

# Sri Lanka and India avert regional war

by Linda de Hoyos

On Aug. 5, the guerrilla fighters of the Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam (LTTE) surrendered their weapons to Indian troops in Jaffna, the northern city of Sri Lanka. The surrender was the result of high-pressure negotiations between Sri Lankan President Junius Jayewardene, Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, and LTTE leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran. Although many pressures will be exerted to break the accord among these three leaders, the pact is unique in breaking the pattern of exacerbated ethnic-religious separatist conflicts throughout the continents of Africa and Asia.

The accord has, at least temporarily, arrested the escalating war between the majority Sinhalese Buddhists of Sri Lanka and the minority Hindu Tamils. On July 27, New Delhi and Colombo announced that they had reached an agreement that would grant the Tamil population an autonomous region in the merged north and eastern provinces, re-establish Tamil as a national language, and amnesty Tamil political prisoners. In return for these concessions, the Tamil guerrillas, with the LTTE as the most powerful, would lay down their arms.

The accord further specified that its implementation would be protected by India. On Aug. 3, 4,000 Indian troops were dispatched to Jaffna to disarm the Tamils. The Indian troops also escorted the Sri Lankan armed forces back to Colombo. India is now patrolling the Palk Strait, which joins Sri Lanka with India, to prevent supplies reaching the Tamil guerrillas from India.

The accord and its implementation was also coordinated with the United States, which had reportedly urged Jayewardene to agree to take a diplomatic-political route to ending the war. On July 30, State Department spokesman Charles Redman confirmed a Reuters report that the Sri Lankan government had asked the United States for logistical military support in carrying out the pact. The request, he confirmed, had been made with the understanding of the Indian government.

LTTE leader Prabhakaran was brought to New Delhi from Jaffna during the final stage of the negotiations. When the accord was first announced, Prabhakaran had rejected it, although the other guerrilla organizations stated their readi-

ness to lay down their arms. Prabhakaran was kept in the India-state-owned Ashoka Hotel, amid a full guard suggesting house arrest, and was escorted back to Sri Lanka by Indian armed forces after he finally agreed to surrender his fighters' arms. Also present in New Delhi over this four-day period was Palestine Liberation Organization chairman Yasser Arafat. The PLO has supported the Tamil insurgency with weapons and supplies, and clearance from that channel was likely necessary for Prabhakaran's agreement. The guerrilla leader stated he finally agreed to the pact because he had been left by "stronger powers" with no other choice.

In the Sri Lankan conflict, India has taken the role of the protector of the Tamils, who originated in southern India and were transported to Sri Lanka by the British who used them as the administrators of their colony. After Sri Lankan independence, the Tamils were systematically downgraded until today they represent an oppressed minority with second-class citizen status. Since the mid-1970s, the chauvinism of the Sinhalese Buddhists has in turn produced powerful Tamil separatist-terrorist organizations based in the northern provinces of the island, supplied and aided by Tamil sympathizers in southern India.

The primary danger to the agreement remains from the Sinhalese. On July 30, Sinhalese radicals, led by Buddhist monks, rampaged through Colombo in protest against the accords. By the time police had quelled the riots, over 30 people had been killed. "Jayewardene the dictator is going against our whole country," declared Sinhala Balamanda Laya, who participated in the riots. "We can't trust Gandhi. This is not Jayewardene's land to give away."

The danger is now acute that Jayewardene will be assassinated by Sinhalese chauvinists, who have called for wars of "extermination" against the Tamils. In 1959, then-Sri Lankan Prime Minister Solomon Bandaranaike was murdered for even mooted such concessions as Jayewardene has now executed. Bandaranaike's wife, also a former prime minister, is now leading the Sinhalese opposition against Jayewardene. The prime minister is now under the security protection of Indian commandos.

The negotiated agreement staved off a likely Sri Lankan military assault on Jaffna and the guerrillas controlling much of northern Sri Lanka, resulting in a bloody and possibly protracted civil war, which would have divided the entire region. Not only was Sri Lanka relying for its counterinsurgency on Israeli security forces operating out of an Israeli interest section of the U.S. embassy in Colombo, but Sri Lankan Security Minister Lalith Athulathmudali visited his counterparts in Pakistan in June, immediately after India had carried out a military airlift of humanitarian aid to the war-stricken Tamils in the north. The Sri Lankan ethnic-religious conflict was thus on the brink of becoming a regional war that would divide the subcontinent against itself. This prospect has now, for the moment, been averted by the diplomacy and determination of Jayewardene and Gandhi.

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