

# India seeks negotiated settlement to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka

by Susan Maitra

Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi has written to both President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher with a request for their aid in easing the crisis in the neighboring island of Sri Lanka between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamils, who are demanding a separate state. The contents of her letter have been published in the Indian press.

India cannot indefinitely stand by and watch as the Sri Lankan army, deployed by the Sinhalese government of President Junius Jayewardene, carries out its brutal repressive campaign against the Tamils, Mrs. Gandhi pointed out. Specifically, however, she asks that President Reagan act to force the withdrawal from Sri Lanka of the Israeli secret intelligence agency, the Mossad, which is operating out of the interest section of the U.S. embassy in Colombo and which is the reported director of the crackdown. Likewise, Mrs. Gandhi has called upon Prime Minister Thatcher to recall British counterinsurgency experts who are also giving the Sri Lankan government guidance.

There has as yet been no reported reply from either the American President or the British prime minister to Mrs. Gandhi's request.

As of this writing more than 100 people have been killed in a 10-day combined army and navy offensive against Tamil terrorists in northern Sri Lanka; thousands are homeless: entire villages have been razed. A press blackout has been imposed. Widespread reports of rampaging army men have forced the government to order an investigation, but official spokesmen insist that the operation will continue until the separatist terrorism is ended.

The government's operation followed several days after a bomb explosion in India at the Madras airport killed 29—many Sri Lankans on their way back to Colombo. The bombing is still under investigation by Indian authorities.

The new outburst between the Sri Lankan military and the Tamil extremists, with its fresh indications of the military running amok, dims the prospect for a peaceful settlement. Within India, the pressure on the government to "do something" has escalated sharply. The Tamils of Sri Lanka are culturally related to the Tamils of the Indian southern state of Tamil Nadu, some of whom are giving support to the Tamil

terror apparatus in Sri Lanka. On Aug. 8, Prime Minister Gandhi made a firm statement in parliament that there was no possibility of an Indian intervention into the complex situation in Sri Lanka. Mrs. Gandhi condemned the killing of innocents and emphasized that India wanted to help the Tamils, who are denied representation in the Sri Lankan government decision-making process, and not further provoke the Sinhala government against them.

Nevertheless, the pressure is building on the Indian government to find a solution quickly. In answer to Mrs. Gandhi's statement in parliament, the deputies from Tamil Nadu walked out. And on Indian Independence Day, Aug. 15, 1,600 Tamils were arrested in Tamil Nadu for violently demanding that the Indian government militarily intervene into the Sri Lankan crisis.

## The election battle

The Sri Lankan government's "flight forward" military operations against the Tamils take place against the backdrop of elections due in the coming months. Sri Lankan politics is dominated by two parties—the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP)—both of which are controlled by the chauvinist Sinhalese. In past elections, the contest between these two parties for votes has turned quickly into a racist Tamil-bashing contest. The party with the most shrill anti-Tamil rhetoric wins the ultimate political prize—the support of the Buddhist clergy.

The SLFP leader, Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, who enjoyed power in the '70s, following her rabid anti-Tamil husband in the '60s, is detested by the majority of Tamils. It was Mrs. Bandaranaike who formulated the 1972 constitution which proclaimed Buddhism the state religion and Sinhalese as the state language. It was in direct protest against her policies in 1975 that the call for a Tamil Eelam—a separate nation—was raised.

Recently, however, Mrs. Bandaranaike declared that the Jayewardene government was incompetent to handle the problem and should resign to make way for one that could take up negotiations. Whatever Mrs. Bandaranaike has in mind with this pre-election gambit, if it provokes President Jayewardene to prove himself the better negotiator, it might

be useful.

The 1977 election, which swept the UNP and its leader Jayewardene into power, was a spectacle of anti-Tamil rhetoric. Perhaps the least chauvinist of all the Sinhalese leaders, however, Jayewardene was aware of the urgency of a political solution to the problem and was privately committed to working out a solution that would return the Tamils' honor. But once in power, he became obsessed with staying there.

Instead of using the momentum of his victory to solve the Tamil problem, he launched a campaign against Mrs. Bandaranaike, stripping her of her civic rights and throwing the SLFP into chaos. Meanwhile, the Tamils, denied equal rights and political participation, became more sullen and angry.

The explosion of riots in 1983 temporarily broke up the game. But by then political control had largely gone over to the hands of the chauvinist Buddhists, on the one hand, and on the other, a new breed of Tamils, who mouth Marxist-Leninist jargon and take the law into their own hands, challenging the army. Jayewardene, for his own short-sightedness, was reduced to a roving apologist for his racist colleagues.

### **International meddling**

As in most cases of ethnic and religious tensions in the Indian subcontinent, the seeds for the present crisis were sown by the British. The Tamils were brought into Sri Lanka during the nineteenth century to manage the British tea plantations. When the British left, the Sinhalese took their revenge by treating the Tamils as "second-class citizens."

In the course of their unsuccessful attempts to secure their rights, the Tamils have produced a core of separatist-terrorists who have gained the full backing of the Moscow-dominated terrorist international: Muammar Qaddafi's Libya; the radical wing of the Palestine Liberation Organization; and the Soviet front group, the World Council of Churches. There are also reports that the Tamils have a radio operating on a North Korean ship parked in international waters off the Sri Lankan coast.

In the United States, the Tamils have won the hearts of such liberals as Senators William Proxmire, Ted Kennedy, and Alan Cranston.

The fact that Sri Lanka has now called in the Mossad to aid in its counterinsurgency efforts makes the situation even more serious, especially from the standpoint of the non-aligned Indian government. Mrs. Gandhi's request for their removal from the Sri Lankan scene has evidently not been heard. On Aug. 22, it was learned that a member of the Sri Lankan cabinet who is known to be close to the Buddhist clergy was in Jerusalem where he was "privately" meeting with David Kimche, the director general of the Israeli foreign ministry and an adherent to the plan of religious fanatics to destroy the Dome of the Rock mosque on Jerusalem's Temple Mount.

Another close friend of the Sri Lankan government is

Vernon Walters, the peripatetic Kissingerite envoy who is trying to force the Sri Lankans to turn the port of Trincomalee into a full base for U.S. rapid deployment forces.

This line-up of involvement of outside forces in the Sri Lankan crisis adds a new danger to the situation, as it places the crisis at the disposal of those who would not mind if it were to blow up to a full-fledged subcontinent military confrontation.

### **The prospects for negotiations**

Perhaps it is in order to avert that eventuality that Mrs. Gandhi and President Jayewardene are maintaining contact and that Jayewardene has gone ahead with the roundtable negotiations scheduled for Aug. 17. According to the latest reports, the Tamil United Liberation Front, likely under the strong encouragement of the Gandhi government, attended the conference. Although the TULF, the largest Tamil group, has rejected Jayewardene's plan for a second chamber in the parliament which would include Tamil representation (since, the TULF explains, it wants a separate state), it will accept the idea of regional councils on which the Tamils would be represented.

But the step-by-step negotiating process can only continue if the Sri Lankan government indicates that it is seriously interested in something other than a full-scale military oppression of the Tamils. This is the second main point of the Gandhi government's diplomatic intervention, but India has little leverage. What kind of half-measures are there if the Sri Lankan government hardens its stance even further, with the prodding of the British and the Israelis, given that India does not want a military confrontation? India does have an economic weapon that might work—namely the one-half million "stateless" Tamils in Sri Lanka, whose demand for citizenship and equal rights has so far been denied.

At least 100,000 of these "stateless" Tamils are tea plantation workers, virtual bonded laborers on the Sinhalese-owned plantations. The feudal landlords make a pretty penny on selling the tea, but more important, this high-quality tea accounts for more than 37% of the country's total exports. Putting the tea plantations out of business, or quietly threatening to do so, could give the appropriate shock to the Sinhalese hawks.

Since India is also a tea-exporting nation, the proposal goes, it can use the service of 100,000 skilled tea plantation workers. All that is needed is to give these "stateless" people an Indian passport. In a land of 700 million, 100,000 more skilled people would not upset anything—on the contrary, it might give the Sri Lankan government something to ponder.

This a highly unorthodox approach, but it signifies the quality of thought that the Indian government will have to employ if the British and their American and Israeli partners on one side, and the Soviets on the other, advance in their own designs to turn the Sri Lankan problem into a superpower-dominated crisis.