

Keenie Meenie Full Transcript

October 2020

[Phil Miller] Sri Lanka is a tourist paradise. Thousands of British people come here for holidays and honeymoons. But there is a much darker side to Britain's relationship with Sri Lanka. 35 years ago, British men came here to help fight a dirty war. Their story has been covered up for decades, but now it is starting to emerge.

[Robin Horsfall] Yeah, Keenie Meenies. It's just a term used by soldiers for people who were very keen and nasty at their job.

[Richard Holworthy] Keenie Meenie Services. Keenie Meenie means under the counter.

[Merril Gunaratne] Keenie Meenie Services was a terminology they used. Silly, no? Keenie Meenie. But we knew that they were SAS personnel.

[Titles] Keenie Meenie: Britain's Private Army

[Phil] Sri Lanka's civil war was brutal and bloody. Tens of thousands died, most from the island's Tamil minority. Although they too had armed groups accused of committing war crimes in their battle for a separate state in the North of Sri Lanka. The war started in 1983 after a pogrom of Tamils by the island's Sinhalese Buddhist majority. Many Tamils abandoned peaceful protest and joined the Tamil Tigers, or LTTE. In the face of this powerful new guerrilla force, the Sri Lankan government turned to their old colonial masters for help. The British. But for the British government, this was a dilemma. They did not want to get directly involved in what could be a nasty war. Instead, they allowed British and White South African mercenaries operating through a shadowy company in London called Keenie Meenie Services, KMS, to act as guns for hire. For the last few years I've been writing a book about this company, trying to find out as much as I can by digging through declassified files at the National Archives that shed more light on what they did. And now I'm looking to speak to insiders who can tell me more. My research has taken me to Prague, where one of those mercenaries, Robin Horsfall, now lives.

[Robin] I was working as a bodyguard for Mohammed Al Fayed in London and got a bit bored with the job. So I needed something more exciting, and volunteered to go and work for a company called KMS. When I was in the Special Air Service everyone knew about KMS. It was one of the early companies set up to provide military services to foreign governments.

[Phil] As a member of British Special Forces, Horsfall had taken part in the Iranian Embassy siege and served in the Falklands and Northern Ireland before going into private security.

[Robin] The British Army, for somebody who's leaving after 12 years, didn't do anything to ease me into the civilian world apart from to point me in the direction of the companies that used the skills that I had.

[Phil] KMS is quite an unusual name. What do you think it stood for?

[Robin] Oh it wasn't for anything in particular. It was for Keenie Meenie Services. So it was a bit of a joke, and it stuck. Probably a Scottish saying.

[Phil] There are only a handful of insiders who are prepared to talk about the British government's secret links to Keenie Meenie Services and the diplomatic intrigue that went on behind the scenes. Lieutenant Colonel Richard Holworthy was a defence adviser at the British high commission in Sri Lanka.

[Richard] We had a training team from a firm called KMS, Keenie Meenie Services. They were not official government, they were a private firm. Mostly, surprise surprise, from ex-SAS and ex-commando forces.

They were much involved in training the Special Task Force, which is a paramilitary wing of the police. They didn't have a particularly good reputation. And they were not too cognizant with the ideas of the rule of law I don't think. To put it politely. No, they weren't bad, they were quite effective, but effective in a slightly over the top way.

[Phil] I've been put in touch with a Tamil refugee called Verasammy, who might be able to tell me more about the consequences of Keenie Meenie's work in Sri Lanka. Verasammy was just a child when Keenie Meenie came to Sri Lanka to train the Special Task Force. He now lives in the UK as a refugee. We've changed his name for safety reasons.

[Verasammy speaking Tamil] Visukuddy was my neighbour. The Special Task Force tortured him then he tried to escape and hid in some reeds, But they caught him and dragged him out with a rope. They shot him on the road side. They were horrible. They chopped people up and burnt them with tyres. We used to see thick black smoke coming from the STF camp. We knew they were burning bodies on tyres.

[Phil] This gruesome method of execution became a hallmark of the Special Task Force, committed against successive generations of anti-government activists in Sri Lanka. I spoke to Britain's former ambassador to find out how UK mercenaries were allowed to work with such a brutal police squad.

[David Gladstone] I've spent my entire career from the age of 20-something in the Foreign Office As it happened, I was engaged to my future wife, who was quite clear she rather liked the idea of travelling around abroad, and living in embassies. She thought at that stage with servants with white gloves and everything being served beautifully And from the little I knew about Sri Lanka at the time, I thought it could be quite interesting because the various things brewing up, not least what became eventually the major civil war.

[Phil] Were you aware at that time of a British private security company, called KMS Ltd, or Keenie Meenie Services?

[David] I was aware of them, yes.

[Phil] Keenie Meenie was set up by two SAS veterans, Colonel Jim Johnson and Major David Walker.

[Richard] They were known in the Embassy as Brodie and Doyle from that TV series.

[Announcer] Anarchy, acts of terror, crimes against the public.

[Phil] In the 1970s, Keenie Meenie supplied bodyguards to British embassies around the world. It also won contracts with governments in the Middle East and Africa.

[Robin] They'd had a lot of success with Sheikh Yamani, who was the oil minister for Saudi Arabia at the time providing bodyguards for him, and built their company on the prestige that came from that. They were linked to members of the British government in a deniable way. So the operations that they were part of were supported and were supported by the British government at the time.

[Phil] Could you tell us a little bit more about what they were doing in Sri Lanka and who they were as a company, who was running them?

[Robin] They had some sort of political cover in this country, but I was never quite sure what. And I thought it was something at that stage I didn't need to know about, and therefore I wasn't going to beaver around too industriously to find out.

[Phil] What do you mean by political cover?

[Robin] I mean, I was told, on what authority I'm not quite sure, that there were one or two British politicians who were connected to the company. But that is only, that's all hearsay.

[Phil] In fact, the KMS chairman Colonel Jim Johnson did have important political connections. One of his closest friends was Sir Anthony Royle. He was vice chair of the Conservative Party in the 1980s and a close confidant of Margaret Thatcher. The company's other founder, David Walker, was also extremely well connected.

[Robin] The old boy network of Sandhurst officers and the class system that was very very prevalent during that period of the late 20th century meant he was good friends with people who were in the Ministry of Defence, who were in MI6, and who were members of government.

[Richard] Basically, the government did not want to get involved in any actual physical military help. It was a war we didn't want to get involved in, particularly at that stage. And so the vacancy was there for someone else to fill, and quite frankly it was better that one of our, a British team went in to fill it rather than somebody else. As the Foreign Office was concerned, they were happy for them to be there, provided they let us know what they were doing.

[Verasammy speaking Tamil] The STF killed so many Tamils in the 1980s when the British mercenaries trained them. They killed my relatives. I'm so shocked to hear the UK government supported the mercenaries.

[Phil] The true extent of Whitehall's support for Keenie Meenie is being hidden at the UK National Archives, where sensitive files have been redacted. I'm having to take the Foreign Office to court to demand full access. Does that surprise you that files from that era about this topic aren't being made public yet?

[David] It does, because I can't think of why that would be.

[Phil] And are you surprised that we found that some members of the Foreign Office's South Asia Department from that period, they're now working in censorship roles? Doing sensitivity reviews of the files before they are being made public. Is there perhaps a conflict of interest there?

[David] I don't want to sit in judgement of my old department and friends. I had no idea, certainly, but those people are drawn from any former diplomats who wanted to do the work. I don't think you can read anything into which department they were in before.

[Phil] But Gladstone's old colleagues are not just censoring paperwork from this period. Hundreds of Foreign Office files from the start of the Sri Lankan war have been destroyed altogether. This cover-up posed a major problem for my investigation. I needed to find an expert who could help me dig deeper. Dr. Rachel Seoighe is an academic and author who has spent a decade studying the conflict and working with Tamil human rights defenders. I travelled with her on a research trip.

[Rachel Seoighe] Father, do you remember a British mercenary group called KMS coming to Sri Lanka in the mid-80s and training the STF?

[Father Joseph Mary] The people always said these people have come to train the soldiers, the STF, not for the good of the Tamils. So we thought they were actually mercenaries that came to train these fellows to get rid of us Tamils.

[Phil] Many of Dr. Seoighe's contacts were too afraid to speak on camera.

[Rachel] I started by trying to contact retired members of the Special Task Force to ask them about their experiences, particularly because a lot of the members who were trained by Keenie Meenie have since retired

[Masculine voice] That was long ago and I would rather not remember anything about that period because I have left that far behind me. So if you would excuse me, I'd rather not talk about anything. But you might talk to the present commander. He's a nice man. Lateef.

[Rachel] At every point, I was channelled toward the head of the Special Task Force, a very powerful man called Lateef who was close to the then Prime Minister. Lateef was happy to meet with me and show me around his office, but he didn't want to give an interview and he referred me to his colleagues for a tour of the STF training camp. I was picked up by a chauffeur and taken around the camp all day. It was very bizarre to say the least.

[Incidental dramatic music]

[Music abruptly switches to Right Round by Flo Rida]

♪ Hey, walk out that house with my swagger ♪
♪ Hop in there with dough, I got places to go ♪
♪ People to see, time is precious ♪
♪ I looked at my cotty, are ya out of control ♪
♪ Just like my mind where I'm goin' ♪
♪ No women, no shawties, no nothin' but clothes ♪
♪ No stoppin' now, my Pirellis on roll ♪
♪ I like my jewellery that's always on whoa ♪

[Rachel] The current head of training at the camp was actually trained himself by some of these men who came as mercenaries with Keenie Meenie.

[Athula Daulagala] So 1984, September, we observed the first training batch as trained by the KMS.

[Rachel] And who were the lead instructors of KMS?

[Athula] When I was training in 1985, Jim, I think his name, Jim Ress, and we call as Jim, and Tom Hegan.

[Phil] British mercenaries set up and ran this training academy for three years in the 1980s, when the STF was constantly committing war crimes. And Dr. Seoighe's rare access to the highest level of Sri Lanka's security forces was not over yet.

[Rachel] I was put in touch with the head of intelligence at the time, a man called Merrill Gunaratne. And it was very unsettling to go to the house of the former head of intelligence services.

[Merril] Did you see that cat? There was not a day she did not sleep with me in the bed. I am exceptionally attached to animals, and it looks to me wrong to pet with one hand and to kill and eat with the other. I don't know whether you think that way. It's nice to have people of the same outlook, you know.

[Phil] Keenie Meenie started training Sri Lankan forces in 1984. For the next three years, they trained the STF how to be professional, disciplined, and respect the rule of law. But the operations they carried out whilst under the training of the British raises very serious questions about its effectiveness

[Merril] They started doing operations. Then they were meeting with success. LTTE being caught off guard because of the element of surprise. A lot of courage coming in. This is where the confidence came with the nature of training and the leadership and training given by the KMS.

[Athula] Operating in a small team in the jungle, that was a very good system given from the British experts. It helped us to start the planning process of major operations.

[Phil] But just months after Keenie Meenie began training the STF, things started to go terribly wrong.

[Merrill] Once they went to Jaffna for operations and they lost lives. Thikkam was the place. Point Pedro. A landmine took some lives, five or six lives I remember.

[Phil] The Tamil Tigers ambushed the STF, killing several of their elite members. The survivors then set out on a revenge mission described in this declassified document.

[Narrator] 10 civilians were killed by police commandos. There was a random shooting at Point Pedro Town.

[Phil] The army joined in the carnage, and together with the STF they burnt down Point Pedro's historic Hartley College library.

[Joseph Rajaratnam] My age is 94. I was a maths teacher. In 1984, the library was burnt. There is about more than 2,000 books, valuable books, everything burnt.

[Phil] The massacre of 10 civilians at Point Pedro and the torching of the nearby library was shocking at the time, but far worse was about to unfold, even as the British training continued.

[Father Joseph Mary] There's a record of missing people. From deep villages they would come. "My husband has disappeared, my son has disappeared." By whom? STF. People have been killed. They're just ordinary poor people who earn their living hand to mouth. They would take the person, and if there were many persons, tie them together, and tyre over them, and burn the tyre so the body is burned completely. Burned completely, completely. So that's what happened. Everywhere, tyre, tyre, tyre.

[Rachel] Were many of these people who were burnt-

[Father Joseph Mary] Civilians.

[Rachel] They were civilians.

[Father Joseph Mary] They were not terrorists or militant groups. They didn't belong to LTTE or anything. Ordinary citizens.

[Verasammy] The STF caught people and lined them up and used informants to identify them. They took them to the camp and tortured them.

[Phil] We also spoke to a former Red Cross doctor who treated at least 10 people who said they were tortured by the STF.

[Doctor] I've seen people's thumbs were tied together and they had been hanged. Another thing was, they had been water submarined. Their head was put in the water and taken up. One person was so anxious he told me his penis was put in a drawer and crushed to get some information.

[Phil] Despite these gruesome tales, the Tamil community had seen nothing yet. After three years of intensive training from KMS, the Special Task Force was about to conduct its most controversial ever mission.

[P. Ariyanethiran speaking Tamil] Everyone was screaming that the army was coming and that we had to run. I was only wearing a shirt and a sarong. I lost my sarong when we were hiding in the field so I had to run in my underwear. Two air force helicopters also came. They transported the army and the Special Task

Force, and dropped them off. They wanted to gather everyone here, so they shot towards people. The people ran towards the farm and gathered here. Then they killed everyone in the farm

[Phil] 85 civilians were shot down by Sri Lankan forces on this day of bloodshed.

[Rachel] This was three years after the massacre in Point Pedro which involved the killing of 10 civilians. And then three years later, after working with Keenie Meenie Services and supposedly assisting them with techniques and tactics, we have this enormous massacre of more than 80 people. It tells us a lot about the failure of Keenie Meenie Services to improve human rights compliance in Sri Lanka. What we saw was an escalation of violence over that time period.

[Merrill] STF had benefited from the training of KMS. STF was expanding in numbers, growing in confidence, meeting results and success.

[Incidental music: We Are The Champions by Queen]

♪ We are the champions my friends ♪
♪ And we'll keep on fighting to the end ♪
♪ We are the champions ♪
♪ We are the champions ♪
♪ No time for losers ♪
♪ 'Cause we are the champions ♪

[Merrill] So in my time I have to say that the investment with the KMS was profit worthy. We could never have reached the standards we reached, we could never have made the LTTE, generated the fear psychosis in the LTTE with the STF if they were locally trained. It was the foreign training, the KMS training, which gave them the expertise. It is their training which gave them the confidence we are second to none.

[Rachel] So do you know what Keenie Meenie means?

[Merrill] Keenie Meenie Services.

[Rachel] Mm. But what does the name mean?

[Merrill] I did not know, frankly. Keenie Meenie Services was terminology they used and looked, sounded silly, no? Keenie Meenie. But we knew that they were SAS personnel.

[Phil] So how much did British diplomats know about these sinister operations by UK-trained Sri Lankan forces? Alastair MacDermott was stationed at the British High Commission in Sri Lanka. Some people say he worked for MI6. He wrote this document.

[Narrator] The security forces, and in particular the Special Task Force, continue to be accused of random attacks on innocent civilians, of attempting to conceal the evidence of such attacks by secret burial of bodies and of mass arrests and round-ups.

[Phil] Although MacDermott had some concerns, he concluded:

[Narrator] We are not sure how much credence to give to claims of ill treatment made about the Special Task Force. We must, of course, guard against becoming ourselves victims of Tamil propaganda.

[Phil] Do you think the Tamils were exaggerating the extent to which the Special Task Force were involved in this?

[Richard] No, I think i-i-it was happening. It's in the psyche of the Sri Lankan forces at the time. They were being clobbered too, you know, left right and centre by the Tamil insurgents. And so they had a slightly different view on counter-measures to those that we in the British army have.

[Phil] And what would some of those counter-measures have involved?

[Richard] Uh, well, I think they killed people, basically.

[Phil] Civilians?

[Richard] Yes, oh yes. It was all anti-civilian, yeah. And they locked them away without any habeus corpus. They put people... People disappeared, there's no doubt about that. People disappeared, people were killed. That's what happens, unfortunately, in all these types of conflict.

[Phil] But were these acts the inevitable consequence of this war? We've obtained a declassified CIA file which suggests in remarkably frank terms that the ruthless efficiency of the STF was a consequence in considerable part to their training by the British mercenaries from KMS.

[Narrator] Although the Special Task Force shows greater discipline and professionalism than other security units, it is among the worst perpetrators of violence against Tamil civilians. The Special Task Force appears to be the backbone of the government's operations in the Eastern Province. We believe the STF's superior combat performance relative to the Army is due to its KMS training. Even so, US Embassy sources assert that the STF is behind most of the violence against Tamil civilians in Eastern Province. These sources report a common STF tactic when fired upon while on patrol is to enter the nearest village and burn it to the ground.

[Phil] British mercenaries did not just train Sri Lankan forces. The company, Keenie Meenie, also supplied British, Rhodesian and South African pilots to fly helicopter gunships. And this air power turned the war in favour of the Sri Lanka forces, giving them a decisive advantage, but with terrible consequences for Tamil civilians.

[Widow speaking Tamil] When the helicopters were in the sky, we would all run and hide in the bunkers. One of my sisters had a newborn baby. The baby was not breathing properly, but they had to run to the bunker to hide. Sometimes they would drop bombs on houses as well. We could not walk on the streets, because we could be shot.

[Richard] There were seven I think, when I left, Brits, flying for them, always with dark helmets, gloves, so you couldn't see they were white. I think at that stage they were a great help.

[Robin] I got back to Colombo for a weekend and a South African helicopter pilot was explaining one of his experiences. And he told me that he'd been responding to a vehicle ambush where a Sinhalese vehicle, a Sri Lankan vehicle, had been blown up by a road mine. And he flew over it to give it air cover in a Huey Bell helicopter. As he flew over the area, his door gunner opened up and shot every man, woman, child and animal that he could get his eyes on. And in response to that, he flew his helicopter much higher to prevent him from doing that. But there were no recriminations for that action. It was considered to be perfectly acceptable by those people that were in charge of that group.

[Phil] One of the Keenie Meenie pilots, Tim Smith, wrote a book about his time in Sri Lanka.

[Narrator] In five months I had been personally involved in the death of 152 Tigers. Well, to be totally accurate, at 152 I had given up counting.

[Phil] Smith was traumatised by what he saw in Sri Lanka and went on a months leave in England. But he decided to go back for another six month tour.

[Narrator] The mundane daily grind went on. A patrol somehow managed to get the Tigers pinned down in a school house. We pitched in with the gunship. Yes, I was flying the gunship. Somehow the dividing line between morality and necessity had grown dim. I called for the weapons system to be armed and the pod gun selected. Rolling into the attack dive I switched the weapon sight on. The red aiming circle framed the school buildings. I hoped there were no kids in there. I pressed the trigger. The pod gun thundered into life. Bloody good shooting.

[Phil] In terms of the helicopter pilots, one KMS pilot, Tim Smith, he has said that he opened fire on a school, and that he opened fire on a bus full of civilians.

[Richard] You've read his book, have you? Yeah.

[Phil] Have you as well?

[Richard] Yes.

[Phil] I mean, those are war crimes.

[Richard] Those are war crimes, yeah, yeah.

[Phil] But in your final report from Sri Lanka you said that you were happy to see the KMS pilots here.

[Richard] Yep.

[Phil] How do you explain that?

[Richard] Well, the pilots of that particular incident, actually, he'd arrived after I'd gone. And he was very upset about it, because the gunner in the back who does the shooting, not the pilot.

[Phil] I mean, the case with the opening fire on the school, that was in December 1986, so that was when you were there. And Tim Smith was flying a gunship and pulled the trigger.

[Richard] That I hadn't heard about, to tell you the truth, or I hadn't remembered it, anyhow. Yeah. The... I honestly don't know too much of the detail of that one. But I'm sure the pilots would not have sanctioned it, shall I say. They're looking for people maybe, but the gunner in the back who was the Sri Lankan was probably a bit trigger happy.

[Phil] In the particular case of the school, it was Tim Smith himself who was pulling the trigger.

[Richard] Oh, was it? Well, that I didn't know.

[Phil] According to Lieutenant Colonel Holworthy, the KMS pilots had another unorthodox tactic.

[Richard] Initially, actually, they were talking about bombing from helicopters. I thought it was completely impossible. But what they did was they had the old 36 grenade, the Mills grenade, and they pulled the pin out but kept the lever and put the grenades into wine glasses with the wine glass holding the lever. And then they'd fly over and drop the wine glass with the grenade in it. Of course, when it hit the ground, the glass broke, the grenade exploded. And I know this was happening because when I went to Trincomalee one day and had lunch there, and there were no wine glasses at all. The whole bloody lot had been dropped on the Tamils with grenades inside them.

[Phil] Keenie Meenie pilots were fighting on the front-line of this dirty war. But who was in charge of the company's contract?

[Richard] It was run by an ex-SAS guy whose pseudonym was Ken Whyte, and he was an ex-SAS lieutenant colonel.

[Phil] This is a photo of the man who was known as Ken Whyte when he was fighting with the British army. Later, he ran intelligence operations in Aden, Yemen, where enemy prisoners were allegedly tortured. Like so many British officers who learnt their trade fighting insurgencies in the dying days of Empire, he ended up in Northern Ireland in charge of an SAS squadron. There, he was linked to the death of an IRA prisoner, putting him on an IRA hit list. By the time Ken Whyte left the SAS and went to work for Keenie Meenie, his decades of counterinsurgency expertise were seen as hugely important to the Sri Lankan military. Once again, the line between training and operation command was blurred.

[Merril] I knew him as Whyte, Ken Whyte. He was very good, very good. He was a very professional guy, a tough guy.

[Phil] This declassified British government telegram indicates that Whyte was acting effectively as director of military operations for the Sri Lankan High Command. In other words, this document would suggest Ken Whyte was at the heart of the war's operational command structure. Ken Whyte's real name is Brian Baty and he lives in a sleepy English village. I've sent him several letters asking for an interview and giving him a chance to respond to all the allegations in this film. He never replied. So I went to Baty's house to see if he would talk to me there.

- Hello, Lieutenant Colonel Baty, Brian Baty? The front door's open, but nobody's coming to the door. Hello?

[Brian Baty] Yes, and you can bugger off.

[Phil] Are you Lieutenant Colonel Baty?

[Brian] You can bugger off.

[Phil] Are you Brian Baty, sir?

[Brian] You can bugger off.

[Phil] Can I ask you some questions about your time with KMS in Sri Lanka?

[Brian] No. No.

[Phil] Serious allegations, sir.

[Brian] Bugger off my land, get out!

[Phil] I've written to you, sir, as a journalist. You're being linked to war crimes in Sri Lanka, sir.

[Brian] You're a crackpot.

[Phil] Do you have any comments about these allegations, sir? Were you the most senior KMS man in Sri Lanka? Do you accept any personal responsibility for war crimes that were committed in Sri Lanka, sir?

- Not all mercenaries are so unwilling to discuss their role in Sri Lanka's war. Robin Horsfall did not fly helicopters or command operations, but he became increasingly concerned about what the British firm Keenie Meenie Services was getting involved with.

[Robin] We were sent to the North of Sri Lanka to run a battle school for the officer cadets. And this was the final part of their training before they were deployed. Initially I enjoyed the work. I was training bright young men with good educations. We were teaching them counter-terrorist drills as we knew them and as we functioned in the United Kingdom under the rule of law. We gave them intelligence briefings, we gave them briefings on what was acceptable behaviour. And it was only after our first pass-out group came back to us afterwards and explained to us what they'd experienced that it became a moral dilemma. They were being asked to carry out atrocities. They were being asked to necklace prisoners with tyres and burn them alive. And that means you put a burning rubber tyre over somebody and burn them to death, or use it as a form of torture. For me it was a tipping point. There was nothing I could do. I was a fairly young man, I was coming up to 30, I had no authority. There was no press in the north of the country. There was nobody you could take the story to. So I just simply decided to go home. So I drove to Colombo on a weekend, pretended that I was sick, refused to go back on the transport, created the circumstances for, to be called into the office, gave the wrong answers, and was put on a plane home.

[Phil] What do you mean by the wrong answers?

[Robin] Essentially you're talking to a former officer in the British Army, Brian Baty. And it was about being obtuse, or stropky. not kowtowing to his authority. So I never signed a paper saying I'm so disgusted with what's going on here. I didn't think that I, I don't think I had the confidence to do that. But inside I was pretty upset about the whole affair.

[Phil] Decades later, Brian Baty still wielded some authority. After we tried to contact Baty, the SAS told Horsfall not to take part in this film. But Horsfall is determined to speak out about what he witnessed in Sri Lanka, unlike most of the other mercenaries who carried on working for Keenie Meenie for several more years. The company only began to scale back its work in Sri Lanka after its operations in a different part of the world attracted attention. Keenie Meenie's co-founder, David Walker, had embroiled the company in a controversial US plot to overthrow a democratically elected government in Nicaragua.

[Tom Foley] Who is David Walker?

[Oliver North] David Walker is a British subject who runs a business in the Channel Islands.

[Tom] He's a security specialist? A specialist in insurgency and military matters?

[Oliver] The firm that he represents or runs, specialises in a number of activities like security assistance and the like, but I'm not entirely certain-

[Tom] Did you ever engage him?

[Oliver] That we really want to go too far in this discussion in a public session. I think there are equities that belong to other governments that are at stake here.

[Phil] Oliver North's dramatic revelation that a British mercenary company was fighting in Nicaragua was a public relations catastrophe, and soon Keenie Meenie ceased to exist as a company. In London, the KMS office was taken over by another private security company, Saladin. Saladin's director is none other than the former head of Keenie Meenie, David Walker. The United Nations' Working Group on Mercenaries says it is concerned about what appear to be close links between KMS and Saladin, including at the highest managerial level. Although Walker has not responded to our requests for comment, we found that he recently wrote a letter to Sri Lanka's Special Task Force expressing his pride in the work Keenie Meenie had done with this controversial unit. Sri Lanka's civil war finally ended in 2009 with the total annihilation of the Tamil Tigers. But the Special Task Force shows no sign of ceasing its activities. Today, thousands of Tamil civilians are still unaccounted for, and once again Tamils are protesting about the disappearances of their loved ones and the injustice and repression under which they live. While the international community

expresses deep concern over their plight and the lack of justice, the Special Task Force sees things rather differently.

[Palinda Wijesundara] When the war ends, people had so much time to demonstrate for very small things also. So it became a nuisance to the public as well as the police. What the police did was they use the water cannons and batons So during that time there were so many clashes between the police and the public. so it is not good to the image of the police department as well as the government. So the government wanted some kind of training for the police department. That's why we went to Scotland.

[Phil] In recent years, the STF has received extra training from Britain. But this time it is not mercenaries, but Scottish police who have been involved. In 2015, the UK began using its overseas aid budget to train the Special Task Force in crowd control tactics as part of an annual project costing over a million pounds. Even the head of the STF, Lateef, visited Scotland for training. The British government says it wants to improve the STF's human rights record, but the fearsome unit continues to violently attack protestors. This footage shows the STF bludgeoning Sri Lankan medical students in 2017, two years into the Scottish training scheme. And while we were filming in Sri Lanka, this family accused the STF of opening fire on their teenage son, for the crime of stealing sand from a beach. He was chased into a river and drowned in terror.

[Sathakaran speaking Tamil] Everyone is gathered here today for a ritual 41 days after my son died

[Grandmother speaking Tamil] Evil men did this to us.

[Sathakaran speaking Tamil] My son was 17 years old. His name was Mathusan Sathakaran. If the Special Task Force wasn't shooting, my son wouldn't have run away. He wouldn't have drowned in the river. The Special Task Force stopped us rescuing him.

[Phil] The allegations do not end here. A dozen Scottish police officers were training in Sri Lanka in 2018 during some of the country's worst violence against its Muslim community, in which the STF is accused of helping Buddhist mobs to burn down mosques and assault Muslim leaders. Even a Sri Lankan government minister spoke out about the Special Task Force.

[Abdul Haleem speaking Sinhala] I think Muslims in every village were prepared. But what they told was that the STF came and chased them away and allowed the rioters to attack and go in some other places I was told the police had told you will be given one hour to attack and leave" They have attacked and gone. There are such complaints.

[GPS] In half a mile, the destination's on your left. Tulliallan Castle.

[Phil] The Scottish Police refused to be interviewed for this film. However, they did agree to meet me off camera. The footage you are about to see was secretly filmed. I've arrived at Tulliallan Castle in Fife, which is home to the Scottish Police College, and it's where they've been training Sri Lankan police officers. I'm going to try to find out as much as I can about it today.

[Police Scotland Interviewee] Hello. Nice to meet you, come this way.

[Phil] Can I turn my dictaphone on, just to save me time-

[Interviewee] Uh, prefer not to, because I know you're making a commercial film, and clearly what we don't want is things ending up going, "Well, hang on, we never approved that." Our business model is we train them how to train. We want them to create bespoke products, which are relevant to ethical standards, dah, dah, dah, dah, human rights stuff, they then train. More recently, it's only more recently that we've started to, at the request of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, to start looking at public order. So that's the gap.

[Phil] And that involves the Special Task Force, does it?

[Interviewee] It involves individuals. We brought them here to train them.

[Phil] Okay, and are they, which units are they from?

[Interviewee] Well that's the data we'll pause at, given that, as I've said, everything I've said so far is in the public domain.

[Phil] Yeah. No, I mean-

[Interviewee] So going into detail you'll have to ask the Foreign & Commonwealth Office

[Phil] Because I mean, there was a picture of the Special Task Force on your website.

[Interviewee] There was a picture of an individual with an STF shield, yes.

[Phil] That suggests that you've trained that unit surely?

[Interviewee] We've trained individuals who are trainers. What we are doing is training their trainers how to train.

[Phil] I tried to show Police Scotland a video of the Special Task Force beating medical students at a demonstration in Colombo, but he refused to watch the footage. Were you aware of that incident?

[Interviewee] I'm aware of an incident yes

[Phil] Have you seen this video of it?

[Interviewee] No, no. There's no point in showing me it. I'm not a public order specialist one way or another, I can go on the internet and I can find lots of videos and clips and statements. There's lots out there. Showing me the video is not gonna add one thing or another.

[Phil] Yeah, I mean, I'm just wondering if that's the kind of thing you'd want? I'm not commenting on that. I'm not a public order specialist one way or the other.

[Interviewee] I'm not commenting on what's right or wrong from a public order perspective, and I can't comment whether we've trained those individuals or not or otherwise.

[Phil] While Police Scotland downplays its work with the STF, Sri Lankan officers talk proudly about the training they received.

[Palinda] Last September, October or so, they came, The instructors came from Scotland and they've training training, evidence gathering, evidence gathering team training and liaison officer training. So still the training is going on, and from this January they have started another training called Bronze Commander training. It's in public order. So I think this training will go on for another two years.

[Phil] Sri Lanka continues to receive community policing training from Scottish officers, although Police Scotland insists that none of this work is aimed at the Special Task Force. Meanwhile, in London, the Metropolitan Police is taking a very different approach. Shortly after my book was published in January, they launched a war crimes investigation into KMS. This means that one day, detectives could question David Walker about his work in Sri Lanka. He is still a director of Saladin and was last photographed in public when he signed a deal in Kenya in 2019. I emailed Saladin to ask David Walker about the police

investigation, but he never replied. So I went to Saladin's current office in Kensington, to see if I could speak to him there.

[Buzzer noise]

[Masculine voice] Hello?

[Phil] Oh hello, my name's Phil Miller, I'm a journalist. I'm trying to speak to David Walker from Saladin. Is he there, is he available?

[Masculine voice] He's not, I'm afraid, no.

[Phil] But he is a director of your company, isn't he?

[Masculine voice] Ah, you're welcome to put any questions on an email

[Phil] I have. I've emailed you several times asking for comment. I mean, are you aware that the Metropolitan police is now investigating the activities of British mercenaries in Sri Lanka, of which David Walker played a major role?

[Masculine voice] Thanks very much, bye.

[Phil] I mean, we've tried so many times to contact him, to contact David Walker, and he just has no interest in speaking to us. I think we've given him every opportunity. The person I spoke to through the doorbell, through the intercom, just told me to email in any questions I have for David Walker, which I've already done. David Walker is the last surviving senior member of Keenie Meenie. Brian Baty passed away in February 2020, a month after my book came out. We understand the police launched their investigation the month after Baty passed away. So it's a matter of time now whether the police are going to act swiftly to gather as much evidence they can before it's too late, or whether they are going to let Keenie Meenie get away with what it did in Sri Lanka.

[Verasammy speaking Tamil] In my homeland many Tamils have suffered because of the STF. Britain should compensate them for their losses.

[Robin] I left because I wasn't happy with the role that I was being asked to fulfil. There were a lot of undercurrents that were immoral. They were wrong. It doesn't matter if somebody legitimises a government or recognises a government, it doesn't make them right. And there's been a terrible genocide that's taken place in Sri Lanka, and now the Tamils are a very tiny minority, and a frightened minority that still exists in the country under fear. And I'm frightened that eventually there are going to be no Tamils in Sri Lanka at all.

[Widows speaking Tamil] The British government has helped train the forces who are committing these atrocities. The British government needs to come down and see what they are doing. They need to investigate what is happening to us.

[On screen titles]

In the last 150 years, the number of mercenaries convicted by British courts is Zero.
Britain has one of the largest private security industries in the world.