

Sri Lanka turns into a flash point

by Susan Maitra

Sri Lanka's Buddhist hierarchy held a conference with opposition groups, headed by former Prime Minister Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, on May 18, and decided to canvas for a general election on the government's handling of the ethnic crisis that is ravaging this tiny island nation. All opposition parties willingly accepted the Buddhist initiative, which included a proposal that the northern Tamil-majority sector of the country be handed over to the military outright.

Activation of the Buddhist clergy in a nationwide mobilization could give the Opposition—which is otherwise powerless to force general elections, having no more than a combined total of 16 out of 169 parliamentary seats—the leverage to oust President Junius Jayewardene.

With this, yet another dangerous iron has been thrown into the fire. Jayewardene has so far not been able to defuse the explosive combination of a ruling coalition containing a faction of Sinhala hardliners, a military that is both Sinhala-dominated and professionally unprepared for battle with terrorism, and a web of regional and international political complexities. Despite his errors, Jayewardene is probably the only Sri Lankan political figure who could achieve a political solution to the crisis.

Terrorist onslaught

The clergy was apparently galvanized into action over what it deemed the lack of adequate government response to the Tamil terrorist assault on the sacred city of Anuradhapura, and killing of some 150 civilians there on May 14. The Anuradhapura incident followed by a month the outbreak of Tamil-Muslim communal violence in the eastern province of Sri Lanka. According to correspondents in Sri Lanka, Tamil agitation was drawing no response from the large, business-oriented Muslim population in the province, and efforts to escalate were met with fury by the younger generation of Muslims.

At the same time, during the past several months, the "human rights" apparatus has gone into motion internationally, while new and old political parties and groups are springing up to say that the issue in Sri Lanka is not an ethnic clash, but a struggle "against our common enemy, the imperialists and their hangers-on"—in the words of "National Liberation Organization" head Nihal Perera.

The World Peace Council, the Soviet front group headed by Romesh Chandra, has launched a campaign against the

"repression of the Tamils, and the presence of American troops at a base provided by that country."

The Sri Lankan crisis has put a challenge to the initiative for regional cooperation in which India has taken a new lead. Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi held a meeting with Sri Lankan National Security Minister Lalith Athulathmudali in February, and in early April, Indian Foreign Secretary Romesh Bhandari held consultations in Colombo on Mr. Gandhi's instructions.

In response to the recent escalation of violence on the island, however, pressure built in India's southern state of Tamil Nadu for Indian intervention on behalf of the Tamils. There are also widespread suspicions that the Tamil guerrillas in Sri Lanka are being harbored in Tamil Nadu. A measured statement in parliament by Prime Minister Gandhi, announcing the formation of a special advisory committee to work with him on the matter, was followed by a rather strong and pointed statement by Minister of State for External Affairs Khurshie Alam Khan.

The Sri Lankan government immediately protested, and declared that it would boycott the meeting of the South Asian Regional Commission (SARC), in Thimpu, Bhutan, on May 15. Sri Lankan authorities arrested the Press Trust of India correspondent in Colombo, charging him with willfully misreporting President Jayewardene's dinner speech during British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's visit in Sri Lanka. The PTI report that Jayewardene had asked Thatcher for troops, was parlayed into a major issue in New Delhi. But as of this writing, the PTI incident has been quietly buried. Intervention by India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, convinced Sri Lanka to send a special presidential emissary to Thimpu, and then to Delhi to meet with Prime Minister Gandhi.

On May 18, President Jayewardene publicly admonished the Sri Lankan security forces to maintain discipline in the face of the terrorist onslaught. He also announced the meeting of all the country's religious leaders to launch a new attempt at reconciliation, and, on May 21, Sri Lankan National Security Minister Athulathmudali hinted that new Indo-Sri Lankan cooperation was at hand.

There have been indications, that concerted steps are being taken to identify and cut off the terrorists' supply of weapons. Two Singaporeans were detained on May 8 as a result of Madras customs' detection of a shipment of arms and ammunition, headed for Andhra Pradesh. Sri Lankan authorities claimed that although the ship sailed from Singapore, the arms actually came from Britain.

According to AP and the United News of India dispatches from Colombo, the separatists claimed to be equipped with AK-47 and G-3 rifles, light and medium machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades, and remote-controlled mines. The militants further claimed that some of their ranks have been trained with anti-aircraft weapons in "foreign war zones" which they refuse to identify, but have not yet acquired such weapons in Sri Lanka.