

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Sri Lanka: cul de sac?

New violence and the inability to reconvene negotiations call for a rethinking.

After its success in bringing the Tamil ethnic minority and the Sri Lankan government to the negotiating table in Thimpu, Bhutan in August, the Indian government's initiative to facilitate a political solution to Sri Lanka's violent ethnic crisis appears to have come to a standstill.

On Dec. 9, Sri Lankan President Junius Jayewardene paid a one day visit to Delhi, upon return from the South Asian Regional Cooperation (SARC) heads of state meeting in Dhaka, Bangladesh, for talks with Rajiv Gandhi and Indian foreign ministry officials. Whether any breakthrough will result is not known, but few here are optimistic.

The fragile, almost tentative ceasefire unilaterally extended by the Sri Lankan government on Oct. 15 is clearly ineffective. Reports of new violence come in almost daily. At the same time, there has been no agreement on a basis for restarting negotiations.

The Indian foreign office and the prime minister himself have been engaged in successive rounds of talks with both Sri Lankan officials and Tamil representatives to find some common ground. But so far, the Sri Lankan government's working paper, which reportedly offers little in the direction of Tamil political representation, has been rejected as a basis for renewed talks by the Tamil groups.

The Tamils themselves are now split into two factions. The four radical groups under the banner of the Ee-

lam National Liberation Front (ENLF) insist on a separate Tamil homeland, and are demanding to be recognized as the "sole legitimate" representative of the Tamils. The People's Liberation Organization for Tamil Eelam (PLOT) distinguishes itself as a group of "Marxist revolutionaries" committed to recruiting youth of the Sinhalese majority to a broader revolutionary overthrow of the government. PLOT and the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), a moderate parliamentary grouping, are, however, united in pursuing negotiations to find a satisfactory political formula.

The central issue surrounds the granting of power to the states, two of which in the north and east are Tamil-majority states. The TULF had demanded a system of regional councils, where the two Tamil-majority states would be linked to make up one region, with powers over law and order, land settlement, and other vital matters. So far, the government has been unwilling to go beyond "district" councils with much more limited powers. India has been working to translate its own system of federated states with a division of powers, into a form appropriate for Sri Lanka.

In involving itself in mediation, India had to put its opposition to terrorism and separatism clearly on the table—to the discomfort of certain lobbies in India and elsewhere. But while it is vital to strengthen the Sri Lankan government's hand against separatist terror, as Rajiv Gandhi well

knows from his successful handling of the Punjab mess, this is by no means a sufficient basis for actually solving the problem.

The isolation and defeat of separatist terror depends on creating a broad political base for that as part of a longer term political solution among both minority and majority groups on the island. It is this that President Jayewardene appears incapable of doing.

Among other things, the specter of the 1987 presidential election is acting as a powerful constraint on the Jayewardene government, as indicated by the coy abstention of Jayewardene's main political rival, former Prime Minister Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike and her political party.

Who has kept aloof, waiting to capitalize on whatever steps the President takes. His success in reaching a compromise deemed unacceptable by chauvinist Sinhalese would make as winning a campaign issue as his failure to do anything at all.

In this type of political vacuum, the polarization between the government and the terrorists has taken on the character of stalemate, with military escalation the only prospect. Indeed, Jayewardene himself has given credence to this outlook in recent speeches emphasizing the need to "win the war" with more arms.

This in turn points to what some here perceive to be an error embedded in the terms of the negotiation process from the outset. In this view, it is essential to base the talks on a grouping that includes representatives from each and all of the major political and parliamentary groupings—and not simply on a back-and-forth between the government and the Tamils, the latter represented overwhelmingly by militant guerrilla factions at that. In this view a broadening of the negotiations is as important as finding a common basis to continue talking.