

The Rebel Ecosystem & the Attribution Problem

The non-LTTE Tamil armed-group ecosystem (TELO, EPRLF, PLOTE, EROS, TELA, ENDLF, post-2004 Karuna/TMVP), state-backed paramilitary tracks (EPDP, TMVP), the criminal-economy actors who used the LTTE label, and the command-vs-unit responsibility question — for which Rome Statute Art 28 and JCE doctrine are the relevant frames.

Tamil-civilian violence in the 1983–2009 period was not produced by a single organisation. Observers in the late 1980s counted at least thirty separate guerrilla groups (US Library of Congress, 1990). This plurality is analytically critical: the frequent collapse of these groups into either LTTE absorption or Sri Lankan state co-optation created a structural blame-diffusion problem that persists today.

§1 The Staniland frame

Staniland (Cornell, 2014) maps insurgent organisations on two axes: horizontal community ties × vertical leadership-unit ties. Fragmented organisations are most susceptible to predation, criminality and defection. The Tamil ecosystem after 1987 exhibited precisely this fragmentation, enabling state-sponsored paramilitary laundering of violence through nominally autonomous Tamil factions.

§2 The major non-LTTE groups

TELO (1977) — destroyed by the LTTE in April–May 1986. EPRLF (1979–80) — Marxist-Leninist; PLAT armed wing deployed by India as a de facto proxy against the LTTE during the IPKF period; leadership assassinated in Madras 1990. PLOTE (1980) — international arms-procurement networks; 1987–90 decline phase produced extortion and politically motivated killings frequently mis-attributed to the LTTE. EROS (1975) — merged into the LTTE by 1990.

§3 State-backed paramilitary tracks

EPDP — from 1988 onward operated in close coordination with Sri Lankan security forces in Jaffna and the islands (OISL 2015; UTHR(J)). TMVP / Karuna faction — after the March 2004 split, operated as a Sri Lankan-army-aligned paramilitary in the Eastern Province; UNICEF and HRW documented continued child recruitment by TMVP under state protection (HRW — Complicit in Crime, 2007).

§4 The criminal-economy attribution problem

The 2002–06 ceasefire window produced a documented expansion of smuggling, extortion and narcotics-adjacent trade along the A9 corridor (ICG; Sarvananthan 2007). Some used the LTTE label without central authorisation. UTHR(J) and the academic literature converge on a structural distinction: central-command crimes are one category; peripheral criminal activity badged 'LTTE' is another. Conflating them serves neither truth nor accountability.

§5 Child recruitment — command vs unit attribution

Child recruitment was an institutionalised LTTE practice from the early period (OHCHR OISL 2015; UNICEF action plans 2007 and 2008; HRW Living in Fear 2004 and Trapped and Mistreated 2008; UN SRSG-CAAC).

The accountability question — for any future judicial process, not for this archive — is whether recruitment after a given date continued under central HQ direction, regional-commander discretion (especially Karuna's Eastern command pre-2004), or unit-level practice in defiance of HQ commitments. Rome Statute Art 28 (command responsibility) and JCE doctrine (ICTY; Special Court for Sierra Leone AFRC and CDF) supply the legal frame.

TLTE describes; we do not invoke.

§6 Why this matters for the ledger

If the LTTE name is loaded onto every Tamil-coded violation 1983–2009 — including those by Indian-backed factions, state-backed paramilitaries, and criminal entrepreneurs — then the actual command-responsibility map is obliterated, both for the LTTE and for the state. Honest record-keeping requires the distinctions kept above.

Sources

- Paul Staniland — Networks of Rebellion (Cornell, 2014).
- UTHR(J) — The Broken Palmyra and Reports 1–14.
- OHCHR OISL 2015.
- UN Panel of Experts 2011.
- HRW — Complicit in Crime (2007).
- HRW — Living in Fear (2004) / Trapped and Mistreated (2008).
- UN SRSG for Children and Armed Conflict.
- ICG — Sri Lanka country file.
- Stanford Mapping Militants Project.
- Rome Statute Art 28 — command responsibility.

What this is not

- This dossier does not name commanders, cadres, or accused individuals beyond those already in Tier-A public record.
- This dossier does not adjudicate command responsibility — that work belongs to accredited courts.
- This dossier does not exonerate the LTTE for institutional wrongs documented by OISL, UTHR(J), HRW and UNICEF.
- This dossier does not accept survivor or family intake — route to PEARL, ITJP, OHCHR Special Procedures, OMP.