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Monitoring a Little-Noticed War

On Monday, 94 people died and 150 were injured when a truck loaded with explosives rammed into a military convoy in Sri Lanka. The government blames the Tamil Tiger guerrillas -- the pioneers of the suicide bombing -- for the attack. The rebels have not said anything.

For more than 20 years, the Tamil rebels have waged a brutal war of independence against the Sri Lankan government, which is dominated by ethnic Sinhalese. Their opponents in Colombo are no innocents, and have made little effort to protect Tamil civilians as they wage a brutal counterinsurgency. In April, government security forces stood by for two hours as mobs burned Tamil homes and shops, killing 14 people.

A Buddhist-led government battling a Hindu separatist group in a land with no oil draws little international interest -- and no pressure on either side to end such horrors. Hoping to change that, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour, called last month for international human rights monitors to be sent to Sri Lanka. All countries with influence, starting with the United States and Japan, should push the Sri Lankan government to agree.

Colombo is eager for international aid and support in its fight against the Tamil Tigers. With U.N. rights monitors bearing witness, the government may feel pressure to rein in army and police abuses. Monitors could also bolster the country's weak judicial system, which barely investigates crimes against Tamil civilians. The guerrillas, who count the forced recruitment of child soldiers among their crimes, are less vulnerable to international shame. But shining a spotlight might help persuade overseas Tamils to choke off funding.

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