

we were quickly encircled. Some of the strikers covered their faces with scarves, one of them gripping a hacksaw in his right hand.

Others started making calls on their mobile phones to summon reinforcements. One of the more thick-set protesters reached through the driver's window and seized control of the keys. Others threatened to harm our cameraman unless he handed over the tape - something which we refused to do.

Instead, we reluctantly agreed to erase a short portion of film - deleting enough to satisfy the strikers' drunken self-appointed censor, but retaining enough to give viewers a brief sense of the mob's violent intent.

The shots we didn't manage to capture were of the policeman standing in front of the vehicle and soldiers standing close by. Throughout the stand-off, they did nothing to intervene. That day in Trincomalee the mob was in the chair.



Civil War

A few hours later, a major in the Sri Lankan army told us he could no longer guarantee our safety. There had been more JVP threats. Two hours later, we left. The ceasefire agreement may not yet have broken down but there is an alarming level of lawlessness and unrestrained violence in the disputed north-east.

In Trincomalee alone, the Tigers are attacking at will. JVP hardliners can issue threats with impunity. And the Sri Lankan military stands accused of the extra-judicial killing earlier this month of five young Tamil students, whom ceasefire monitors agree were shot



Chief Negotiator and Political Strategist of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Anton Balasingham (2R) walks with LTTE supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran (L) and LTTE political leader SP Thamichelvan (C) after arriving in Kilinochchi.

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.

through the head in execution-style killings.

By stepping up attacks, the Tamil Tigers clearly hope to provoke the government into a bloody retaliation so that the country's new president, Mahinda Rajapakse, will be blamed for the breakdown of the ceasefire.

Right now, the president says he remains committed to the truce. There's little doubt that we will make further journeys to Sri Lanka over the coming months for the crisis seems almost certain to escalate. And there's little doubt those visits will be punctuated by violence and civil strife.

The government and the Tigers fully understand the dreadful consequences of a return to civil war. But this is a country with a blood-soaked history, where reason has all too often given way to rage.