

**Background:**

The Sinhalese arrived in Sri Lanka late in the 6th century B.C., probably from northern India. Buddhism was introduced beginning in about the mid-third century B.C., and a great civilization developed at the cities of Anuradhapura (kingdom from circa 200 B.C. to circa A.D. 1000) and Polonnaruwa (from about 1070 to 1200). In the 14th century, a south Indian dynasty seized power in the north and established a Tamil kingdom. Occupied by the Portuguese in the 16th century and by the Dutch in the 17th century, the island was ceded to the British in 1796, became a crown colony in 1802, and was united under British rule by 1815. As Ceylon, it became independent in 1948; its name was changed to Sri Lanka in 1972. Tensions between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil separatists erupted into war in 1983. Tens of thousands have died in an ethnic conflict that continues to fester. After two decades of fighting, the government and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam formalized a cease-fire in February 2002, with Norway brokering peace negotiations.

Location: Southern Asia, island in the Indian Ocean, south of India

Capital: Colombo.

Note: Sri Jayewardenepura Kotte is the legislative capital

Area: 65,610 sq km

Area comparative: slightly larger than West Virginia

Climate: tropical monsoon; northeast monsoon (December to March); southwest monsoon (June to October)

Terrain: mostly low, flat to rolling plain; mountains in south-central interior

Religions: Buddhist 70%, Hindu 15%, Christian 8%, Muslim 7% (1999)

Ethnic groups: Sinhalese 74%, Tamil 18%, Moor 7%, Burgher, Malay, and Vedda 1%

Languages: Sinhala (official and national language) 74%, Tamil (national language) 18%, other 8% note: English is commonly used in government and is spoken competently by about 10% of the population



The government is a parliamentary democracy, led by the chief of state and head of government, President Chandrika Bandaranaike

KUMARATUNGA (since 12 November 1994). The prime minister is Ratnasiri WICKRAMANAYAKE (since 10 August 2000). Unlike other countries where the duties of the president and prime minister are divided, in Sri Lanka the president serves as both the chief of state and the head of government.

The official and national language is Sinhala 74%, Tamil (national language) 18%, other 8%; English is commonly used in government and is spoken competently by about 10% of the population.