A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a bundle of green grass. The person is wearing a light-colored, possibly white, long-sleeved shirt and a red patterned skirt. The background is a lush green field of tall grass. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

In the southern part of the island, the state road leaves the coast at Hambantota and heads inland, first among the farm fields and areas, then through the forest, among tall hills on the boundary of Yala National Park.

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It then turns back to the sea and comes to Pottuvil, a town whose name would not mean anything to anyone were it not the town closest to Arugam Bay, a place that, among those for whom surfing is somewhere between a sports passion and a mystical religious experience, has become an essential destination because of the superb wave conditions at the entrance to the bay.

The road goes north along the coast from Pottuvil, where the tsunami struck straight on, without any obstacles damping its power: the wave in some cases went inland for kilometres before turning back and carrying away whatever it had not destroyed on its way in.

The great difference between the eastern and southern parts of the island are immediately apparent. Except for Arugam Bay with its little hotels on the beach, tourism has never come here, and the landscape, the road and the houses reveal that the level of backwardness and poverty was high here even before the tsunami. The towns that succeed one another, often crunched up against the road running close to the shore in that narrow strip of land that separates the ocean from the lagoons in back, are small rural communities, towns of peasants and fishermen, with a few shops and cafes whose available goods could all be carried off in a tuk-tuk. In the evening, a few isolated lights, some electric light bulbs, more often an oil lamp. The road is narrow and doesn't widen until the outskirts of Batticaloa, the largest centre on the coast, halfway be-



tween the south and Trincomale, where the northeast begins.

Inland, the road passes endless rice paddies divided into small fields barely marked by the edges of the irrigation canals, built and maintained with care. Where the rice paddy ends, and where there is no swamp, this is the kingdom of water buffalo and cows: the latter are scattered everywhere, the former concentrated in the lowest areas where the water or at least mud remain to provide cooling in the drier periods of the year – the forest approaches the coast and the road.

Various ethnic and religious groups live together here: there are Buddhist Sinhalese, but not many, while most of the population is Tamil, Hindu by religion, and whole towns are inhabited by purely Muslim communities,



consisting of Tamils who converted or of groups descended from the “Moors” who arrived on the island hundreds of years ago, like Thirukkovil and Akkaraipattu, where the Department operated. More than live together, it might be said that the island’s tiresome socio-religious geography has led the various communities to coexist, marking the land with towns where the entire population, or much of it, shares culture, origins and religion, or other small towns where there’s a mosque in the south and on the other side a Hindu temple. Normally in these places relations among the various communities do not lead to any major tensions in the people’s everyday lives. What they really all share are the living conditions in an area where the economy has gone beyond bare subsistence or dignified poverty for only a few, but this has not been enough to create solidarity. Rather, the opposite has occurred: each group, each community has a history, a way of being, a sense of belonging that is different from those in the neighbouring village, who are perhaps even of the same ethnic group. Living in a country where ethnic mistrust is atavistic often means making it a criterion for judging any situation: The consequence is that it is never possible to generalise, and it makes no sense to expect similar reactions even if the context is apparently the same.

In this system of severely isolated nuclei, the only sign of globalisation is the television antennas, perhaps battery-powered, that rise even above the huts and the temporary shelters.

Traffic here is quite different from that on the western side of the island: there are many trucks and farm vehicles, cars are less common, there are even fewer tuk-tuks, while a motorcycle or even just a bicycle may become an ambulatory business or means of transport for merchandise and foodstuffs.

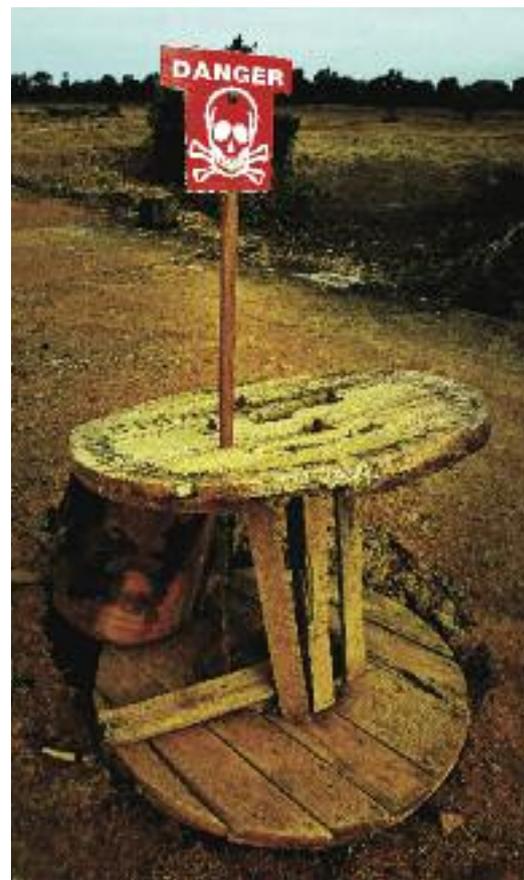
The war passed through this area without any major battles, except for the one that marked the Sinhalese conquest of Batticaloa, which left behind the obvious and constant presence of the army, with patrols in every town, roadblocks, camps defended with barbed wire, sentry boxes, sandbag bunkers built across the only road which was deviated for civilian traffic into odd byways of beaten earth and deep potholes. Much later than in the west and with fewer international agencies involved, the damage from the tsunami is starting to be repaired even here, but there is still an incredible number of shelters and temporary accommodations housing whole families, and you can't be sure whether the rebirth is being held back by the poverty that was here before or that owing to the many months of blockade and isolation imposed by the war. South of Batticaloa towards Kantale to the west, there are whole emergency displaced camps just like the ones that sprang up in early 2005. Two minor differences indicate that these were not homeless people hit by the tsunami but Tamil families kicked out of the war zones: the camps are built farther inland, farther from the road and from sight, and the faces of the people, their eyes, reveal that it was not nature but man who decided who was to live here.

Between Batticaloa – which became the home base for many international organisations and humanitarian agencies after the tsunami – and Trincomalee, the conflict has been more violent and more sad. The coast road, which in the south has less traffic, mostly public vehicles with UN









license plates – after the bus drivers, who don't slow down and stay in the middle of the only lane, the most incautious and aggressive drivers are those in the big white off-road vehicles with satellite antennas and sporting United Nations flags – is barred at a certain point. To get to the north you have to make a big detour inland and then head back down towards the sea again, unless you have special permission from the military authorities.

If you get it, you pass through what until now was the latest scene of battle in the conflict between the Tamil Tigers, who had a strong presence in the area, and the Sri Lankan armed forces. Now here, where at the time of the tsunami anyone bringing aid passed first through an army roadblock and then a Tigers roadblock farther on, in a provisional division of the territory into areas controlled first by the state and then by the rebels, there is a genuine military occupation in effect: the road ceases to exist for long stretches, replaced by a beaten earth trail winding between deep potholes and small bridges over many waterways; in the towns you can see the signs of destruction and shootouts; at Vakarai, a town where the fighting was especially fierce, the rubble of war is piled under the sun alongside the tsunami's rubble, which no one has



given authorisation to remove in expectation of more events. On the ruins left by the wave one sees the obvious signs of bullets and hits. Not far from here the Department was supposed to build a school, but it was impossible to do: in the end, others made do as best they could, with the hasty, rushed approach of things that may not last long, fixing the roofs that once sheltered the classes. Now the area is surrounded by a police encampment.

Despite these events and the great difficulties they entailed, in the area between Pouttuvil and the towns south of Batticaloa a significant portion of the Department's programme was carried out. Thanks to the NGOs, which were able to take advantage of the truce to provide concrete assistance and achieve positive results, and to the commitment of the Department, with its directly implemented projects, it was possible to bring to a conclusion major construction projects in situations deemed impossible by others.





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projects