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Sri Lanka: A Photographic Essay

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Sri Lanka: A Photographic Essay

Since 1997, the author has worked for MAG (Mines Advisory Group), documenting the impact of landmines and explosive remnants of war on countries such as Iraq, Laos, Lebanon, Sri Lanka and Sudan. Through a multimedia approach, Sutton creates photo exhibits and films to educate the public on landmines, unexploded ordnance, and small arms and light weapons.¹

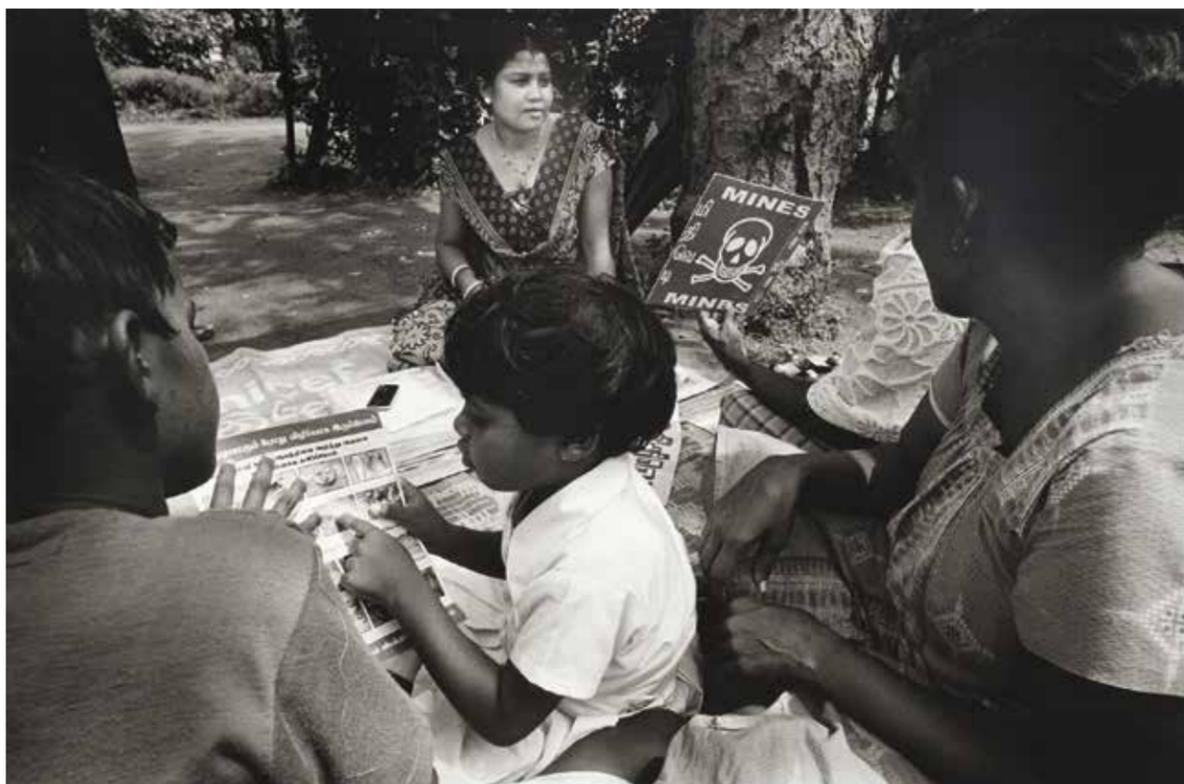
by Sean Sutton [MAG]

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a separatist group in Sri Lanka, began fighting against the Sri Lankan government in an effort to create an independent state for the Tamil people in 1983. The conflict evolved into the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983–2009), which killed an estimated 75,000 people.²

Landmines and other explosives were used throughout the conflict, leaving behind large-scale contamination in the northern and eastern provinces where the majority of fighting occurred. The contamination not only severely restricted internally displaced persons from returning to their homes but also delayed reconstruction and development activities.³ *The Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor* reports that many Sri Lankans in the north live near, if not next to, mine/explo-

sive remnants of war contaminated land. The contamination blocks access to vital agricultural land. As a result, people may ignore signs clearly warning of ERW contamination in order to meet their basic needs.⁴

In July 2011, the National Steering Committee of Mine Action, Sri Lanka's national mine action authority, determined that an estimated 255.22 sq km (98.54 sq mi) of hazardous areas remained for clearance. Since the 1980s, 21,993 landmine casualties have been reported, including 1,419 IDPs (injured or killed). A survey conducted in Sri Lankan IDP camps determined that a large number of IDPs have mine-related disabilities.⁴ In 2009 Sri Lanka had 38 casualties (6 killed/32 injured), down from 79 casualties in 2008 (11 killed/68 injured).⁵



Mine risk education programs were crucial to reducing landmine casualties in Sri Lanka. Sinnapandivirichchan, 2011. All photos courtesy of the author.

Documenting the Changes

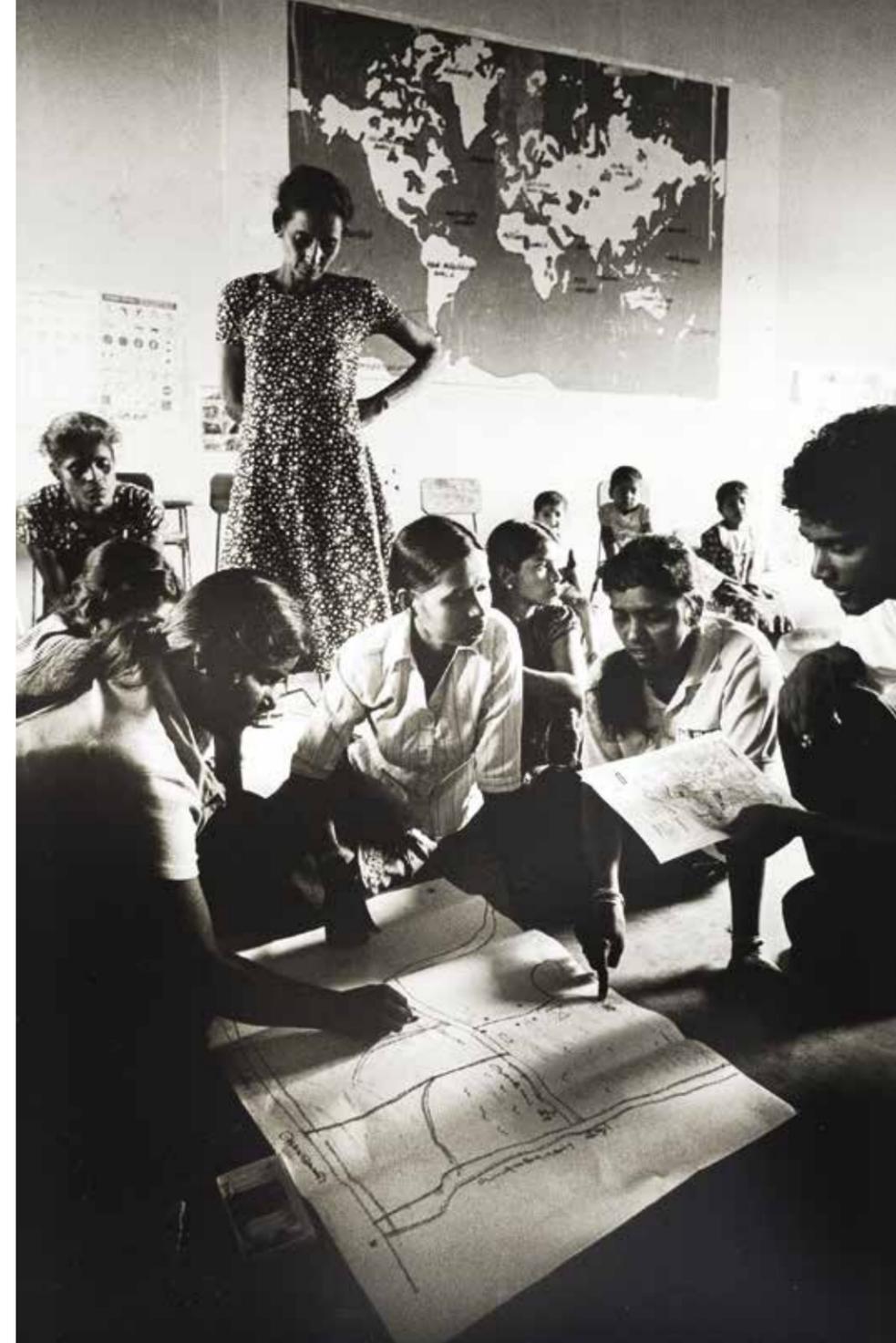
I traveled to Sri Lanka a number of times in the past 10 years. I first visited in 2002, not long after the ceasefire between the government and LTTE. The situation then was desperate; people were repeatedly displaced and suffering tremendously.

Sadly, however, the conflict re-ignited in 2006, forcing the population, particularly in the north, to move ahead of the violent offensives and carry what few belongings they could. Three years later, the Sri Lankan Civil War finally ended with the defeat of LTTE. According to MAG's estimates, more than 360,000 people were displaced and their homelands left contaminated by landmines and countless other dangerous items.⁶

In February 2011, I traveled to Mullaitivu district in the northeast of the country where the final battles took place. Some areas showed signs of life as recent arrivals from the camps re-established their homes, but most of the region remained desolate, abandoned and destroyed. We passed through military checkpoints and on toward the coast through overgrown villages. With the exception of the odd wild dog, stray cow or patrolling soldier, the atmosphere felt eerie and lifeless.

Other than the army, the only people allowed into the region were deminers and survey staff. I saw the teams from MAG hard at work surveying areas for signs of explosive contamination and then clearing landmines and other unexploded ordnance. Without a doubt, their work was vital to ensure that people could return safely to their homes. It was a race against time as the local inhabitants desperately longed to return home and build a better life.

Early in 2012, I returned to Mullaitivu district and the difference was extraordinary. Where once I saw utter desolation, I now saw bustling communities



Members of a MAG Safer Villages Committee meet to discuss and draw maps showing high-impact areas to be prioritized for clearance. MAG's beneficiary focused approach ensures the priorities of affected communities are addressed, 2011.

with crowded markets and well-attended schools. Everywhere I looked signs emerged of greater prosperity and a new sense of purpose; I had difficulty imagining that it was the same place.

I am very fortunate in my work, spending time with communities documenting what life is like for them. Some-

times the stories are tragic and hard to comprehend, but this was quite different and a joy to experience.

The last Sri Lankan IDP camp was closed, and its people relocated to their homes 25 September 2012. Many IDPs do not live in camps and have yet to return home or resettle.⁷ MAG, Danish



The pickets in the foreground each show where a landmine was found. Navaseelan, shown with his family, says: "MAG cleared the area where our home is and is now clearing land for farming. We are very happy and feel safe here with our children," 2012.⁶



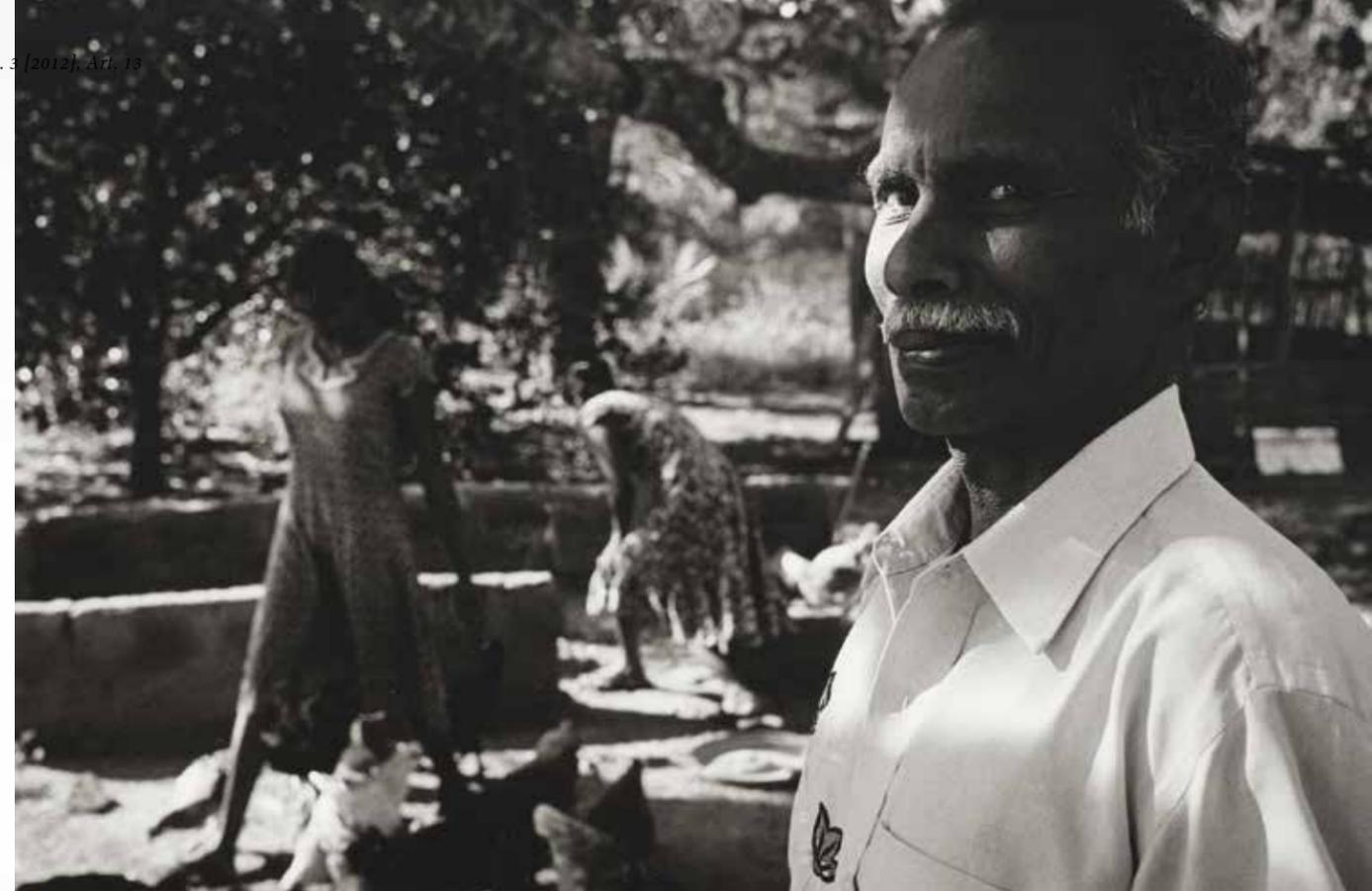
Landmines found in Mullativu, Sri Lanka, are defused and placed safely away from detonators for later destruction, 2011.

Demining Group, Devlon Assistance for Social Harmony, the Sri Lankan Army, *Fondation Suisse de Déminage* (Swiss Foundation for Mine Action), The HALO Trust, Horizon, the Milinda Moragoda Institute for People's Empowerment, Saravatra, the United Nations Development Programme and UNICEF are clearing the remaining areas.⁸

MAG Helps People

Navaseelan owns nearly seven acres of land in Devapuram village, Sri Lanka. MAG cleared his land, making it safe to use, and he is growing crops and providing for his family for the first time since 2007.

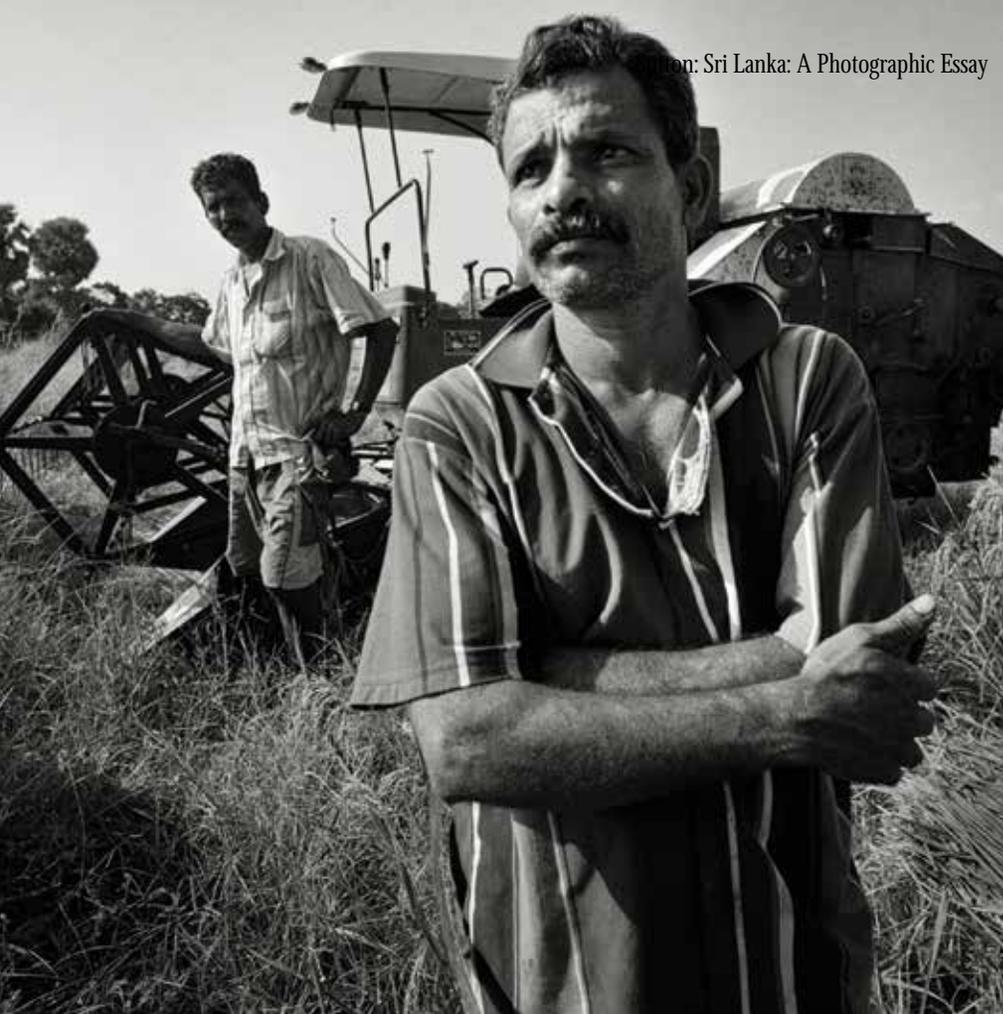
Benjamin Romavl, a wiry man in his 60s from Sinnapandivirichchan, told me his incredible life story. When shelling began outside their home, he and his family packed their vehicle with their belongings and fled. They moved from place to place, remaining in one area for as short as three days or as long as six months, depending how quickly the fighting caught up to them. They often



Benjamin Romavl with his daughters at his home in Sinnapandivirichchan village, Sri Lanka, 2011.



Benjamin Romavl, a wiry man in his mid-sixties with an incredible life-story told me, "Soon it will be like it was before and we are very happy. One hundred and fifty three families are here now (in their village) only because of MAG. Otherwise how could we be here? Our lives would be a question mark."



Following clearance by MAG demining teams, villagers harvest crops from their land for the first time in four years in Mannar, Sri Lanka, 2012.

stayed in areas without access to food, water or medicine. The family finally found refuge in an IDP camp where they spent one year and four months. Romavl ended his story with, "Soon it will be like it was before, and we are very happy; 153 families are here now (in their village) only because of MAG. Otherwise, how could we be here? Our lives would be a question mark."²⁶

MAG's goal in Sri Lanka is to protect conflict-affected individuals by facilitating recovery activities. By contributing to the urgent requirement to survey priority areas and clear them of landmines and unexploded ordnance, MAG enables post-conflict reconstruction and development interventions. MAG's program in Sri Lanka is supported by AusAID, the Canadian International Development Agency, Stichting Vluchteling and the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA).²⁷

See endnotes page 66



Happy children enjoy a safe playground once again. A new school was built in Sinnipandivirichchan village, Sri Lanka. Six unexploded projectiles were found at the site and destroyed by MAG teams, 2011.



Sean Sutton is an award-winning photojournalist; his well-known pictures show the impact of landmines and ERW on communities and have been published and exhibited all over the world. His book documenting how UXO affects people in Laos was runner-up for the Leica European Publisher's Award. Sutton is MAG's marketing and communications mttanager and has worked for the charity since 1997.

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