

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Crisis in Sri Lanka

Jayewardene's proposal for a lower house for Tamil representation may be the last call for peace on this island republic.

Following a tour that took him through China, the United States, and India, Sri Lankan President Junius Richard Jayewardene on July 23 presented a proposal for a political solution to the Tamil issue. In his words, the proposal was "a compromise" between two contradictory and apparently inflexible positions.

The proposal was presented at a conference which was boycotted by the most prominent Tamil group, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF). The TULF has called for a "week of mourning" beginning July 25 in memory of the victims of the anti-Tamil riots that rocked the island of Sri Lanka last year.

Jayewardene's proposal calls for establishing a second parliamentary house consisting of members representing the 25 districts of the island. The powers and functions of the second chamber will be decided by the conference. Each district would be represented by two members and about 25 members would be nominated by the president, the parliament, and professional bodies.

The idea is to bring into the political process those Tamils who would be representing the Tamil majority district.

The Sri Lankan President is going through the motions to bring the Tamils and Sinhalese into a dialogue under conditions of rapid polarization. On the one hand, the Soviet-backed Tamil extremists are eager to take revenge for last years' massacre.

On the other, the chauvinist Sinhalese, backed by obscurantist

Buddhist monks and racist army leaders, want to plunge the country into greater chaos.

In New Delhi, a political solution is seen as essential to prevent a communal explosion that could ignite southern India as well. The spectacle of President Jayewardene touring foreign capitals to promote his plan, while simultaneously mobilizing for a military showdown at home, does not inspire confidence.

Nor does Jayewardene's decision to bring Israeli counterterror experts to the island and to issue a similar invitation to retired British strategic services personnel. Yet, it is widely recognized here that Jayewardene's government may be the last hope for a settlement before polarization sweeps away the basis for a political solution.

Last year's Sinhalese-Tamil riots, which began after Tamil terrorists ambushed 13 soldiers, claimed more than 330 Tamils—most of whom were innocent citizens—and the ferocity of looting indulged in by the Sinhalese points to the racial intolerance that has been grown up over the years.

Although the extremist Tamil organization, the Liberation Tigers, came into existence in 1974, systematic racial discrimination against the Tamils had started in 1948, a legacy of British rule when the colonial occupiers had set the two groups against each other.

In 1948, the so-called Citizen's Act stripped about 100,000 Tamils of Indian origin of their citizenship rights, and reduced the Tamil representation in parliament from 24 to 16. In 1956,

when Prime Minister S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, husband of the later Prime Minister Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, began his "Sinhala Only" campaign, the anti-Tamil policy took firm root.

In 1972, the constitution that proclaimed Sri Lanka—then Ceylon—a republic recognized Buddhism as the state religion and Sinhali as the sole official language. Eight days before the constitution was brought out by Prime Minister Bandaranaike, the Tamils joined forces to form the Tamil United Front to protect their rights. With that, the wedge was firmly driven between the two religious groups, who had lived in harmony for several hundred years before the British arrived.

If the Tamils have consolidated their movement since 1975, so have the chauvinist Sinhalese. President Jayewardene's cabinet consists of such Sinhali chauvinists as Prime Minister R. Premadasa, Industry Minister Cyril Mathew, and others who share the Nazi belief of belonging to a genetically superior Aryan race (the Sinhalese consider themselves Aryans, over and above the Tamils, who are Dravidians).

Jayewardene is ridiculed by the Buddhist zealots because his family originated from the Coromandel Coast of India, and because he is not a thoroughbred Sinhalese.

Among the Sinhalese, perhaps the most dangerous and surely the most powerful elements belong to the Buddhist monasteries. Buddhist monks in Colombo, Kandi, and Anuradhapur have called for the total extermination of 1.5 million Tamils. One such monk, Dr. Rahul Walpole, threatened another bloodbath if the government even contemplated offering representation in provincial assemblies to Tamils without first settling the terrorist problem.