humanitarian emergency situation in Sri Lanka; to analyse the humanitarian responses of the international relief agencies such as ICRC, CARE, OXAM and UNCHR in Sri Lanka, and to assess their role in mitigating the suffering of the victims of the conflict; to analyse the impact of the involvement of the relief agencies on the conflict and the protection of human rights in Sri Lanka.
The present study seeks to test the following hypotheses:

1. The nature and intensity of an ethnic conflict determine the scope of activities of relief agencies.

2. International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) or International Humanitarian Agencies (IHAs) are involved in an internal conflict mostly because of the failure of the national actors to protect human rights.

3. Prolonged and active involvement of international relief agencies in a strife-torn country may lead to erosion of state sovereignty in the long run.

The study is divided into six chapters. Chapter One analyses how ethnic conflicts get internationalised. It gives a theoretical framework describing the conditions and circumstances under which the humanitarian agencies get involved in the conflict.

Chapter Two provides a historical background to the ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka. It discusses the various factors that led to the humanitarian emergency situation. It also deals with the origin of violence and discusses the changing dimension of violence and its consequences for the people in the country.

Chapter Three gives a brief profile of the relief agencies like ICRC, CARE, OXFAM, and UNHCR. It discusses the circumstances and conditions that led to the involvement of these relief agencies in internal conflicts. The focus would be on the aims, objectives and mandates of these relief agencies and their work in the conflict situations.
Chapter Four will deal with the emergency relief provided by the relief agencies under study in Sri Lanka. It analyses the activities of the relief agencies to succour the victims of the conflict. It presents details of the basic amenities, such as food aid, shelter and healthcare provided by these relief agencies. It also discusses some of the income-generating programmes undertaken by these relief agencies to alleviate the sufferings of the victims of violence. Different relief agencies have undertaken various types of income-generating projects.

Chapter Five analyses the conditions of refugees in Sri Lanka. It describes how the relief agencies like ICRC, CARE, OXFAM and especially UNHCR are trying to help the people who have fled their homes and become refugees because of the ethnic violence in Sri Lanka. It mainly focuses on the repatriation and reintegration process of the Sri Lankan refugees. While summing up the discussion, the concluding chapter assesses the humanitarian work of these relief agencies in Sri Lanka.

The study adopts a historical and analytical method. It is based on primary and secondary source materials. The primary source material includes official and legal documents of the ICRC, CARE, OXFAM and UNHCR (Annual reports, Newsletters, Asia-Pacific Reports, and Donor Reports). The secondary source materials include books, articles, periodicals and newspaper reports. The study needed a field trip to Sri Lanka.

The researcher undertook a month-long field study trip to Sri Lanka in December 2004. Unfortunately, just then Sri Lanka was hit by tsunami. There was a colossal problem in getting connected to the people and the officials concerned.
since everyone was trying to provide and send relief to the tsunami-affected people. Already, there were a number of restrictions in getting access to the data pertaining to the study, as the ethnic conflict was a sensitive issue for the government. Not only was the data not easily forthcoming, even the limited available literature posed the problem of confusing data, especially about the amount of relief delivered and the amount invested. Additionally, the exact figure of IDPs was not clear.

Though interviews were held with several NGO activists and individuals besides some political leaders and academics, many wanted to remain unidentified. Especially the NGO personnel in Sri Lanka were tightlipped. Even though a separate questionnaire was prepared for this purpose most of the time the NGO personnel and the officials were reluctant to fill the questionnaire and give any kind of details.