

# Sri Lanka-India conflict averted, as Tamil terrorists gain ground

by Ramtanu Maitra

India and Sri Lanka have decided mutually to negotiate the withdrawal of the Indian troops that have been stationed in Sri Lanka for the past two years, and to discuss the implementation of the remaining unmet clauses in the India-Sri Lanka Accord signed between the two countries in July 1987. The decision to defuse the crisis, which came less than 48 hours before the deadline set by the Sri Lankan President through intensive diplomatic efforts, including exchange of letters between two heads of state, has eliminated the threat of an armed conflict between the two countries.

There are clear indications that despite this breather, Sri Lanka is still heading toward bloody chaos. While the Indian and Sri Lankan foreign ministers were discussing a planned withdrawal of the Indian troops, anti-India protests over the July 29-30 weekend caused the deaths of more than 150 people. The violence suggests that the Maoist Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) is in no mood to give up its terrorist policies. In north and east, where the Sri Lankan Tamils enjoy a majority and have been demanding autonomy for years, the gunning down of two respected, moderate Tamil parliamentarians by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) indicates that the extremists, despite their earlier pledges, are unwilling to give up violence. It is more than likely that the LTTE, following the Indian troops' withdrawal, will renew its earlier campaign to annihilate the smaller and weaker Tamil groups.

## Internationalizing the conflict

As of this writing, a showdown has been averted, over the July 29 date set unilaterally by Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa for withdrawal of 45,000 Indian troops deployed to assist in facilitating a settlement under the terms of the 1987 accord. India was clearly taken aback by the Sri Lankan President's demand, made in a speech to Buddhist monks on June 1 and only subsequently communicated to New Delhi second hand. India has officially begun to withdraw troops, the first 600 of whom have already returned to their country. The Indian decision followed assurances from the Sri Lankan foreign minister that the Sri Lankan Army will not use force to demobilize the Indian troops—a move which could have escalated to armed conflict between the

two countries. Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Ranjan Wijeratne will now come up to New Delhi to negotiate with his Indian counterpart.

Beginning June 1, Premadasa had refused to budge on his unilateral decision, and the potential for a conflict was allowed to build up. Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's statement that the withdrawal of all the Indian troops by July 29 would not be logistically possible, was paid very little heed. In late June, Sri Lanka decided to boycott the foreign ministers' meeting of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), scheduled for July 1-2 in Islamabad, Pakistan, accusing India for abusing its "size and prominence." This was seen by the observers as a deliberate attempt by President Premadasa to involve other nations in the region in the bilateral incident.

The Sri Lankan decision to internationalize its dispute with India prompted indefinite postponement of the foreign ministers' meeting, and raised the specter of the dissolution of the four-year-old organization, which had been set up to discuss multilateral issues—and not bilateral issues—in the region. Possible dissolution was explicitly raised in a letter from Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Ranjan Wijeratne to his Pakistani counterpart Yaqub Khan, sent only a week before the scheduled start of the meeting.

But there were clear signals that the Sri Lanka government in Colombo wanted to up the ante. On June 8, Wijeratne, a hand-picked candidate of President Premadasa and a political lightweight, told the Sri Lankan parliament that his government expected New Delhi to withdraw its troops by July 29. The July 29 date was not decided mutually by the two governments, but came about in an unexpected statement made by President Premadasa while addressing a rally of Buddhist monks on June 1. Premadasa told the monks that he would like to see the Indian soldiers off the island before July 29, the second anniversary of the India-Sri Lanka agreement that brought them to the troubled nation to assist in disarming Tamil separatist insurgents, who subsequently reneged on their agreement to a political solution of the crisis.

Subsequently, Sri Lanka threatened to place the contentious issue before the United Nations, unless India withdrew its troops on the scheduled date.

What surprises observers most is that before announcing the withdrawal date, the Sri Lankan President chose not to consult New Delhi, or the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) commander based in Sri Lanka, or even the Indian envoy based in Colombo. Subsequently, citing President Premadasa's statement as a *fait accompli*, the lesser politicians of Sri Lanka made repeated statements accusing India of refusing to withdraw its troops by the "set" date.

The Indian reaction on the official level was cautious throughout these goings-on. Aware of the political implications in the regional context, India pointed to the terms of the India-Sri Lanka Accord, under which it was mutually agreed that the IPKF would be withdrawn as soon as the outstanding issues of the India-Sri Lanka Agreement, signed by the former Sri Lankan President Julius Jayewardene and Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi on July 29, 1987, were implemented.

A reading of the India-Sri Lanka Agreement shows that the Indian government had been given a specific role, along with the Sri Lankan government, in "ensuring the physical security and safety of all communities inhabiting the Northern and Eastern Provinces," where the Sri Lankan Tamils, under various armed extremist groups, had begun a full-fledged secessionist movement beginning in the early 1980s.

The proposals embodied in the agreement, relating to cessation of hostilities and to the referendum on the merger of the two provinces, were made explicitly conditional on an acceptance by all parties of the terms negotiated during the last half of 1986, on devolution of powers to the provincial governments. The agreement specifically provides for a role for India in implementing the process of devolution of powers to the Provincial Council in the North-East—something which has yet to occur. The Sri Lankan government has now challenged the substance of India's role in the matter.

At the official level, things remained confusing during June and July, in spite of efforts at the highest level to defuse the situation. Sri Lankan Foreign Secretary and former Ambassador to New Delhi Bernard Tilakaratne, went to New Delhi on June 6 to deliver a message from President Premadasa and discuss the issue with the Indian prime minister, among others. Subsequently, it was reported that both governments had agreed that "consultations will continue so that conditions will be created as envisaged in the India-Sri Lanka Accord to facilitate an IPKF withdrawal." President Premadasa later met with the Indian envoy in Colombo, and reportedly said that he wanted to resolve any dispute with India in a spirit of cooperation. Premadasa stressed that he did not want any misunderstanding between the two sides. Following Tilakaratne's trip to New Delhi, the Indian Prime Minister sent a special envoy to deliver a personal message to President Premadasa, urging him to settle the issue through bilateral negotiations.

While these were welcome moves, Colombo's rhetoric continued to assume the quality of tub-thumping, as if it were

trying to attract the attention of others beyond India. Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi stated categorically that, while India had already begun to withdraw troops, the July 29 deadline to withdraw the entire contingent was set arbitrarily and was unrealistic from a logistical standpoint. He also noted with dismay the Sri Lankan tactic of boycotting the SAARC. It was reported in the usually reliable Indian daily printed from Madras, *The Hindu*, that B.G. Deshmukh, Rajiv Gandhi's principal secretary, visited the United States and Britain to explain the Indian position on the issue.

The Indian media, while eager to place the blame on Prime Minister Gandhi for putting the Indian troops in Sri Lanka and creating a mess in the process, conveniently pointed out that the three most powerful groups—the Sri Lankan government on the one side, and the JVP and the LTTE—which were earlier often labeled as "terrorists" by the Sri Lankan government itself, on the other side—are now in unison asking for the IPKF to leave. Few took the time to consider why the crisis was suddenly mounted, and for whose benefit.

### **The crisis of confidence**

It is a fact that President Ranasinghe Premadasa never accepted the stationing of the IPKF on Sri Lankan soil. During the December presidential campaign, in which Premadasa came out the winner, he had promised his countrymen that if elected he would send the Indian troops back. It is only natural that he has sought to fulfill his campaign pledge. But what intrigues and worries observers is the timing and the arbitrariness with which the Sri Lankan government has proceeded. The timing is important, since President Premadasa is going to be the next chairman of the SAARC, whose next heads of state meeting is scheduled to be held in Colombo in December.

There is no question that sooner or later all the Indian troops will be removed from the island; the question is: What then? It is not at all clear how the Tamil issue can be definitively resolved, but it is equally clear that it cannot simply be put "on ice." The fact is, an IPKF withdrawal under present circumstances will leave two powerful terrorist groups, JVP and LTTE, as powerful as before, if not more so. Neither of these groups believes in parliamentary democracy, but are instead chained to their assault rifles and rocket launchers. President Premadasa, a product of the grass-roots politics of Sri Lanka, will be the first one to recognize this fact and the inherent contradiction in trying to form an alliance with these forces.

Certainly all is not lost, but well thought out and circumspect action is needed at this crucial juncture. India, however big it may be, can play an assisting role; it cannot "solve" Sri Lanka's problems. Creating a crisis with India, as a means to leverage some kind of hoped-for domestic political settlement, not only won't work, but may even lead to greater dangers—for Sri Lanka, and the region as a whole.