

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Sri Lanka: a fast-deteriorating situation

India awaits evidence of new government initiatives for a political settlement of the communal crisis.

It is now more than two months since the collapse of the All-Party Conference that was exploring the grounds for a peaceful political settlement to the conflict which has pitted the Tamil minorities against the Sinhala majority in Sri Lanka. The crisis flared up more than a year ago, with bloody riots killing hundreds. Half-hearted efforts by the government to find a negotiated settlement have failed, and virulent Sinhala chauvinists and separatist terrorists on the Tamil side have increasingly conspired to push the situation out of control.

The lack of any new domestic political initiatives from the Sri Lankan government of President Junius Richard Jayewardene is the most disturbing element and is raising many questions here.

Against this backdrop, one development has made Indian officials especially wary—the sudden flood of refugees from Sri Lanka to Tamil Nadu. Official figures put their number presently at 50,000, with thousands of poor Tamils recently flooding across the channel separating the two countries. These refugees contrast with the largely middle-class exiles of the earlier period, and give credence to fears that more trouble may be afoot.

New Delhi has reportedly received independent reports about an effort by sections of the Sri Lankan military in league with Sinhala chauvinist hardliners in the Jayewardene cabinet to orchestrate the exodus of poor Tamilians from the northern provinces, reducing the Tamil popu-

lation drastically and freeing the area for Sinhala settlements. This racist scheme has the smell of the worst Israeli-style tactics, and is not beyond the headline Sinhala chauvinists.

Moreover, Jayewardene, who has been conducting a delicate balancing act between the “moderates” and the Sinhala fanatics all along, has taken up an unusually strident posture vis-à-vis India. On Feb. 20, he reiterated Sri Lanka’s charge that India is training terrorists in the southern state of Tamil Nadu to break up Sri Lanka and create a separate nation, “Tamil Eelam.”

The government of India has repeatedly rejected the charges of training terrorists. While there is no doubt that the government itself is not engaged in, and would not sanction such activities, there are clear signs that terrorist elements and the promoters of “Tamil Eelam” are at work in Tamil Nadu. Some months ago this was documented by the India fortnightly *India Today*, and one fallout of the spy scandal that rocked Delhi in January was exposure of an Indian intelligence report describing the separatist-terrorist networks in Tamil Nadu.

But the actual extent to which these networks are involved in Sri Lanka is open to question. So far, Sri Lankan authorities have not identified the international elements of the terrorist-separatist campaign bent on wreaking havoc in both countries and destroying relations between them.

Yet the Sri Lankan government has increasingly made “Tamil Nadu terrorists” the sole focus of concern, par-

ticularly since the collapse of the All-Party Conference in December. If India really wants to help, Jayewardene has said, it should stem the Tamil “Tigers” operations. He has said in speeches that there is no possibility of negotiating any settlement until the campaign of terror is ended. Intensified Sri Lankan military activities in the Palk Straits have caused several incidents in recent months. In the terrorist hunt, many Indian fishermen have lost their boats and some, their lives.

That India has no quarrels with military-security measures to stop terrorism in Sri Lanka was made clear during the visit of Sri Lankan Security Minister Athulathmudali to Delhi on Feb. 9-10. When a Zairean plane carrying weapons for Sri Lanka’s military was detained after an unscheduled landing in India for refueling, the prime minister himself intervened to have the aircraft released. Still, the recent Sri Lankan proposals for joint naval patrols of the 25-mile wide Palk Straits will be carefully weighed, according to government spokesmen, “in the totality of the prevailing situation in Sri Lanka.”

What India insists is that the Jayewardene government resume political talks with the spokesmen of the Tamil minorities, whose grievances are real and legitimate.

Happily, India has full U.S. support in this approach. This has trimmed the sails of the left lobby and others here gunning for a confrontation with “the U.S. puppet” Sri Lanka. The United States refused to send security personnel or sell military equipment to Sri Lanka. While stressing its opposition to a separate state, the United States has used every occasion to press the Jayewardene government to restart real negotiations and to seek the aid of India in resolving the crisis.