

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

From bad to worse in Sri Lanka

A failed military security operation follows a new burst of terror at stalled political talks.

On May 18, Sri Lanka's security forces launched a major military offensive to regain control of the northern Tamil-majority province of Jassna. By May 20, mid-way through the offensive, the Sri Lankan defense ministry announced that the troops were forced to pull back to their bases under heavy fire from Tamil extremists, operating from as many as 40 hideouts throughout the peninsula and using rockets, mortars, machineguns, and land mines.

The government spokesman defined the abortion of the mission as a "set-back."

The apparent bungling of the vaunted "military solution" only further deepens the tragic crisis enveloping this island nation. In the weeks preceding this new cul-de-sac, terrorist-separatist activities had reached a new height, including savage internecine warfare among the Tamil extremist groups, and the process of negotiating a political solution to the ethnic problem underlying the crisis ground to a dead halt.

The so-called Eelam Revolutionary Party, one of the guerrilla groups operating in Sri Lanka, claimed credit for the April 21 sabotage of the Kantalai Dam, which killed 200 civilians and washed away the homes of another 14,000. In a statement from Trivandrum, in India, the group's "politburo chairman," P. K. Balasubramaniam charged that President Junius Jayewardene wanted to continue his "reign of terror" against Tamils to save his

own government from downfall.

On May 2, an Air Lanka plane was blown up, killing 15, mostly tourists, and five days later, a bomb placed in the central telegraph office in the heart of Colombo killed 12 and injured 175.

In the midst of this, the most powerful guerrilla group, the Liberation Tigers of Tigers Eelam (LTTE), made a bid to take over the movement by exterminating the leadership of its rival, the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO). Both are professedly Marxist-Leninist groups, but LTTE rejects any settlement short of establishment of an independent socialist state of "Tamil Eelam."

Surfacing in London to take credit for the telegraph office bombing was a spokesman for the Janatha Vimurthi Peramuna (Peoples' Liberation Front), the Maoist group that organized a revolt against the government in 1971 which took 18,000 lives. The leader of the Front, Rohana Wijeweera, who was educated at Patrice Lumumba University in Moscow, and then began quoting Chairman Mao, had been underground for some months. Not part of the Tamil movement, the Front is in fact professedly Sinhala-majority chauvinist. Sri Lankan security forces insist, however, that Wijeweera maintains links with the separatists.

The Front's London spokesman said the bombing was committed because there have not been elections in Sri Lanka for nine years. This is the war cry of Sirimavo Bandaranaike, former prime minister of Sri Lanka

and leader of the Sri Lankan Freedom Party.

As the activation of Wijeweera suggests, the extremist groups are involved in proxy wars on behalf of their respective foreign sponsors—be they extremist factions of the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Soviet Union, or North Korea—whose interest in perpetuating the crisis varies.

It should not be forgotten that Sri Lanka was used as a safehouse for the North Korean assassins of half of South Korean Prime Minister Chun Doo Hwan's cabinet in the 1983 Rangoon bombing.

None of these groups represent the mass of Tamils, whose grievances are real and must be addressed by the Sri Lankan government.

These latest developments have already intensified the hand-wringing here over what should be India's role. The government has issued a pro forma condemnation of the Sri Lankan military operation in Jassna. But, in fact, India can't do much at this point.

The failure to bring forth the moderates of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) and the Tamil Workers' Congress as the legitimate representatives of the Tamils is of one piece with India's refusal to identify and draw the line at extremism at the outset of the long "political solution" exercise that has now run aground. It is the same mistake that so tragically complicated the Punjab crisis.

Moreover, India can have no consolation in the prospects of a Bandaranaike government in Sri Lanka. Not only is the notoriously opportunistic politician a die-hard Sinhala chauvinist, but her record as a friend of India is not exactly strong. During the 1971 crisis in Bangladesh, then-Prime Minister Bandaranaike offered the Pakistani air force refueling facilities when Pakistan was fighting the Indian army in then-East Pakistan.