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Tamil Refugees and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka

As of the next issue, Professor Michael Lanphier assumes the post of editor of *Refuge*. I have held the editor's position for over ten years. It is somehow appropriate that my final issue deals with ethnic conflict, in particular ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. In the early eighties, many refugee claims from northern Sri Lanka were denied at the time since Canada only gave status to refugees affected by the riots in Colombo. This special issue tells why. But in the early eighties, the West was unaware of the insurrection in the north and the army repression under way. My report of my field trip was published in *Refuge* as well as in the *Toronto Star* and led directly to a change in refugee policy vis-à-vis Tamils who were fleeing northern Sri Lanka.

There is a second reason why this issue is important. Increasingly, the majority of refugees around the world are products of ethnic rather than ideological conflicts. Most states in the world are multi-ethnic polities with significant nontitular minorities who may have a compact pattern of settlement and strong cultural identities. When these differences are exacerbated by injustices, by

efforts that increase inequalities and social-economic disparities, or by efforts to redress those same inequalities and social-economic injustices by discriminating against a successful minority, then we have the conditions that can lead to conflict. If the political structure of a state favours the hegemony of one dominant group rather than promoting an ethni-

cally mosaic society with unity arising out of diversity, then the underlying conditions will certainly lead to open confrontation. Ethnonationalism can be used by political power brokers within a community as a basis for mobilization, particularly in a time of crisis. History can be constructed to reinforce ethnic identities *at odds with those defined as the*

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