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**WORLD**

# Sri Lanka's hidden genocide

Four years after the Tamil Tigers were routed in Sri Lanka, the catalogue of government atrocities is just beginning.

By **Rosie DiManno** Star Columnist

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**“It was terrible. Every day when I woke up, I didn’t know if I would still be alive when the sun went down. I remember the fires, everything burning, women, children. So many times I came close to death, a shell that dropped five metres away from me, 10 metres away. Why not me? Why did I survive?”**

In the hospitality of war

We left them their dead

To remember us by

### **Archilochus, Greek poet-soldier, 7th century BC**

VAVUNIYA, SRI LANKA—Sri Lanka is an island nation in the shape of a tear drop, poignantly.

And countless are the tears that were shed amid the spasms of a savage civil war — as countless, as uncounted, as the dead.

The United Nations, which has acknowledged its calamitous failures under the Responsibility to Protect — R2P, a doctrine that Canada was pivotal in establishing — is still trying to tally the numbers and apportion the blame, four years on: 40,000 to 70,000 civilians killed over five months of the final conflagration, the number the UN now accepts, though many argue the figure is far higher.

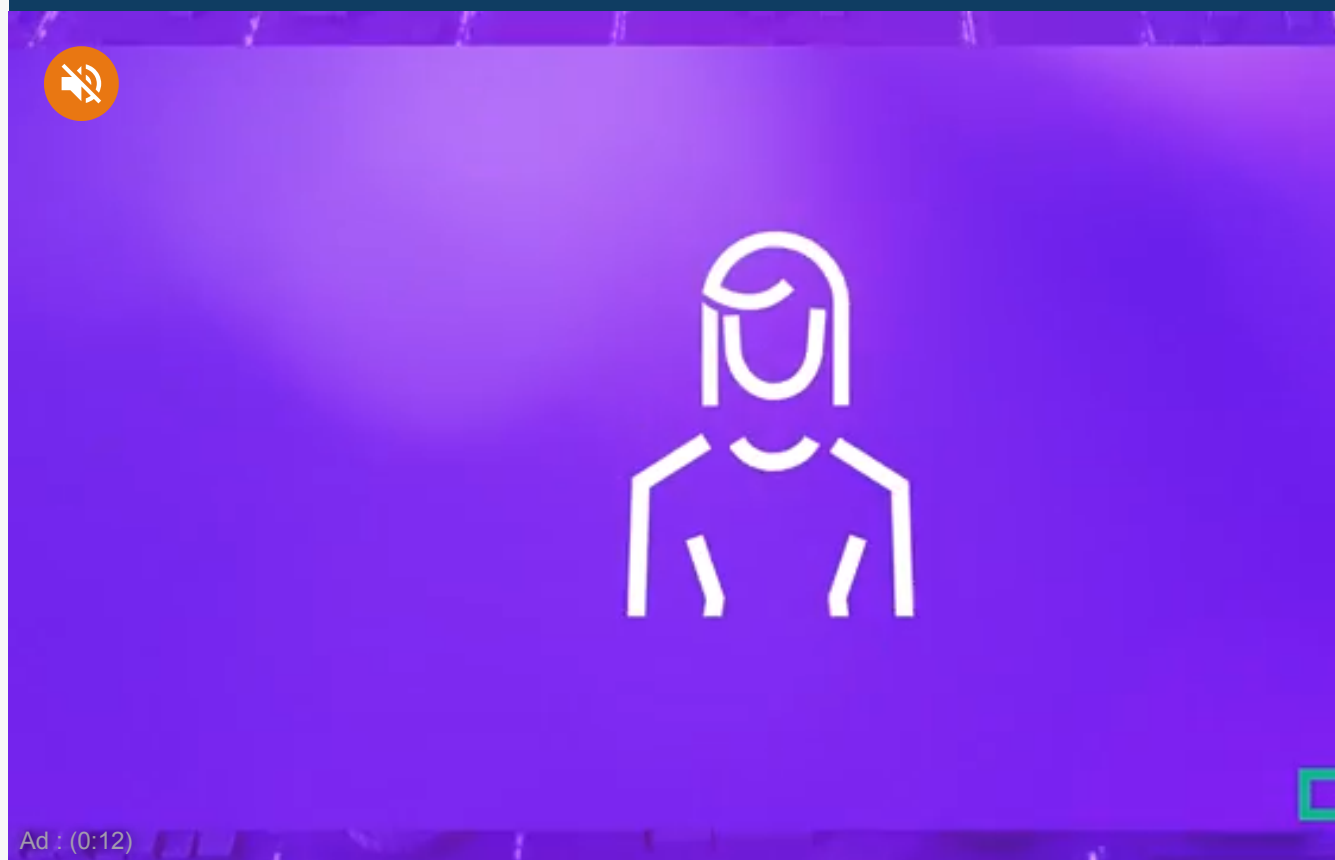
#### How the UN failed Sri Lanka: Dimanno

Nobody has been held responsible despite repeated cries for an international inquiry into war crimes committed by both sides. But one side, at the end, had at most 1,500 hard-core cadres while the other had 50,000 front-line soldiers.

The liberation struggle for a separate Tamil state in a majority Sinhalese country had raged for nearly three decades: conventional combat, asymmetrical combat, terrorist combat waged by fanatical

fighters who wrote the manual on spectacular suicide bombings against civilian targets, male and female shock troops with vials of cyanide at their throats in case of capture.

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The Tamil Tigers took an entire population hostage as human shields, driving hundreds of thousands away from their homes in a forced mass migration eastward across the scrubby jungle, floundering in retreat as one insurgent-held town after another fell. In the spring of 2009, in the last phase of their doomed quest, 350,000 people were funnelled into a narrow tract of coastland on the marshy shores of the Nandikadal lagoon on the northeastern coast, Tigers' backs against the sea, army troops surging in a pincer offensive from the west, the north, the south.

Trapped in The Cage, as it became known, civilians were caught between Tigers on one side who shot anyone attempting to flee and

heavy artillery bombardment on the other from the Sri Lankan army. An estimated 80,000 took their chances, traversing no man's land, fearful of being shot in the front or the back, and marshalled into detention camps.

The world looked away from these bedraggled wretches and the hordes left behind. Mangled corpses of babies, shredded by shelling, hung from palm trees. Families clambered for scant shelter behind mud bunds and inside bunkers, parents using their bodies to shield their children, lured cruelly into no-fire zones that were promptly fired upon. The ground, boggy with blood, was littered with severed limbs and tatters of charred flesh. Hell on Earth was a spit that measured three kilometres by one kilometre.

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## **The Gardiner connection**

Here, in May of 2009, the Tigers made a futile last stand. Their elusive and messianic leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, among the last to die, apparently while attempting to steal away, joining the stream of shell-shocked citizens wading across the lagoon and collapsing into the arms of Sinhalese troops they feared as monsters.

For five months, they had been pummelled, strafed and bombarded — women, children, the elderly. Only a few voices were raised internationally to halt the carnage. In Toronto, expatriate Tamils blocked the Gardiner Expressway to draw attention to atrocities unfolding on the other side of the planet. The public only wanted their road back.

The Tigers were a terrorist organization, thus designated across the globe by 2006. In their death rattle as a once-powerful rebel force, no mercy could be expected, even as their leaders scrambled for a ceasefire, for a formal surrender under the auspices of the UN. But most of the innocents who died in the final convulsion of combat, between January and May 2009, were killed by the army in what was an entirely avoidable massacre. The Tigers were besieged, escape impossible, yet the regime in Colombo would not yield.

They eradicated terrorism — that was their triumphalist cry in a war-on-terror era — and were applauded for it: the “Sri Lanka Model” of counter-insurgency. Colombo even offered to train the U.S. military, mired in Afghanistan, in their successful ways.

They brought the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam to their knees. And in the years since the war ended, the Tigers crushed, the government has continued to promote its version of events, their “bloodless historic victory,” which every regime official still describes as a “hostage rescue.”

But on the ground, that benighted ground, the Sri Lankan forces unleashed horrors that, retrospectively, have been condemned as alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity. The killing of civilians through widespread shelling, intentional attacks on innocents, firepower targeted on hospitals (22 such attacks in those

final five months, as documented by Human Rights Watch) and humanitarian convoys, denial of aid assistance and starvation, failure to allow for care of the wounded and enforced disappearances.

Navi Pillay, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, in September [called upon Sri Lanka again to conduct a “credible” inquiry into human rights violations](#). Failing that, “the international community will have a duty to establish its own inquiry mechanisms.”

Victors, as always, write the requiems.

### **Witnessing a massacre**

This is what Dr. Thangamuthu Sathiyamoorthy wrote on May 13, his last email dispatch to the outside from inside The Cage:

“Heavy battle started since 5:30 a.m. Many wounded civilians were brought to the hospital. The hospital is not providing services because hospital was under shell attack. Few staff reported to duty. Nearly 1,000 patients are waiting for treatment. But even wound-dressing and giving antibiotic problem. So many wounded have to die, in the ward, among patients, many dead bodies are there. Seeing and hearing the people cry . . . disaster.”

Sathiyamoorthy was one of four Tamil doctors, along with a handful of medics and nurses, who stayed in the conflict zone for two years, treating acute trauma and burns, performing surgical amputations without anesthetics in makeshift field hospitals, under almost constant artillery attack. He chronicled the death and destruction in photos and email dispatches that he regularly sent to 40 embassies as well as international media — upwards of 200 recipients —

because foreign journalists were not allowed anywhere near the battle zone.

It was a war without witnesses. Colombo made sure of that.

The UN had withdrawn all but its domestic Tamil staff — the Tigers would not permit them to leave — sending out only the occasional World Food Program convoy. The last one, the 11th, came under intense fire from multi-barrel rocket strikes (the army) and mobile artillery batteries (the Tigers), despite safe passage negotiations with both sides, as civilians huddled close to the vehicles in a forlorn bid for safety. They were killed by the hundreds.

“The fighting was like a tsunami in the final months,” Sathiyamoorthy told the Star during a recent interview in Vavuniya, close to the southern border of Northern Province, where he is now director of the main local hospital. “There were thousands of attacks and no corridor for civilians to leave, never. Civilians were not going over into the area captured by the government. How could they? There was shelling all the time coming from that direction, aerial attacks, Claymore mines. And the Tigers shooting at them if they tried to escape.”

## **Civilian pawns**

To this day, Sri Lanka's military commanders insist they took all reasonable precautions to induce the population out of harm's way, away from the front line, and that culpability lies with the Tigers, who deliberately surrounded themselves with civilians, which is true.

This had always been LTTE strategy, from the time they first withdrew from the Jaffna Peninsula in the northwest sector of the

country in 1996, taking 400,000 civilians with them and establishing a mini-state in the Vanni, a vast triangular swath of jungle — Tigerland — that the rebels controlled for more than a decade. It would ultimately become the main scorched battleground when the Sri Lankan government, under President Mahinda Rajapaksa and his defence secretary brother Gotabaya, launched its no-mercy push to annihilate the Tigers in 2007.

The army first broke through Elephant Pass — which connects Jaffna Peninsula to the Vanni — amid fierce fighting. Then, within weeks, the main towns held by the LTTE fell like dominoes, most disastrously Killinochchi, the Tigers' administrative centre, with its parallel government, parallel judiciary, parallel police and health and education services. It signalled the beginning of the end-game.

“When the army entered Killinochchi, we went to Mullaittivu District,” recalls Sathiyamoorthy. “We moved seven, eight times, five kilometres at a time.”

He had been regional director of health services for Killinochchi and Mullaittivu, spending the ceasefire years — between 2002 and 2007 — crossing back and forth the delineation line separating Tiger and government territory. When fighting resumed, Sathiyamoorthy sent his wife and young children to Vavuniya but remained behind as a Tamil doctor on the Colombo government payroll.

The Tigers had trained their own physicians, though Sathiyamoorthy also attended to Tigers, when needed. “We treated whoever came to the hospital. To get medicine, the supplies we needed, I had to deal with the army HQ and negotiate with the LTTE. The army was suspicious of me, the LTTE were suspicious of me. After 2007, the government systematically stopped the supply



of drugs. We had some stock but not enough to treat people properly, so they died.

“The army asked me to come into the government-controlled area but there was no way to get there, no proper road. And the people needed me. Every day, there would be hundreds who needed treatment.”

In retreat, as the fighting intensified and as the Tigers fought a desperate rearguard action, Sathiyamoorthy and the three other doctors would arrive at a location and scout out buildings that might be converted into a slapdash hospital. They coped with the wounded, even as their top nurse was killed and one of the other doctors was struck in the chest by shrapnel.

Yet it was only from these doctors that the UN in Colombo was receiving any eyes-on estimates of casualties and civilian displacement, figures the government continues to angrily refute.

“We practised medicine in a different way. My job was co-ordinating. We’d arrive in an area and I’d say, OK, this is a school, we can set up here, we can put beds there and operate.”

### **Dangerous no-fire zones**

The government plan was to “prick” the Vanni pocket, creating corridors through which civilians could detach themselves from the Tigers and flee. But these routes never opened up, says Sathiyamoorthy. Nor was there any respite from bombardment in the three no-fire zones the government carved out between January and May 2009, when the Tamils were clearly on their heels, the cause lost. The fate of non-combatants gang-pressed into a civilian perimeter was of no apparent consequence to the military.

Sathiyamoorthy sketches a map on a piece of paper. “This was supposed to be a no-fire zone,” he says, pointing. “But it wasn’t. Civilians went there because they thought they would be safe. They weren’t. They were fired on by the army. The government should have taken a more realistic approach to evacuate civilians. The whole area was under their control, except for a narrow part.

“It was terrible. Every day when I woke up, I didn’t know if I would still be alive when the sun went down. I remember the fires, everything burning, women, children. So many times I came close to death, a shell that dropped five metres away from me, 10 metres away. Why not me? Why did I survive?”

On his laptop, Sathiyamoorthy clicks on a video he shot in the last days, an ambulance ablaze when hit by shelling as it attempted to evacuate casualties toward the rear and a Red Cross hospital ship anchored two kilometres offshore.

“There was nowhere for the civilians to move anymore, our backs were to the sea. We hoped for an international intervention.”

That was the only card the Tigers had left to play, that images transmitted to the outside world of a civilian bloodbath in progress would spur the international community to outrage and a ceasefire from Colombo.

Some did raise their voices in protest but Colombo turned a deaf ear. Globally, as the regime well knew, attention was focused on Gaza, where an Israeli invasion force had just engaged in a three-week battle that resulted in the death of about 1,000 civilians. The siege at Nandikadal lagoon, which had turned into a massive human abattoir, simply didn’t register with the same sense of outrage. The

UN passed 10 resolutions against Israel, none against Colombo to restrain its forces.

## **End-game**

Just two years earlier, the prevailing opinion was that there was no military solution to the conflict, that the Tigers could never be defeated. Sathiyamoorthy shared that view, along with a Tamil populace that continued to believe, despite the subsequent setbacks, that the Tigers would launch a decisive counterassault, as they always had before.

By February 2009, even the most diehard rebels saw that the end was at hand. “All of them knew they were going to die. They were prepared to die. I knew that it was over and that it would end badly.”

Yet the Tigers continued forcibly recruiting children, shoving them to the front. Where once they had compelled conscription, demanding every family give one child to the liberation struggle, now they were grabbing two and three siblings, youngsters their parents couldn't hide in the shrinking battle space.

On May 5, Sathiyamoorthy watched as three high-ranking Tigers pressed cyanide vials into their mouths.

Nine days later, he stood in what was left of his ramshackle hospital, listened to the moaning of a thousand patients he could not help. “I did some wound-dressing only, no medicine for their pain, and we were under attack again. Many people were escaping now through the lagoon. The boundary was 50 metres away. There was no margin between us anymore except the lagoon.”

Rebel-held territory had been reduced to a dot of land, no more than 150 metres in radius.

“On May 15, at 2 p.m., the LTTE said they had decided to surrender and the last people started to go. I left that evening, about 5,000 of us. Thirty minutes later, the army had captured the entire area.”

He had changed into a sarong, to blend in with civilians and “look like an ordinary person.” Soldiers were separating out anybody who looked like they may have been a Tiger. But when Sinhalese-speaking troops were unable to communicate with civilians, Sathiyamoorthy stepped forward to translate. “I told a soldier I was a doctor. He said I must have been serving the LTTE. I knew he wanted to kill me. I could see it in his eyes.”

Instead, Sathiyamoorthy was sent with thousands of other civilians to an army camp in Vivayuna. “The next morning, I was arrested with the other doctors. Our crime was that we had sent statements to the media during the fighting.”

## **Plea for justice**

One final indignity remained for Sathiyamoorthy and his medical colleagues. After two months out of sight and with charges hanging over their heads, the Tamil physicians were trotted out at a press conference held at the defence ministry in Colombo. Clearly nervous, the doctors — under the stern gaze of officials — announced they had lied throughout the conflict about the civilian casualty figures, had been forced by the Tigers to inflate the numbers. Only a maximum of 750 civilians, they stated, had been killed in the five months leading up to May 18 when the civil war was officially declared over.

Speaking woodenly, they added it was the Tigers who had seized food and medical shipments sent in by the government.

It was an exercise in propaganda that makes Sathiyamoorthy wince in shame, four years on. He was released from custody in August 2007, though the threat of prosecution hung over his head far longer.

Together with the International Red Cross, Sathiyamoorthy and his three fellow doctors have since been credited with co-ordinating the evacuation of nearly 14,000 patients and caregivers from The Cage between mid-February and May, most removed on twice-a-day evacuation runs to the hospital ship.

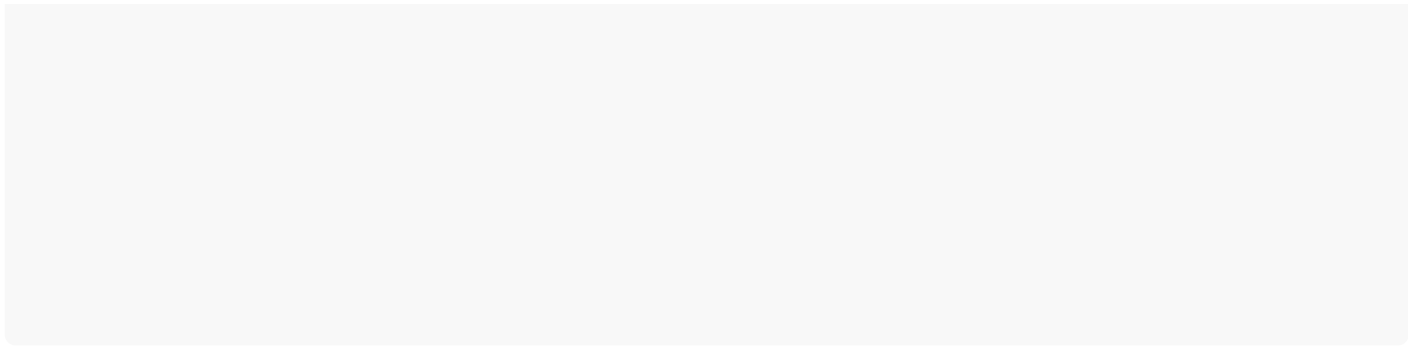
“I can’t tell you how many died in those months — 20,000, 40,000? Too many . . . so many who could have been saved.

“One day I hope that there will be justice for them. And punishment for the guilty.”

Read more about: [Sri Lanka](#)

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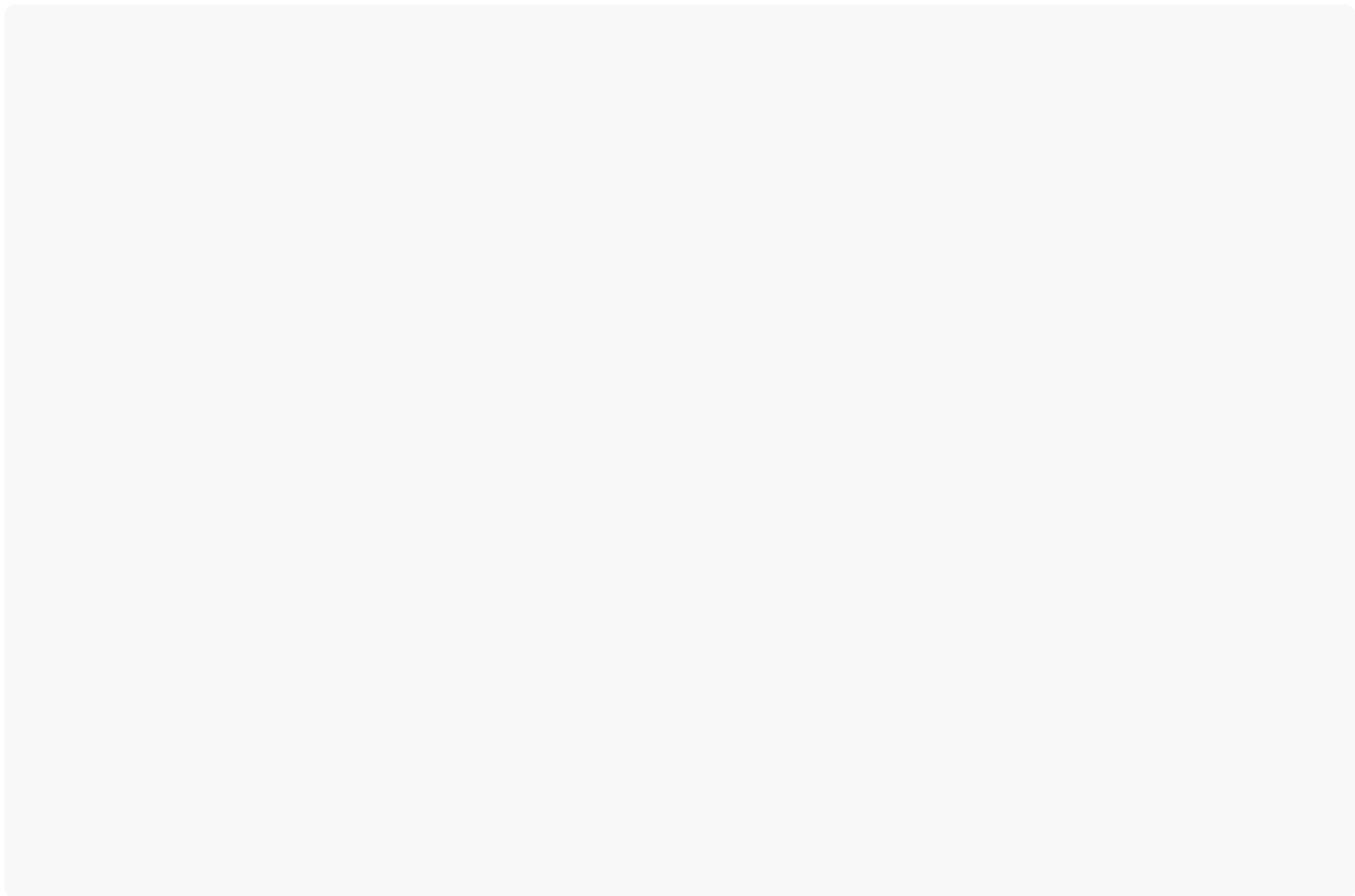


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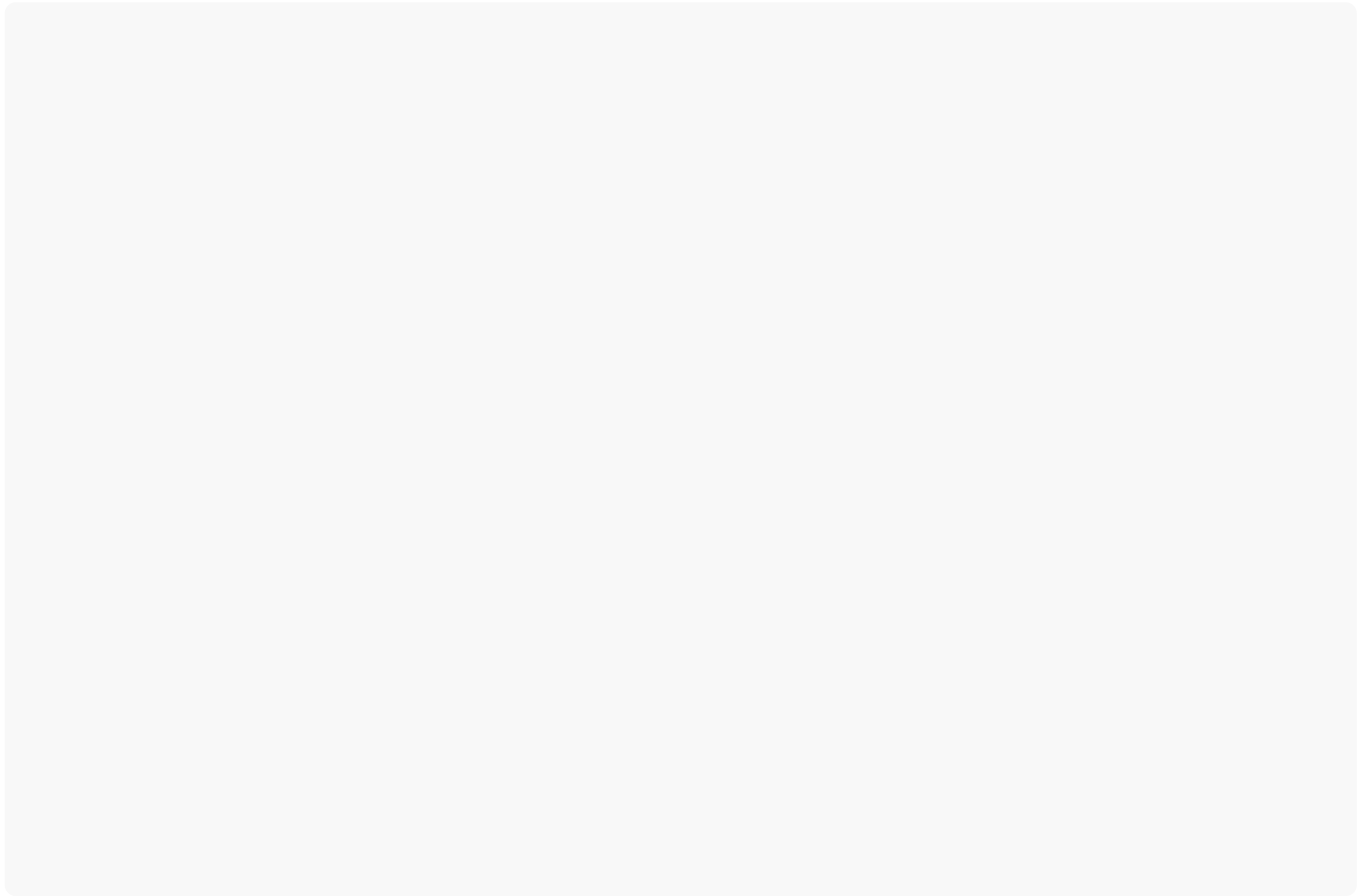
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