

# Soviet involvement in Sri Lanka

by Ramtanu Maitra

The second round of negotiations between Tamil dissidents and the Sri Lankan government opened on Aug. 12 in Thimpu, capital of Bhutan, in an atmosphere of uncertainty. Tamil terrorist attacks on civilian targets in Sri Lanka in recent weeks point to the fact that Tamil extremists, financed and instigated by both Moscow and Tripoli, are determined to sabotage the talks.

The progress of the talks is not known at this writing, but the urgency of positive motion toward a negotiated settlement of the ethnic conflict which has wracked the small island nation for several years is plain. Just as the crises in Punjab and Assam in India, the Sri Lankan conflict has been an avenue for destabilization of the Indian subcontinent.

Since the meeting in India in June between Sri Lankan President Jayewardene and Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, the Indian government has played an active role in assisting a constructive process of negotiations.

## Soviet role surfaces

Given its pivotal location in the Indian Ocean, both superpowers have courted the Jayewardene government. But recently, there has been a dramatic increase in Soviet and related efforts to bend the island nation to its designs. This has become particularly visible since July 1983, when riots between the majority Sinhalese and the Tamil ethnic groups rocked the island to its base.

During these two years, the Soviets have openly sided with the Tamil secessionists and attacked the duly elected Jayewardene administration for killing of Tamil civilians. During this same period, Libya's Qaddafi has developed a liaison with the Tamil terrorists and provided them with significant amounts of cash. There is a link between the Tamil terrorists and George Habash's PFLP organization.

The Soviet modus operandi in Sri Lanka involves both overt and covert operations.

Moscow found the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict an "appropriate" issue to explore because of two well-calculated factors. First, it is a fact that the Tamil minorities are treated by the Sinhalese, in general, as second-class citizens. Second, the Tamils originated from India: Across the Palk Strait, which separates the mainland from the island of Sri Lanka, lies the Tamil-majority state of Tamil Nadu. Moscow knew well beforehand that once the Tamil-Sinhalese bloodbath

started, public opinion within India would force the Indian government to get involved. In the Soviets' calculation, India would mount a military intervention on the island on behalf of the Tamils, or intervene in some other way to topple the Jayewardene government.

Although Moscow has succeeded in exploiting a crisis in the region, the cutting edge of the Soviet gambit has been somewhat blunted by the skillful diplomacy of the Indian government and the Reagan administration's reluctance to fall into the Soviet trap. The U.S. government publicly acknowledged that India is working for peace in Sri Lanka. It has also been acknowledged by both the Sri Lankan government and the moderate Tamil leaders that India's role in defusing the situation has been most helpful.

The Soviets' first demonstrative move took place in 1971 when Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, now leader of the main opposition party, the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP), was prime minister. One Rohana Wijeweera led a series of Maoist-style urban guerrilla raids in Colombo in an attempt to seize power. Wijeweera, who is commonly described as a pro-Peking communist, studied at Moscow's Patrice Lumumba University where the Soviets provided him with basic guerrilla training. Wijeweera's role in the recent Tamil-Sinhalese conflicts is not clear. Reports from Sri Lanka indicate that he has gone underground.

From another corner, the pro-Moscow Communist party of Sri Lanka has consistently opposed President Jayewardene's government. In 1982, the government referendum to extend the life of the parliament by another six years was widely supported by the population—it was passed by more than a two-thirds majority—but Communist leader Peter Keuneman called it "terrorism and fraud."

In 1984, when the Sri Lankan government called for an all-party conference to defuse the tense and hostile atmosphere that followed the July 1983 riots, the Communists boycotted the talks. The same Sri Lankan Communist leaders were seen marching around Moscow prior to the first round of peace talks in early July of this year in Thimpu, Bhutan.

The terrorist-separatist and the "opposition party" tracks have been complemented by a steady dose of diplomatic muscling. Since 1981 Moscow has been involved in pressuring Sri Lanka to play an active role as the chairman of an Indian Ocean peace conference to be sponsored by the United Nations. In January 1981, Colombo was visited by a Soviet delegation bent on entrapping Jayewardene into a propaganda war against Washington. But Jayewardene disagreed with the Soviet assertion that while Moscow aimed at peace, the United States was creating tension in the region.

In February 1982, another Soviet delegation was back to threaten Jayewardene that if the conference did not materialize, they would have no option but to compete with the "growing United States military presence in the Indian Ocean."