On April 26, The Times-Dispatch published a Commentary column about a group of 18 young professionals representing marginalized communities from Sri Lanka. In March, the group had participated in the University of Virginia Center for Politics' Global Perspectives on Democracy (GPD) program in Charlottesville.

The program was held as part of an exchange in cooperation with Relief International and was funded by the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. The exchange's first leg took place just before the conclusion of Sri Lanka's 26-year war between the Sinhalese majority Sri Lankan government and a secessionist group, which the U.S. government considered a terrorist organization, called the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) or Tamil Tigers.

The separatist movement arose due to decades of systematic marginalization of the Tamil people, which continues despite the cessation of battle.

In June my colleague, Meg Heubeck, three other Americans, and I were selected to participate in the return portion of the exchange to Sri Lanka, which occurred during most of August. We visited organizations and individuals who advocate peaceful co-existence and equal rights for all in Sri Lanka and traveled around much of the South Asian island to visit cultural sites and view projects started by the 18 GPD participants. We also held a workshop on topics such as civic engagement, advocacy, and free Internet technologies.

Being in Sri Lanka at that moment in the nation's history was life-changing. The war came to a bloody conclusion in May with those in power riding a wave of majoritarian popularity -- and trying to figure out how to maintain it. The government was, and still is, unhurriedly attempting to determine what to do with more than 250,000 of the nation's Tamil people currently held in what their government refers to as "welfare camps."

From the moment we arrived it was clear that 26 years of war had turned the Pearl of the Indian Ocean into a police
state. The first person we encountered after departing the aircraft at Bandaranaike Airport outside the capitol of Colombo was an air force serviceman bearing a machine gun.

On our 4 a.m. drive to the hotel, our van was repeatedly detained at military and police checkpoints. The terrorist movement -- which sprouted from years of marginalization -- has given the government its justification to post heavily armed military and policemen on practically every corner in Colombo, the capital city, as well as throughout smaller cities and much of the countryside. Checkpoints and thorough pat-downs are the norm. They are much more thorough if you happen to be Tamil.

The cult of President Mahinda Rajapaksa is pervasive. His image is plastered on telephone booths, lampposts, truck tailgates, giant billboards, and practically anywhere else you can imagine. The images are used for multiple purposes -- and viewed differently depending on the viewer.

The president is extremely popular among members of the Sinhalese majority, who often post his image. He did bring a conclusion, albeit a bloody one, to a war that had gone on for more than a generation.

Corporations, on the other hand, pay for billboards mostly to buy favor from the government. The president's family and those connected to him post them with the hope that they will help keep him popular and enhance the family's power and influence. We also witnessed his image plastered in Tamil areas as a means of intimidation, and the locals dare not tear them down.

Freedoms of speech and expression do not exist in Sri Lanka. Individuals and their family members can be persecuted, imprisoned, or even killed for promoting a view that is counter to those in power. A vocal critic of government corruption, journalist Lasantha Wickremetunge, was murdered last January when a group of assailants riding motorcycles on the streets of Colombo surrounded his car and filled it full of lead.

Another journalist, J.S. Tissainayagam, was convicted on Aug. 31 under Sri Lanka's Prevention of Terrorism Act and sentenced to 20 years hard labor for writing critical articles on how the government was conducting the war.

We were constantly reminded while in Sri Lanka to be cautious about what we said publicly, as it could affect those we met or were somehow connected to. Some activists that we encountered actually told us they could disappear due to the opinions they were expressing to us. The amazing thing is what they were saying was not radical at all but just a perspective that's different from the government's.

The greatest current challenge to building a lasting peace in Sri Lanka is the issue of the massive number of Tamils who are still locked behind razor wire and armed guards in the "welfare camps." During the conclusion of the final military operation, about 270,000 people were trapped between the government forces and the remnants of the Tamil Tigers, most of whom were eventually killed.

Estimates of the civilian death toll vary between 7,000 and 20,000, but about 260,000 people -- who survived being shelled by the military and shot at by the Tigers if they attempted to escape -- ended up in the camps.

They still live in squalor, and disease is rampant. Dirt-floor tents are filled beyond capacity, and family members are separated with no attempt to reunite them. A Sri Lankan friend of ours who works for a humanitarian organization there had a child die in her arms just weeks ago.

Heavy rains fell in August, flooding many of the camps. Excrement that was already overflowing from latrines dug into the ground and used by tens of thousands of people began to stream through tents and trails. Few people were moved away from the high water and casualties were not uncommon.

The fear now is of the November monsoon season. Some trenches have been dug in an effort to siphon the rainwater away, but those forced to live in the camps remain crammed into tents with mud floors that were never meant for long-term habitation.

The government line is they need to be certain no LTTE fighters are released and that the captives' home areas have
been demined. Releases, however, register barely a trickle -- and combat ended in May.

There is no culture of engagement between the people and the national government, and individual rights are not sacrosanct. Once elections are concluded, democracy is basically put on hold until the next call to the polls. Sri Lanka has a unitary system of government, with few if any checks and balances, and all power comes from the top down.

The constitution also lists the rights of the people but a few paragraphs afterward explain how the government may suspend those rights whenever it deems necessary.

Citizens never write or visit their members of parliament, and communicating to the president is unheard of. Two of the 18 exchange participants upon their return started Democracy Corps Sri Lanka, based on a program founded at the UVa. Center for Politics' Youth Leadership Initiative, which teaches young citizens how to start service projects that emphasize getting young people involved in the political process. Though underfunded, the Sri Lankan founders have discovered -- not to their surprise -- that the ground is fertile for such a movement.

While Sri Lanka has no shortage of challenges, it definitely has a lot going for it. The education and health care systems are among the best in Asia. The beauty of the island is often staggering.

Its coast is lined with sandy beaches and the blue-green waters of the Indian Ocean. The heart of island bulges with lush, towering mountain peaks. There are literally dozens of national parks full of monkeys, elephants, leopards, and other animals -- but you will also find the them in unprotected areas around the country.

Sri Lankans produce some of finest fruits and vegetables you will find in the world. If you like spicy curries, the food is unsurpassed.

Most important, you will not find friendlier or harder-working people. One would think that almost three decades of war would sour one's demeanor. Sri Lankans are very neighborly and quick to make friends, and most Sinhalese and Tamils get along just fine together even though they speak different languages and have separate alphabets. Family is also extremely important in Sri Lanka.

Meg and I grew very close to the 18 Sri Lankans during their stay in the U.S., and we reinforced those relationships in August. They are bright, joyful, and energetic people who just want to help make their nation the best it can be. Most of the Sri Lankans we met there were quite similar.

Overcoming decades of war will not be easy, nor will it happen overnight. The key ingredient to a lasting peace in Sri Lanka is the government loosening its grip and providing equal rights to the Tamil people -- most of whom just want to live unmolested.

Unfortunately, it appears that most of President Rajapaksa's energy is going toward ensuring that he and his family members indefinitely remain in power, and reconciliation does not appear to be part of that equation.

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