



# After the Storm : Memories of War, Dreams of Peace



A PUBLICATION OF  
**CARITAS SRI LANKA -SEDEC**



Compiled by:  
Ms. Niranjani Roland, Ms. Oshadi Senuri  
and Ms. Uthpala Hewawitharana

Edited by :  
Mrs. Dharshika Kadirvel, Mr. Priyantha Fernando  
and Rev. Sr. Ushani Perera

Cover Page: Mr. Terrance Codipili  
Design & Layout: Mrs. Malar Raviendran

Funded by MISEREOR

Published by **Caritas Sri Lanka – SEDEC**

2025

All rights reserved.

# Table of Contents

• Foreword	i
• Acknowledgement	iii
• Bishop Chairman's Message	iv
• National Director's Message	vi
• Introduction	viii
1. Journey of Survival and Healing	1
2. We never knew he would live	3
3. From Warrior to Caretaker	5
4. 18 Years Without Answers	7
5. A Mother's Strength through War & Loss	9
6. From Anger to Understanding	11
7. Surviving War, Embracing Harmony	13
8. Life Amidst Fear, Finding Harmony	15
9. A Soldier's Duty	17
10. Shepherd in the Crossfire	19
11. Leading through Fear to Hope	21
12. Single Mothers' Journey through War & Adversity	23
13. A Mother's Tragedy	25
14. Journey from Fear to Faith	27
15. In the Shadow of War	29
• Journey of Healing and Reconciliation by Caritas Sri Lanka - SEDEC	31
• Conclusion: Paths toward Peace and Reconciliation	34

# *Foreword*

**"If you want peace, you don't talk to your friends. You talk to your enemies."**

- Bishop Desmond Tutu -

The fifteen narratives of the survivals of the ethnic war in Sri Lanka, penned in this book, reverberate the immense sufferings of the innocent civilians and their journey of healing as well. These healing narratives open a space for the readers to memory and reconciliation.

This storytelling process liberates the victims who experienced the inner wounds in narrating these stories again and again. When the victim opens up a space through these healing narratives, it will open up another door for the oppressor to repent and enter the healing process. Each story begins with the first experience of the wounds of war by taking the reader on an unending journey with the inner peace of forgiveness. The readers of these fifteen stories will be able to touch upon the feelings of the victims in their own personal lives in post-war situations.

Through these pages, we hear the voices of mothers searching for their children, families rebuilding from nothing, survivors carrying both visible and invisible wounds, and former combatants seeking a new path of healing and social responsibility. These voices may speak of pain, but they also carry a profound message of forgiveness, coexistence, and hope.

Caritas Sri Lanka, guided by its mission of compassion and service, has stood with war-affected communities throughout their long journey from despair to hope. This book is a reflection of that ideal, which all victims and perpetrators wish to achieve.

As we look toward the future, these narratives call us to remember the past with honesty, to honor the resilience of those who endured, and to commit ourselves to building a society rooted in justice, peace, and love. May this book serve as both a mirror and a guide, showing us the wounds of yesterday and pointing us toward the healing of tomorrow.

**Mr. Wijith Rohan Fernando**  
Chairman  
Office for National Unity and Reconciliation

## *Acknowledgment*

*At the outset, Caritas Sri Lanka wishes to express its deepest gratitude to all the survivors and storytellers who courageously shared their personal experiences. These stories of pain, endurance, and resilience form the heart of this book, giving voice to those whose lives were deeply affected by the conflict. By sharing those stories with the world, they have sown the seeds of understanding, empathy, and healing that this booklet seeks to nurture.*

*Our heartfelt gratitude needs to be expressed to the Chairman of Caritas Sri Lanka Most Rev. Dr. Harold Anthony Perera, for the continuous guidance, support, and encouragement throughout this journey. We also wish to acknowledge the Diocesan Directors and staff, the translators, editorial team, cover page designers, and everyone who contributed to their tireless efforts in helping and accompanying us to publish this book. We appreciate the Chairman of the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR) for sharing his message for this booklet.*

*We hope that this booklet will serve as a reminder that from even the deepest wounds, seeds of peace can grow, bloom, and flourish when tended with care, courage, and compassion.*



## *Message from the Bishop Chairman*

It is with deep joy and pastoral concern that I send this message for the publication of After the Storm. This book stands as a meaningful testimony to the pain of conflict and the hope of reconciliation. The voices it gathers remind us that war leaves behind wounds that last for generations, but it also shows us that healing, forgiveness, and fraternity are possible when we open our hearts to one another.

As the Word of God teaches us, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9). These words invite us to be instruments of peace, not only in moments of great conflict, but in the daily choices we make to live with respect, compassion, and justice. In the spirit of Pope Francis's encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, we are called to see each person as a brother or sister, to cross boundaries of division, and to build a world rooted in love and fraternity.

The stories collected in this book are not only memories of suffering, they are seeds of hope. They challenge us to reflect on the cost of violence and to recognize the gift of peace as a treasure to be safeguarded. They invite us to "overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21) and to become artisans of peace in our own communities.

I commend the efforts of all who have contributed to this publication - the storytellers who shared their painful yet

courageous journeys, the editors who worked with dedication, and the supporters who made this initiative possible. May 'After the Storm' inspire every reader to walk together with compassion, to reach across divides, and to embrace one another as members of one human family!

It is my prayer that this book will not only be read, but also lived - as a guide for reconciliation, a source of reflection, and a call to renew our commitment to build a just and peaceful society. May God bless all who contributed to this book, and may its message guide us closer to a future filled with justice, reconciliation, and lasting peace!

**Most Rev. Dr. Harold Anthony Perera**  
Chairman, Caritas Si Lanka - SEDEC  
Bishop of Kurunegala



## *Message from the National Director*

With a heart full of gratitude, I share this message for 'After the Storm'. This book emerges from the lived experiences of individuals and communities whose lives were deeply touched by conflict, yet who have also found the strength to heal, to rebuild, and to embrace reconciliation. Their voices remind us that true peace is not merely the absence of violence, but the presence of trust, empathy, and shared humanity.

The significance of this work lies not only in preserving memory but also in opening spaces for dialogue and understanding. Each story acts as a bridge - connecting the pain of the past with the hope of the future, and inviting communities to journey together toward reconciliation. In this sense, the book becomes both a mirror and a map: a mirror reflecting our shared experiences, and a map guiding us toward healing and unity.

It is specially meaningful that 'After the Storm' is being launched during the Peace Day Programme, where survivors, community leaders, faith representatives, and peacemakers come together for dialogue and reflection. In such settings, the stories contained in this book are not just to read but also to live - inspiring empathy, promoting understanding, and encouraging practical steps toward peace within our communities.

As we reflect on these voices, I pray that we may all be inspired to continue the mission of reconciliation in our daily lives. As the Psalm reminds us, "Seek peace and pursue it" (Psalm 34:14). May this book encourage us to listen with open hearts, to act with patience and courage, and to persevere in building a society where divisions are healed, trust is restored, and peace is lived as a way of life.

I extend my heartfelt appreciation to all who contributed to this publication: to the individuals who courageously shared their experiences, to the editorial team who worked with dedication, and to the sponsors and supporters who made this effort possible.

It is my hope and prayer that 'After the Storm' will stand as a beacon of hope, a resource for dialogue, and a guide for generations to come, inspiring all who read it to walk together in compassion and embrace one another as brothers and sisters in one human family.

**Fr. Luke Nelson Perera**  
National Director  
Caritas Sri Lanka - SEDEC

## **Introduction:**

War leaves scars not only on the land but also on the hearts of those who survive it. In Sri Lanka, nearly three decades of civil conflict uprooted families, shattered communities, and tested the bonds of trust between neighbours. The echoes of violence linger long after the battles have ended, in the memories of those who lost loved ones, in the silent pain of those displaced, and in the fear that persists in everyday life. Yet, amidst the darkness, the human spirit has demonstrated remarkable resilience, courage, and the capacity to heal.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God." - Jesus, Matthew 5:9

These words of Christ remind us that true peace is not the mere absence of conflict but the active pursuit of justice, compassion, and forgiveness. Reconciliation is a deliberate choice-a commitment to love even when past wounds run deep. It is an act of courage to face those who have hurt us, to extend mercy, and to rebuild trust that has been broken.

Guided by Gospel values, Caritas Sri Lanka envisions a society where peace, justice, reconciliation, and forgiveness steer every action. Through its work with conflict-affected communities, Caritas nurtures the human spirit, empowers the marginalized, and supports individuals and families as they rebuild their lives. It is a ministry of hope, offering practical support, emotional healing, and spiritual guidance to those who have endured the storms of violence and displacement.

'After the Storm' brings together 15 stories of resilience, survival, and hope. These narratives not only reflect the reality of war's devastation, but also the strength of ordinary people to rise above pain, the power of forgiveness to restore relationships, and the courage to rebuild lives. From mothers and fathers who endured unimaginable loss to former combatants striving to find new paths, each story is a testament to the enduring human spirit and the transformative power of the Gospel-inspired compassion.

A significant number of narrators from the North and East wished to remain anonymous due to the sensitivity of the events they referred to or because they preferred to retain or safeguard their privacy of those mentioned in their narratives. All storytellers requested that pseudonyms be used for key persons mentioned in their narratives. We have honoured all these requests.

As you read these stories, may the lives of these individuals remind us that reconciliation is possible and necessary. May they inspire us to act with mercy, to sow seeds of understanding, and to nurture peace in our communities. Even after the fiercest storms, hope endures, hearts can heal, and a world shaped by justice, forgiveness, and love remains within reach.

## **Story I:** **"Journey of Survival and Healing"**

The war had turned even the most ordinary paths into places of danger. Luxmy, from Batticaloa, now 66 years old, recalls the fatal day in 1995, which completely changed the direction of her life. "It was an ordinary walk near my home, but in an instant everything changed. A sudden blast tore through the silence, and when the smoke cleared, I realized that my right leg was gone". Luxmy had accidentally stepped on a landmine laid by the army to safeguard the train route, which left her disabled for the rest of her life.

She was rushed to the hospital, where doctors saved her life but were forced to amputate her leg. After 45 days of recovery, an organization supporting war survivors fitted her with an artificial limb, giving her the chance to walk again. Over the past three decades she has received five prosthetics. This was a great relief to Luxmy, beside the monthly allowance of 10,000.00 LKR she receives for her medical expenses. Her work as a potter, once her main source of income, became almost impossible to continue, leaving her struggling to provide for herself.

The scars Luxmy carries are not only physical but deeply emotional. She still wakes from nightmares and has sought counseling to cope with the trauma. Her suffering was compounded in 2006 when her younger son was abducted on his way to the kovil and never returned. Despite filing complaints with the police, the ICRC, the Human Rights Commission, and other organizations, no trace of him was ever found. Even today, when she sees young men helping their mothers, she is reminded of her son. "It is a pain that never fades," she says softly.

Luxmy's journey shows that the impact of war extends beyond physical injuries, it shatters livelihoods, separates families, and leaves invisible scars of trauma and loss. Yet Luxmy chooses peace over bitterness. "I am grateful that life is calmer now, that I can live without fear," she reflects. "I do not wish to hold on to grudges. Let the past rest, while the wounds slowly heal." She believes true healing is possible only through understanding and reconciliation between communities.

## **Story 2: "We never knew he would live"**

August 3, 1990, began like any other Friday in Kattankudy of Eastern Sri Lanka. As dusk fell, the residents gathered for evening prayers at the mosque. Among them was Saleem, who left home at 8:15 p.m., unaware that the night would change his family's life.

In the midst of prayers, armed LTTE cadres stormed the mosque and opened fire on worshippers. The sound of gunfire ripped through the stillness, leaving bodies and chaos in its wake. Families rushed in panic, calling out for loved ones. Fathima, Saleem's wife, recalls the terror: "It was sudden and terrifying. We heard the shots, and everything blurred after that."

Panic set in among the neighbours as people rushed to the mosques, shouting out for their relatives. Hours later, her mother-in-law returned home carrying only Saleem's wristwatch and the few rupees that had been in his purse, handed over by a neighbor who had rushed him to hospital. Saleem had been shot in the leg; bullets tore through muscle and bone. "We never knew if he would live," Fathima remembers. "Everything changed overnight."

For months, recovery was slow and painful. Saleem remained bedridden, dependent on Fathima for even the smallest tasks—bathing, feeding, dressing his wounds. She bore the weight of fear, uncertainty, and responsibility, supported by her brother's presence.

Each year, on August 3, their family joins others to pray for the dead and honor the survivors. Today, at 65, Saleem still carries

bullet fragments in his leg. The nerves are damaged, the pain is unrelenting, and steady work is impossible. Yet he persevered, first weaving and selling clothes on the pavement, and later buying a three-wheeler to earn a modest living.

Despite the suffering, bitterness has not taken root in Saleem and Fathima. “I cursed the LTTE for what they did,” Fathima admits. “But my anger is only against the armed groups, not against the Tamils. We still live together, celebrate each other’s festivals, and remain friends.”

Fathima emphasizes the need for healing and reconciliation, which requires remembering without hatred. “We need to forgive, but we can never forget,” she says. “The memories of that night will always remain, but we share our story so others may understand why peace matters.”

## **Story 3: "From warrior to caretaker"**

Vanitha, now 49, has lived through the weight of war. Once a fighter in the LTTE, she has transformed her life into one of service, dedicating herself to training and empowering differently abled people in Mullaitivu, one of Sri Lanka's most war-affected districts. Today, through a church-run charity, she offers vocational training in sewing, carpentry, and beauty culture.

"I train differently abled people so they can live with independence," she explains. "The war touched us all. Some lost their limbs, some lost their families. Each of us had to begin life again from nothing."

Vanitha's own journey began in 1993, when, at the age of 19, she was drawn into the LTTE through school propaganda. "They told us we had to fight for justice. We felt we owed it to ourselves," she recalls. After three months of intense training, she was deployed to different units and took part in major operations such as 'Oyatha Alaigal' (Unceasing Waves). Although trained to carry weapons, she often found herself tending to the wounded, a role that foreshadowed her life's calling.

It was in the camp that she met her future husband. When the war ended in 2009, both were detained and later placed in a government rehabilitation program, where they received counseling, life skills training, and support to reintegrate into society.

Life after release was not easy. Former combatants faced suspicion and stigma, and women in particular endured isolation,

unemployment, and unaddressed trauma. “Some still see us as a threat,” Vanitha admits. “We try to move forward, but society does not always allow us to.”

Despite this, she chose to walk a different path. In her spare time, she visits war widows and grieving mothers, sitting quietly with them, listening as they share their stories. “Many of them still have nightmares,” she says. “Some women had not spoken for years. But when I sit with them, little by little, they begin to open up. Healing takes time.” Her work is a reminder that communities in the North and East continue to carry invisible wounds.

Vanitha believes meaningful reconciliation is possible. “We all did what we were instructed, Tamils, Sinhalese, Muslims,” she says. “But now we must forgive each other. That is the only way forward.”

## **Story 4: "18 Years without Answers"**

*The night of October 6, 2007, changed Sharmila's life forever. Armed men in civilian clothes stormed into her home in Trincomalee and took her husband away. She has not seen him since. For eighteen years she has lived with silence haunted by questions with no answers, carrying grief that refuses to fade.*

*At the time, Sharmila was 29, a young mother of two children. The men claimed they were taking her husband to the police station, accusing the family of harboring illegal alcohol. In the shock of that moment, she quickly noted down the van's number and rushed to the police station, where the officers dismissed her. The number, they said, did not exist.*

*In an instant, eight years of her marriage was torn apart. Her son was only eight, her daughter just four. In the days that followed, she searched everywhere she could, moving from police station to police station, checking prisons such as Boossa, and filing complaints with the ICRC and the Human Rights Commission. "I went to every possible place, hoping to trace him," she recalls.*

*Sharmila's pain did not end with his disappearance. It grew heavier after years of uncertainty, trauma, and abandonment. Determined not to remain silent, Sharmila joined associations for families of the disappeared. She marched in protests and stood in silent vigils across the North, East, and Colombo. "Even then we were watched, threatened, intimidated," she says. "It was a constant emotional struggle."*

Left alone to raise her children without a decent income, Sharmila had to face impossible choices. At last, she made the painful decision to migrate overseas as a housemaid. Speaking now from Saudi Arabia, her voice carries both strength and sorrow: “If my husband were with me, I would not have had to leave my home and my kids. I’m in shock. I left my daughter with relatives,” she added.

Even after the eighteen long years of struggle, she has not given up hope. Despite the silence, despite the unanswered questions, Sharmila still believes her husband may return. Her story is echoed by thousands of women in Sri Lanka’s North and East, mothers, wives, and daughters bound together by loss, yet unwilling to forget.

## **Story 5: "A mother's Strength through War and Loss"**

Anne lives in Welioya, with her two daughters. Before the war, her family's life was secure and comfortable. They owned land, more than 200 goats and cows, and enough to provide a stable future. But when the conflict reached their village, all of it was left behind as they fled for safety.

With the help of a parish priest, Anne's two daughters were placed in a home in Moratuwa where they could study in safety. Anne, meanwhile, endured wave after wave of violence. In 1999, fighters dressed in uniforms resembling the Army attacked her village. Panic and confusion swept through the people. She fled with others to the next village, leaving behind everything familiar.

From then on, life became a cycle of escape and survival. "Whenever we heard a gunshot, we ran into the jungle," she remembers. One day, she stumbled upon a bunker where a family of four, a mother, father, and their two children lay dead, their lives brutally cut short. Soldiers later warned her not to return home, telling her the area was too dangerous.

Anne's suffering stretched over nineteen years, thirteen of them spent in a camp. Returning to her native village was no longer possible, and restarting life seemed beyond reach. The president at the time granted half an acre of land along with financial assistance for war victims to build a new house. Even so, the weight of loss remained. When she went to the police to report her missing property, an officer she once knew remarked that they had

believed she had poisoned herself and died. Anne responded with quiet defiance: “God gave us this life not to end it, but to carry it on despite the challenges we face.”

In time, her husband passed away, leaving her to shoulder life’s burdens alone. Yet Anne found healing in forgiveness. “By the time the war ended, all my pain, worries, and anger had faded. I do not hate Tamils now,” she said. “We need forgiveness and the strength to rise above loss, so that peace and reconciliation can guide families toward new beginnings.”

## **Story 6: "From Anger to Understanding"**

In the fields of Ampara, Senarath has spent his life as a farmer, his hands shaping the soil that sustains his family. Yet his life has also been marked by the scars of war. During the height of the civil conflict, he took up duty as a 'Gram Aarakshaka' (village protection member), charged with protecting his community from the violence that swept relentlessly across the Eastern Province.

One memory remains seared into his mind. On a day when he and other men were away on duty, the LTTE attacked a nearby house where a religious ceremony was taking place. Thirty-seven innocent lives were taken in a single moment. Across Ampara, nine villages fell victim to such attacks, leaving countless families in mourning. Even today, the memories of that day cast a shadow across his heart.

The violence did not even spare sacred spaces. Senarath recalls how thirty-one Buddhist monks were massacred. The grief and rage that consumed him were overwhelming. "I was angry and wanted revenge," he admits. "Each time I saw a Tamil, I wanted to strike back."

Yet time became his teacher. Slowly, reflection revealed what anger and hatred only fuels the cycle of suffering. With courage, Senarath chose a different path. Today, he has transformed his anger into a dialogue of reconciliation. "I don't feel the same, and I regret the way I behaved then. Now we go to Tamil villages, talk with the Tamils, and live with them in harmony," he shares.

Today, Senerath finds comfort in the ordinary things: the ability to travel without fear, to tend his fields, and to share life with neighbors of every community. He has discovered the strength of forgiveness and the quiet power of letting go. “Even though something like that might happen again, I don’t think I would get angry, because I understand now. What I feel now is that we should live with everyone in peace and harmony as one nation,” he said, reflecting the transformative power of forgiveness.

## Story 7: "Surviving War, Embracing Harmony"

Ramani, now 68, lives in Trincomalee with her husband. Their days are marked by frailty and struggle. She has lost the sight in one eye, and her husband endured seven long years battling colon cancer before finally recovering. The modest subsidies they once relied on were discontinued, leaving them dependent on daily wage work, coconuts from their small garden, and occasional support from their two married daughters. Illness forced Ramani to leave her cleaning job, taking away the little stability they had.

Her memories of the war remain vivid, carved into her mind like scars that do not fade. When her children were small, the family often fled into the jungle to hide, clutching one another in fear. Going into town was far too dangerous; survival meant silence and shadows.

The war's toll struck her family deeply. A nephew serving in the army was gravely injured near Alimankada. Both his kidneys were damaged, leaving him disabled for life. Now, his own son has taken his place in uniform, continuing the service his father could not.

Amid loss and hardship, there were small moments of support. Ramani once received government aid, including a water pump for her garden, until it was stolen. Even with such setbacks, she pressed on, determined to keep her family afloat.

Looking back, her voice carries both relief and wisdom. “I am grateful the war has ended,” she says softly. “I have no hatred toward the Tamils. We live side by side, and even in church we stand together, working in harmony.” Her words remind us that peace is not only the absence of violence but the courage to embrace one another across old divides.

In her acceptance, forgiveness, and simple vision of coexistence, she shows how reconciliation can take root in ordinary lives and flourish in daily acts of respect and compassion.

## **Story 8:** **"Life Amidst Fear, Finding Harmony"**

Jacintha moved to Mullaitivu in 1988 from Chilaw in search of a better life. As the years unfolded, she was drawn into the heart of the war's devastation.

A mother of three sons and one daughter, she is now left to shoulder every burden alone after her husband's death six years ago. Daily wage labor and fishing in the nearby lake became her only means of survival.

Her memories of those years are heavy with fear. She recalls how her family ate their meals as early as four in the afternoon before retreating into the jungle to sleep, always alert to the threat of attack. "We could not live as a family, because there was no security," she remembers. To endure, families would huddle together under a single roof, drawing strength from one another's presence.

Some moments remain engraved in her mind. She recalls the day the LTTE bulldozed their village and abducted two families. The community, believing they were gone forever, even prepared for an almsgiving in their memory, until relief swept through them when the families returned alive.

Scarcity was a constant companion. Food, water, and electricity were often lacking. Children were among the most vulnerable, some losing their lives in the 1993 attacks. Amid this darkness, however, solidarity emerged. Temples sheltered families, while the

Red Cross and the Catholic Church distributed food and clothing. Pregnant and nursing mothers endured hunger, yet somehow found the strength to keep their children alive.

Jacintha herself turned to the land for survival. She planted manioc and sweet potatoes to feed her children. Government assistance came in as small allocations of rice, sugar, and a modest financial allowance, but eventually even that ended. After the war, life began to shift. She received two acres of land, which she now cultivates with the help of her children.

Reflecting on the past, her voice carries both gratitude and sorrow. “We live peacefully now,” she reflects. “Yet the war stole so much. My children could not continue their studies. I lost opportunities that might have changed our lives. I could not even baptize my children. I lost many things, but above all, I lost time. Time that can never return. I pray that such suffering will never return, and I try to live in harmony with everyone.”

## Story 9: "A Soldier's Duty"

Nalin was born at a time marked by fear, bloodshed, and the echoing cries of those caught Sri Lanka in the grip of war. As he grew, hope felt distant, slipping through the lives of many who, like him, yearned for peace. Dreams were overshadowed by the relentless conflict between armed groups and national forces, and the nation seemed to hold its breath under the weight of uncertainty.

From an early age, Nalin felt a profound sense of responsibility for the land he called home. Driven by duty and a desire to protect his country, he joined the Sri Lanka Air Force on 7 January 1997.

His journey began at Ekala Camp and continued at Diyatalawa, where he learnt discipline and improved operational skills. Following further training in the supply section, he was deployed to Mankulam Camp as part of Operation Jayasikuru, stepping fully into a life defined by service and sacrifice.

Life at the camp was intense. Nights were punctuated by alarms and gunfire, and each day brought the uncertainty of survival. "Some days, our only food was the dry fruit of mango trees, and our water came from small holes in the earth," he remembered.

Nalin's journey carried him across Sri Lanka, serving in camps at Batticaloa, Anuradhapura, Morawewa, and Trincomalee. In 2007, he was stationed near the sacred Madhu area, entrusted with safeguarding temples and protecting civilians who fled the fighting. "Even in the hardest times, we tried to care for people

*seeking safety,” he reflected. His service continued relentlessly until the final days of the war in 2009.*

Among the many memories, one stands apart. On his eldest daughter’s birthday, he took part in the operation that ended the reign of the armed group’s leader. Triumph and relief collided in that moment, a professional victory intertwined with the hope of a freer nation.

After 22 years of service, he retired, having spent his final years at Katunayake, Palavi, and Ratmalana camps. Reflecting on the long separations from family, sacrifices, and pain, he expressed deep gratitude for the present:

*“Today, I am happy to see people of this country living together in peace. Whatever happened during the war, now people can move freely, without fear, and that is what matters most.”*

## **Story 10:** **"Shepherd in the Crossfire"**

*Father Noel, a Catholic priest from Jaffna, endured the distressing final days of Sri Lanka's long civil war. His ordeal began in 2007, when mounting violence forced him to move from Kilinochchi to Udayarkattu, where he assumed responsibilities at a local church amid growing despair. Caritas HUDEC distributed dry rations to displaced families, yet survival was doubtful. "People shared the little they had," he recalled. "But the situation was bad and many were barely surviving."*

*As the war escalated, he was forced to flee again, this time to Iranaippalai. The sound of shells became a grim language, each explosion a signal of destruction. He and five other priests ministered to terrified civilians trapped between warring forces. "One priest was killed, another disappeared," he remembered. "We managed to escape, but families with children could not."*

*When the military advanced, Father Noel and the surviving priests were taken into custody. They were soon interned in a camp where nearly 80,000 people were confined in appalling conditions.*

*Despite the adversity, Father Noel remained steadfast in his calling. Carrying his baptismal records, holy oils, and a prayer book, he baptized children, celebrated Mass, and restored fragments of hope to those around him. "Later, other priests joined us," he said. "Together we kept faith alive, even in darkness."*

The scars of that time remain unhealed. “I cannot overcome those memories,” he admitted. “Passing through those places brings everything back. My mind will never forget.” For him, true reconciliation demands truth. “If the perpetrators are not held accountable, reconciliation is not possible. Without truth, peace has no foundation.”

## **Story 11:** **"Leading Through Fear to Hope"**

Anura has lived in Mullaitivu since August 14, 1984. Life changed one November morning when gunfire shattered the silence. As president of the village development society, he set out to investigate with a few others. Soon, they saw armed men approaching, while terrified families from nearby places came running, without proper clothing, crying out that their homes had been attacked.

He gathered his wife and three children and fled to the school in Parakramapura. It was the beginning of a long struggle for survival. By 1999, relentless violence forced families to build bunkers. Government support to build these bunkers was meager, about Rs. 15,000, while villagers were forced to spend much more, digging into their scarce savings to construct shelters reinforced with mud and foliage, each strong enough to hide twenty people. Today, those silent bunkers remain as scars of a time when fear lived in every household.

After returning from displacement camps, the divisional secretary sought help to bury bodies. Anura joined others in this painful task. Eighteen people lay face down, all shot in the head. In nearby Kalyanipura, nearly thirty more were killed. In another tragedy, LTTE fighters forced villagers into a room and set off a bomb killing thirty three people. Only one survived from the incident.

Recollecting memories, he reflects that the past, though bitter, has been set aside. "We have forgotten our painful experiences, and

*now we are friendly with the Tamils, so we have to educate this to our coming generations and provide them the opportunity to live with other ethnicities in harmony”, he says. He recalls that even before the war, their lives were deeply connected.*

*At hospitals, Tamil doctors had treated them with kindness, sharing forgiveness, friendship, and the strength to rebuild trust, so that peace and reconciliation can become the foundation of tomorrow.*

## Story 12: "A Single Mother's Journey through War and Adversity"

Stella's life in Kilinochchi was once filled with joy, preparing meals for her family, listening to her children's laughter, and sharing quiet moments with her husband. That harmonious atmosphere was shattered by the war. Now, at 52, she carries the weight of survival: a widow, a mother of five, and a woman marked by scars, yet unbroken.

In 2009, as the war escalated, Stella's family fled their home under ceaseless shelling. Her eldest daughter was wounded, and she clutched her other children in desperation, praying they would live through the night. "We had nights upon nights in bunkers," she recalls. "No water. No food. Only the thought that each moment might be our last."

Her darkest hour came when her husband didn't return after promising to lead them to a safe departure by boat. "A shell struck near the lagoon," Stella says softly. "I searched among the bodies, terrified. I didn't want to see him dead! He wasn't there and he never returned home."

Left to raise her children alone, Stella endured the harshness of displacement camps, where survival depended on sacrifice. She labored for a few rupees, often giving up her own meals so her children could eat.

The war devastated villages like Stella's, and women bore the brunt. Many became widows, while others, like Stella, became mother and father, guardian and breadwinner. Displacement,

trauma, and disregard by society were their new normal. Even years after the war ended, the struggle continued quietly and in pain.

Yet Stella refused to be broken. With the support of humanitarian agencies, she began again, first a hut, then a home garden, and eventually a proper house. Her children returned to school. Slowly, life took root once more.

One memory fills her with quiet pride: her daughter's marriage to a Sinhala Buddhist man. In a country scarred by ethnic division, their union symbolized reconciliation and hope. "It was not easy for her," Stella admits. "But I stood by her. The future must not mirror the past. We must heal and move forward."

Today, Stella lives in calm, though she avoids films that depict war; the memories are too raw. Her strength, however, remains undeniable. "War took so much," she says. "It could not take away our will to live, to love, and to rebuild."

## Story 13: "A Mother's Tragedy"

Rani, now 73, carries the scars of Sri Lanka's three-decade conflict in her own life story. Her world collapsed in 1987 when her husband: a food vendor, trader, and father, was shot dead in Trincomalee by an unknown gunman. He had supported the family through a vegetable transport business and a small food shop. Rani was only 35, with young children clinging to her, when she suddenly became a widow.

She tried to keep the shop alive, but survival proved impossible. By 1990, burdened by debt and despair, she left for Kuwait as a domestic worker, entrusting her children to her sister. For five years she sent money home, trying to hold her fractured family together from afar.

War, however, claimed her children. In 1989, her teenage son was abducted by an armed group. Though her sister managed to save him, the ordeal scarred him deeply. He later joined the LTTE and was killed in battle at Murasumottai in 1994. Rani never saw his body. "I lost him to the war," she says quietly. Two years later, her daughter also enlisted, swept by the promises of protecting Tamil interests. She died in 1997 at Puliyanikulam during Operation Jayasikuru.

When Rani returned home after her daughter's death, displacement followed her. From Vanni to Trincomalee, then again in 2006 to a refugee camp in Tamil Nadu, India, survival became her only constant. "The sun was harsh, the camp was unforgiving, but we had no choice," she recalls of Kandiyapuram in Sivakasi.

In 2007, she returned to Sri Lanka through a repatriation scheme. With support from NGOs and government programs, her family built a small home in Illupaikulam, Trincomalee. Caritas EHED provided seeds and bags to develop a home garden. The Sri Lankan government also gave Rs. 325,000 altogether, including Rs. 75,000, as preliminary compensation and Rs. 30,000 from Opfer Sri Lanka.

*“It wasn’t just food,” Rani remembers. “It felt like hope; that something could grow again.”*

Today, she lives with the family of her surviving daughter. The home is calm, yet her heart is still heavy. “We live peacefully with our Sinhalese neighbors,” she says. “Though, the feeling of being a minority prevails, we are progressing towards reconciling”.

## **Story 14:** **"A Journey from Fear to Faith"**

Theresa, now 55, grew up in Mullaitivu with her parents and two siblings, while her elder brothers and sisters had already begun families of their own. Her childhood was rooted in farming. The family worked as farmers, raising crops and cattle, while her mother cared for the household.

She was only ten when the conflict began. Each outbreak of fighting sent her family fleeing into the jungle, her father returning alone to stand guard with the village defense force. Fear shaped every routine: meals finished before dusk, lamps extinguished by nightfall, silence heavy in the dark. When the village bell rang out, it was the signal to run, carrying only their lives into the shadows.

Some memories remain etched in her heart. On the day of her coming-of-age celebration, an army lorry arrived carrying bodies. An officer, attempting to make light of the situation, asked her father if the family wanted meat. Her father refused, and although the soldier said it was only a joke, the words pierced Theresa deeply, leaving her with a sadness that never faded.

Other nights were spent in bunkers, listening for footsteps. She remembers one family discovered during an attack, the mother's cries still echoing: "Don't kill my kids! Don't kill my kids!" That desperate plea, Theresa says, still brings tears to her eyes.

Life tested her beyond the war. Marriage took her to Thalavila,

where cancer claimed her husband. In time she remarried, holding on to faith as her anchor. “The sisters in the convent helped me heal through prayer and meditation. All I felt was pain and fear, not hate.” she reflects, highlighting the strength to rise above fear, so that her personal healing may guide the future towards meaningful peace and reconciliation.

## Story 15:

### "In the Shadow of War"

In the quiet stretches of Mannar, Sister Rosarin carries memories of a war that tore through her childhood and reshaped her life. Born into a large Catholic family of ten, her early years unfolded under the shadow of conflict.

"I remember the early 1980s," she recalls, her voice steady yet weighted with sorrow. "The military came at night for inspections. My sisters and I would step into the darkness while soldiers searched our home. It shattered our peace."

Education, once a simple right, became a daily uncertainty. She and her sisters traveled by bus to a Muslim school, never sure they would return home. "When fighting broke out, the army sealed neighborhoods. Buses stopped. Some days, we were stranded, cut off from our parents."

A turning point came in 1985, after the killing of Rev. Fr. Mary Bastian, a Catholic priest and human rights activist. His death devastated the village. Soon after, sixty-five young boys were arrested. "Our parents were terrified," she remembers. "They sent us by ship to India. From camp to camp, we hid, children carrying fear instead of books."

Even her vocation did not shield her. Each visit home required her to report to the police, surrender her ID, and explain the length of her stay. "To be questioned in my own country was humiliating," she says.

Amidst this, her mission became service. With her sisters in faith, she stood alongside victims of war. “One Christmas we went to Nanattan, where people had suffered most. We left our convent celebration behind and brought gifts to them. That was Christmas.”

Life in the convent, shared across ethnic and cultural lines, deepened her conviction. “We live together in diversity. If I am in need, they help me. There were losses on both sides. Reconciliation is the only path forward.”

## Journey of Healing and Reconciliation by Caritas Sri Lanka – SEDEC

The Catholic Church has always played an important role in building peace and harmony in Sri Lanka. National issues, especially those that disturb ethnic and religious unity, continue to be a challenge. Guided by the words of Christ, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9), the Church works for the well-being of every citizen, no matter their religion or race.

The Church's teachings give a strong foundation for peacebuilding. They remind us to:

- Be faithful to the truth.
- Respect the dignity of every person.
- Recognize the equality of all people.
- Work for the well-being and development of everyone.
- Respect the rule of law and promote good governance.

To move forward as a country, Sri Lanka must learn from its past. True reconciliation needs forgiveness, respect, and unity that go beyond race and religion. In July 2011, a group of Sri Lankan Bishops visited South Africa. They learned how South Africa, under the leadership of Dr. Nelson Mandela, faced its painful history with truth and forgiveness. This visit showed that healing becomes possible when divided communities come together in a spirit of love and understanding.

When Sri Lanka's 30-year war ended in 2009, the government set up the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation

Commission (LLRC). The report it produced focused on important issues such as reconciliation, power-sharing, demilitarization, media freedom, disappearances, and human rights. It was an important first step, but much more needed to be done. Caritas Sri Lanka - SEDEC, as the social arm of the Catholic Church, worked with religious leaders and civil society to promote the LLRC recommendations.

(LLRC 9.278) "The importance of people-to-people contact in promoting understanding, amity, and reconciliation. The Commission strongly endorses this view, not least because face-to-face interaction is a proven instrument for building consensus and promoting harmony."

But peace is more than the end of fighting. Even after the war, feelings of hatred, suspicion, and fear remained in the hearts of many. Some people felt they had won, while others felt only loss and pain. Caritas Sri Lanka saw that real peace needed healing of hearts and minds at the community level.

Through its 13 diocesan centers, Caritas started peacebuilding and interreligious programs to encourage understanding and trust among communities. People were brought together through exposure visits, where they could meet, share, and build friendships. Inter Religious Forums (IRFs) and village-level committees gave space for members of all four major religions to talk, solve problems, and promote unity.

Caritas also paid special attention to children and youth. Young people were trained to use social media to spread messages of peace and to counter hate speech. Interfaith festivals and visits to each other's places of worship created

respect and understanding. Sinhala and Tamil language classes for children and adults helped reduce misunderstandings. Art, essay, and drama competitions, along with songs written and sung across the country, spread messages of peace and unity.

Even during the COVID-19 and economic crises, members of IRFs and Peace Committees worked together to help their communities, showing compassion across religious and ethnic lines. Caritas also worked with media, local government, and other religious organizations to make these efforts stronger and reach more people.

These initiatives connect well with the vision of the LLRC, especially in promoting religious tolerance and guiding the younger generation with tools like the guidebook for Sunday School teachers. National symposiums brought leaders of all faiths together to talk about peace and reconciliation at a wider level.

Today, Caritas Sri Lanka continues its journey of healing and reconciliation with the support of many partners. Its mission remains clear: to build a Sri Lanka where every person is respected, treated equally, and can live in peace.

Looking back, the storm of war caused deep pain. But looking ahead, there is hope. Caritas Sri Lanka believes that with faith, dialogue, and compassion, wounds can be healed and a united future can be built for generations to come.

**Priyantha Fernando**  
Programme Manager  
Caritas Sri Lanka - SEDEC

## Conclusion: Paths Toward Peace and Reconciliation

The stories in 'After the Storm' are more than individual testimonies, they are a collective portrait of human resilience, courage, and hope in the aftermath of war. From mothers and fathers who lost children, to families displaced multiple times, to former combatants rebuilding lives, and to soldiers and community leaders striving to protect and unite, each narrative offers lessons on the power of forgiveness, compassion, and steadfast faith.

A common thread runs through all these experiences: despite pain, loss, and mistrust, individuals and communities have chosen to rebuild bridges rather than walls. Anne's resilience, Senarath's journey toward letting go of anger, Vanitha's work with differently-abled and war-affected people, and the efforts of village leaders to restore harmony-all reveal that reconciliation is not abstract, it is lived through small acts of courage, kindness, and understanding.

The experiences shared in this book lead to several important reflections and recommendations for fostering peace and reconciliation:

**Forgiveness as a Foundation:** Healing begins when individuals choose to let go of resentment and bitterness, as many of our storytellers did. Forgiveness does not erase the past but allows communities to live together in trust and dignity.

**Community Engagement and Dialogue:** Peace is sustained when people actively engage with one another across ethnic, religious, and social lines. Programs that encourage dialogue, joint community activities, and shared livelihoods can bridge historical divides.

**Peace Forums as Re-agents:** Establishing and supporting peace forums at the village, district, and regional levels can provide platforms for ongoing dialogue, conflict resolution, and collaborative problem-solving. Such forums allow communities to address grievances, build trust, and develop shared strategies for reconciliation.

**Support for War-Affected Families:** Material assistance, counselling, vocational training, and psychosocial support are essential to help individuals and families regain independence and hope. Long-term reintegration programs, particularly for ex-combatants, widows, and displaced families, are crucial.

**Empowerment of Women and Youth:** The stories show that women and young people play a critical role in rebuilding communities. Supporting their education, vocational training, and leadership capacities strengthen the social outlook.

**Faith and Spiritual Guidance:** Many survivors found solace and strength in their faith. Encouraging moral and spiritual guidance rooted in gospel values can nurture empathy, ethical living, and peacemaking.

**Promotion of Justice, Equity and Accountability:** True reconciliation requires addressing historical grievances,

protecting human rights, and ensuring that all communities have equitable access to resources, opportunities, and protection.

**Cultivating a Culture of Peace:** Beyond policies and programs, peace flourishes when individuals embrace empathy, kindness, and moral responsibility in everyday life-within families, neighborhoods, and public spaces.

These stories remind us that peace is not merely the absence of conflict, it is the presence of justice, love, and mutual respect. They inspire a vision of Sri Lanka where communities can live together in harmony, children can grow without fear, and families can heal after unimaginable loss.

'After the Storm' is a call to action: to uphold the dignity of every human being, to embrace the path of reconciliation, and to live as peacemakers in our world. Caritas Sri Lanka remains committed to this mission, guided by the Gospel, to foster hope, restore relationships, support peace forums, and build a future where peace is not only dreamed but lived.

Peace Begins with a smile  
– Mother Teresa

Peace is our gift to each other  
– Elie Wiesel

Do you want to win, or do you want peace?  
– Martti Ahtisaari

Blessed are the Peacemakers, for they will be called  
sons of God  
– Matthew 5:9

Nothing can bring you Peace but yourself  
– Ralph Waldo Emerson

“If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner”

– Nelson Mandela

“Peace is not the silence after the storm, it's the courage to speak truth before it begins.”

– Wayne Chirisa

“In our shared ministry of reconciliation, I ask us to be Peacemakers to love peace, to seek peace, to cherish peace, to create peace” – Jeffrey R. Holland

*"Peace is not merely the absence of war but  
a personal and interior effort.  
True peace begins with humility,  
forgiveness, and mindful communication."*

*- Pope Leo XIV*

Caritas Sri Lanka - SEDEC  
133, Kynsey Road,  
Colombo 8.

E-mail : director.sec@caritaslk.org, sedec@caritaslk.org  
Web : [www.caritaslk.org](http://www.caritaslk.org)