

## From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

### Toward a solution for Sri Lanka

*A string of "firsts" in regional diplomacy gives substance to Rajiv Gandhi's commitment to stabilizing the region.*

In a spontaneous political initiative on June 2, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi threw overboard years of cynical stereotyping concerning the nations of the region.

The prime minister announced that he and Sri Lankan President Jayawardene, visiting Delhi for two days of talks on the Sri Lankan crisis, would fly to Dhaka, Bangladesh, together to express their sorrow and solidarity with the government and people of Bangladesh in the wake of the May 27 cyclone disaster.

"We welcome this gesture and it is a matter of great satisfaction to us, since it will encourage the evolution of South Asian regional cooperation," a moved Bangladesh President Ershad told a press conference. Dhaka is host to the summit meeting of the South Asian Regional Commission (SARC) in December. Jayawardene, who had threatened to boycott the recent SARC meeting in Bhutan over Indian politicians' statements on Sri Lanka, said he was looking forward to the summit.

"We reiterate that we stand together for the solidarity of our region," said Rajiv and Jayawardene in a joint statement after their tour of disaster areas with Ershad.

As President Ershad pointed out, the extraordinary gesture was unprecedented in the history of the subcontinent. Such gestures don't necessarily have an immediate "result," but help to dissolve accumulated prejudices and create a new "geometry" for positive relations.

The mini-summit in Dhaka capped

another diplomatic initiative which had already sent the subcontinent's ideologues scurrying back to their drawing boards. Rajiv Gandhi had invited President Jayawardene to New Delhi in the midst of a hectic schedule of important foreign tours, and after months of mistrust between India and Sri Lanka and a rapid worsening of the violence between the Tamil minority and Sinhala majority there.

The initiative, which included nearly an hour of private discussions and hours more of both formal and informal talks with aides, established a working rapport between the two leaders. The Sri Lankan President delayed his departure by an hour on June 3 to have another, unscheduled meeting with Mr. Gandhi.

While the joint statement issued did not spell out any formula the two sides might have agreed upon for the Sri Lankan crisis, developments since the talks give evidence of some breakthroughs.

According to news reports from Colombo, on his return, President Jayawardene stated publicly—for the first time since the ethnic crisis erupted—that he rejects a military solution to the problem. The Sri Lankan President was addressing the parliamentary group of his party, the United National Party. He called on people to be patient and await the new measures he would be taking, based, he said, on the talks with Rajiv Gandhi.

Earlier, at his departure from Delhi, Jayawardene had announced that he would grant amnesty to Tamil ter-

rorists if they laid down their arms. A bid to halt the violence and make way for resumption of negotiations on a political solution to the crisis is known to be part of a set of concrete proposals made by India.

At a press conference in India, Prime Minister Gandhi revealed that Indian authorities had seized \$4 million worth of arms from Tamil extremists. This was the first such announcement. While always emphasizing its stand for Sri Lanka's integrity and general opposition to terrorism, the Indian government has to date stonewalled on any and all references to extremist activity in the state of Tamil Nadu, just across the Palk Straits from Sri Lanka. There are at least 100,000 Tamil refugees in Tamil Nadu, including the entire spectrum of Tamil activist groups.

President Jayawardene told his party members that Rajiv Gandhi had reassured him that India would not support terrorist acts against Sri Lanka from India.

Amid this evidence of progress there is as yet no indication that the toughest nut has been cracked—namely, the formulation of concrete proposals for a political solution to the Sri Lankan crisis. But it is on this that the effectiveness of the Indian initiative, as well as Jayawardene's political future, ultimately rest.

In reaching for India's help and rejecting a military solution, the Sri Lankan President has put himself out on a limb. He will have to move quickly and firmly to organize a consensus—including Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the strongest candidate in the coming 1987 elections—around viable proposals, or he will be faced with a Sinhala majority revolt in his party. Sinhala mob attacks on Tamil villages in Trincomalee two days after his return were a reminder.