The air was thick with heat as we rolled into the provincial capital of Killinochi in Northern Sri Lanka. My eyes were glued to the scene outside. It had taken us twelve hours driving north from the capital city of Colombo to enter this new world. Over the course of the drive the lush landscape of giant figs and palm trees that dominated the south had been slowly replaced with scrub forest and grassland as we drove into the arid North. The roads, clogged with cars in every other part of the country, were teeming with bicycles. We moved slowly through the mess, many bikes were carrying two or three passengers. Another marked characteristic of Killinochi was the contrast of old and new. New houses with fresh paint stood tall next to their decrepit peers, whose bullet hole peppered walls seemed to moan with the pain of the past. This pain was hard to detect in the faces of the people who calmly moved from place to place weaving in and out on bicycles. There was joy in the air and a feeling of rebirth and peace. And yet as we kept moving we passed a gaudy 40ft caricature of exaggeratedly muscular soldiers holding assault rifles toward the sky that seemed to visibly oppress all who walked by. There was so much history here. I felt like I was finally going to answer questions that had been burning in me about the Sri Lankan Civil War.

I had been working at the FAO in Colombo as a Communications Intern for more than a month. My time had been divided between working in the office during the week and traveling on weekends with my co-intern Yash. In the office I had been reading about the various projects the FAO was undertaking. They all seemed related to the agonizing 30 year civil war that had come to a forceful close only two years previously. Now the FAO was playing an important role revitalizing agricultural production: strategically rebuilding ancient irrigation networks, providing livestock to families and capacity building for farmer organizations—among other work. On the weekends we would take the train to wildlife parks filled with elephants, walk in awe through ancient cities and snorkel in vibrant coral reefs. Almost no signs of war showed themselves when we traveled. Everywhere I was met with kindness and many facets of Sri Lanka seemed like paradise to me. The island had so much packed into such a small space, mountains, beaches, a fascinating history, ancient ruins, game parks and landscapes that blew me away. The national government was catering the economy toward tourism, and it seemed to be working. Foreigners from Europe, China, Japan and Australia flocked to new seaside resorts; game parks and cultural sites in increased numbers each year. I would return from blissful weekend trips and read about human rights violations committed by both the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan Government. I had trouble believing that this peaceful country I had come to know had been in a thirty-year conflict that had claimed more than 50,000 lives over its course. A longing to see the north and better understand the countries complicated past had been building inside me. The sad bullet-holed walls relieved this tension, as they were a reminder of the pain being suppressed elsewhere in the nation.

The suppressed pain and cultural tensions had colonial roots. Tamils, the minority Hindu population in Sri Lanka, had been favored under British rule. When the British left the country in the 1950’s the Sinhalese, the majority Buddhist population, came to power and put in place policies that favored their people. The Sinhalese made the national language Sinhala, which made it difficult for Tamils to rise through the education system. This of course created enormous unrest among Tamil populations, some sought political avenues others called for force. Multiple Tamil groups formed to fight for equality. Out of this unrest the LTTE emerged and forcefully silenced all those who disagreed. The LTTE began carrying out attacks in the early 1980’s all of which were met with counter attacks by the Sri Lankan Government or Sinhalese extremists. Both sides targeted civilians, this eye-for-an-eye mentality escalated until in 1983 the LTTE launched a major offensive and caught the Sri Lankan Government off guard. The LTTE controlled and governed a portion of the North until 2008, setting up schools and a
A separate government system. Their goal was to secede and create a Tamil state in the north and east of the island. This goal was shattered in 2008 when the Sri Lankan Government went against the international advice and sent 400,000 troops to annihilate the LTTE and all affiliated with it. The last two years of the war were the bloodiest, coming to a close in 2009. The remaining LTTE forces were put into rehabilitation camps, many reside there to this day.

We had headed to the North to create short editorials about different projects the FAO was undertaking. Projects always rely on statistics for outcome assessments. Our boss thought it would be refreshing for the donors to read anecdotes from farmers along with statistics and photographs. This allowed us to talk with people who had lived under the LTTE regime. We would ask farmers basic questions about what they had received and then ask about general issues with the project. An emerging theme was that government workers, who often collaborated with the FAO, were not keeping promises.

Up until this trip the LTTE seemed wholly injudicious but nonetheless impressive at executing attacks and maintaining power. We heard very mixed accounts of what life was like under the LTTE. They had created impressive institutions in a very short time and were undeniably good at executing goals. Multiple people commented that there was no corruption within their government and that the LTTE institutions worked efficiently. The LTTE forced prisoners of war and peasants to plant teak trees; huge areas of land had been reforested. Moving through the North we passed acres of forest planted by the LTTE. It was also illegal to cut trees without permission so much of the area remains forested. These are perhaps the most positive aspects of the LTTE whose brutal tactics are known around the world.

The LTTE assassinated both the Sri Lankan prime minister and the Indian Prime Minister during the war. Indian Tamils were the major funding source for the LTTE and after the assassination of their prime minister the funding base shrank. The LTTE also pioneered the beloved technique of strapping explosives to belts or vests and suicide bombing targets. They would later teach this to members of Al-Qaeda—what a lovely contribution to the world. Families under the LTTE were required to give one child to service. The LTTE also actively recruited and utilized child soldiers.

Much of the North still looks like a battlefield. Huge areas are still being demined; entire villages lay in ruin and bullet holes add character to almost every wall that existed during the war. Throughout the war and before the 2008 offensive many families fled and the resettlement process is still ongoing. The need for United Nations and specifically the mandate of the Food and Agriculture Organization is clear, while the government is helping to rebuild the north it still considers the area a threat and anti-Tamil sentiments still permeate national policies. The government still has an enormous military presence of 400,000 soldiers in an area whose total population in just under a million. The most common reason for families not resettling is military occupation of their former land. Without the UN working to revitalize agricultural production, this area would be much more prone to slipping back into conflict.

For me the highlight of my work here was learning the history of this conflict and gaining a much deeper appreciation for the work of my co-workers. Their dedication and work in the north is serving as a vital glue to hold Sri Lanka together. Being apart of that effort is an experience that will constantly influence my future work. I will always remain grateful to Peter Hobbs for helping me apply for the position, the FAO staff who went out of their way to make my stay meaningful and everyone who made this trip possible.