

# Sri Lankan civil war adds to instability of South Asia

by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan Maitra

The uneasy truce between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan government has broken down over a trivial incident, and an all-out bloody war is now in progress in Sri Lanka. The 40-year-old ethnic crisis between the Tamils and Sinhalese, which has taken a toll of thousands of lives, is now fast approaching a state of civil war. The past history of Indian involvement with the Sri Lankan Tamils, coupled with a near-war situation prevailing in the subcontinent over Kashmir and Punjab, has made South Asia currently one of the most volatile spots in the world.

Reports about the present state of affairs in Sri Lanka indicate that the LTTE "Tigers" and the Sri Lankan military are determined to annihilate one other. At this writing, the Tigers, who had grown decidedly cocky after "defeating" the Indian Peace Keeping Forces during the latter's two-year stay in the island-state, have been inflicted with heavy casualties and are now on the retreat from urban areas in eastern districts. The Tigers are, however, holding their own in the rural areas of the eastern provinces, ambushing Sri Lankan soldiers mostly through mines and booby traps, and consolidating their hold in the northern districts where the Tamils have a decided edge over the Sinhalese.

The Sri Lankan Army, on the other hand, after initial successes in the urban areas, is now bogged down in the rural areas of the eastern districts. With the help of the Air Force, the Army is trying to break the Tigers' stranglehold in the northern districts. At this point, the pressure is on the LTTE.

The vicious mood of either side is reflected in the no-holds-barred and take-no-prisoners type of battles. Dead bodies strewn across villages mark the retaliatory measures taken by the victor. On the government side, Minister of State for Defense Ranjan Wijeratne summed up the situation best, when he said, Tigers chief "Pirbhakaran wants my head; I want his." Wijeratne also pointed out that the Sri Lankan Army is not like the Indian Army; it is motivated to *kill* the Tigers.

Though it is difficult to comprehend that the whole world would stand by and let this fight continue till one side is annihilated, the first country to take note of the situation, naturally enough, is India. Indian Prime Minister V.P. Singh expressed his concern recently about the situation in Sri Lanka and, as a policy directive, asserted that India would

not allow its territory to be used by "foreign terrorist groups" as a base of operation.

The foreign terrorists referred to by the Indian prime minister are none other than the LTTE militants, who, according to media reports, are operating from the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, 21 miles from Sri Lanka across the Palk Straits. The Tigers are reportedly off-loading arms purchased from Singapore and elsewhere along the Thanjavur coast in Tamil Nadu, and transshipping them to the northern Jaffna Peninsula of Sri Lanka using fast fiberglass motor boats. Such information has been widely circulated in India, but surprisingly, no action has been taken so far.

## Tigers run amok in Tamil Nadu

The LTTE presence in Tamil Nadu is hardly news. Only recently, a posse of LTTE assassins broke into an apartment house there and gunned down 14 members of the rival Tamil militant group, the EPRLF, including its general secretary. In Sri Lanka, EPRLF was voted to power in the Tamil-dominated northern and eastern provinces, in an election organized under the terms of the India-Sri Lanka Accord and boycotted by the LTTE. The EPRLF government collapsed with the withdrawal of the Indian Peace Keeping Force in early 1990, and the group officially sought refuge in India. Their presence in Tamil Nadu was supposed to be a secret, but evidently security was breached.

The exposé of the LTTE massacre in Tamil Nadu, splashed across national dailies, was grave enough for New Delhi to summon Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi, who was told to clean out the Tigers and other militant Tamil groups. But only a handful of Tigers were arrested; the so-called clean-up operation was apparently an eyewash, indicative of the chief minister's own personal involvement with the Tamil Tigers.

Karunanidhi is by no means the sole Indian connection to the Tigers. Years ago, respectable Indian chronicles identified the presence of the Tigers in Tamil Nadu, and there were more than hints that India's foreign intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), was involved in providing the Tigers with arms training. Subsequently, a book by Rajesh Kadian, titled *India's Sri Lanka Fiasco*, stated that RAW was "orchestrating training" of most Tamil militants in India. Kadian states that besides the training, the guerrillas

were supplied with "replacement" weapons on demand.

Following the stationing of the Indian Peace Keeping Forces on the island in 1987, India came to clash with the Tamil Tigers when they reneged on the agreement to lay down arms under the terms of the India-Sri Lanka Accord. The umbilical cord between RAW and the Tigers was cut, but not before the RAW-trained Tigers, using mines and booby traps, had killed as many as 1,200 Indian soldiers. In addition to the RAW connection, the Tigers had powerful friends in Tamil Nadu. The late chief minister, M.G. Ramachandran, who was posthumously adorned with India's highest national award by then-Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, was a personal friend of Pirbhakaran and had helped the Tigers operate from safehouses in Tamil Nadu until the day he died. There are many other covert sympathizers of the Tigers in Tamil Nadu who tenderly address them as "the boys."

### Many dangers

Such sentimentality is hardly appropriate. As Prime Minister V.P. Singh has pointed out, Indian support to foreign terrorists is fraught with many dangers. On the surface the Tamil Tigers demand an independent Tamil state (Eelam) within Sri Lanka, advocating the "two-nation theory"—one country, two nations—earlier pushed successfully by Mohammad Ali Jinnah before Pakistan was created. But, for

the Tigers, "Eelam" has become a mere ruse, a pretext for indulging in violence.

It is becoming increasingly evident that the LTTE is a fascist organization which promotes a mystical racial notion of the destiny of the Tamil people. Anything that stands in its way has to be attacked and destroyed: first, the Sri Lankan soldiers; then, the other Tamil militant groups; next, the Indian soldiers; and then, back to square one: Annihilate the Sri Lankan Army. According to on-the-scene reports from one Indian news weekly, Tamils in Jaffna who have come to accept the killings as "justifiable homicide" today see "nothing ahead." It is difficult to comprehend how the Tamil Nadu chief minister could support such a movement.

The process has already created a security crisis in the region. In 1983, President Junius Jayewardene of Sri Lanka, unable to cope with the Tamil militancy, sought help from British mercenaries and the Israeli Mossad to train the Sri Lankan Army in counterinsurgency. India justifiably opposed this move, citing a breach of the security situation within a stone's throw of its borders. A similar situation is again developing today. Sri Lanka buys arms from China, the United States, Pakistan, and others. It will be a danger to the region if China or some such hostile nation is allowed to dig its roots in Sri Lanka because of the threat posed by the Tamil Tigers.

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