



# Sri Lanka's Undeclared

**The BBC's Nick Bryant visits north-east Sri Lanka, an area fast becoming a key battlefield as fears grow that troops and rebels are preparing to resume full-scale hostilities.**

**NICK BRYANT**

**O**UR visit to Trincomalee was a tale of two journeys. We were prevented from entering the port because our arrival coincided with a suspected Tamil Tiger grenade attack on a police checkpoint, which prompted the security forces to seal off the road.

Our departure was complicated by a virtual blockade of the city by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the extreme nationalist party, whose half-drunk supporters had surrounded our vehicle earlier that day and threatened to beat us up.

On the way in, we witnessed the ruthlessness of the rebels, who have come now to express themselves almost exclusively through violence and appear to be measuring their success in the blood of members of the security forces.

On the way out, we saw the brute force of Sinhalese nationalism. The attack on the police checkpoint was viewed by the security forces as almost routine - one of over 1,000 violations of the 2002 ceasefire agreement by the Tamil Tigers, the Colombo government alleges.

The suspected rebels waited until dark before hurling two grenades. One exploded metres short of the checkpoint, injuring a policeman. Another landed on the sandbag-protected bunker, but failed to detonate. Then the checkpoint came under a hail of gunfire, a trademark of rebel attacks.

We arrived a few minutes later, just after the army had launched their search for the suspected rebels. Two military motorbikes flashed by with gun-toting soldiers perched precariously on the back. In an area dense with palm trees and undergrowth, and cloaked by now in almost complete darkness, their chances of success did not look good. Sure enough, they failed to flush out the attackers.

When we finally reached our hotel, the music in the lobby was a panpipe version of the Simon and Garfunkel classic *Bridge Over Troubled Water*. Only five days before, the Sea Tigers had launched a suicide bomb attack on a Sri Lankan Navy patrol boat nearby in which 13 sailors were killed.

It seemed a particularly unfortunate choice. Trincomalee, where Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims are almost evenly split but the government is in control, is fast becoming a key battlefield in what feels more and more like an undeclared civil war.

Twenty-four hours after we arrived, the JVP started to enforce its three-day strike, which was called partly in protest at the recent upsurge in rebel violence. Early that Thursday morning, we had set off from our hotel to meet up with the Sri Lankan army, who had promised to allow us to film one of their patrols.

But our way was soon blocked by a group of JVP strikers, who took great offence at our attempts to film the empty streets and barricaded shops. As our vehicle was brought to an abrupt halt,