

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Sri Lanka versus narcoterrorism

Once a tourism-related problem, drugs have become a serious national security threat.

In late August, the West German Federal Prosecutor's office announced an investigation into evidence that the Tamil Liberation Front, a support-arm for the separatist-terrorist groups fighting in Sri Lanka for an independent "Tamil Eelam," has been blackmailing exiled Tamils in Germany to sell drugs and hand over the money for weapons. The evidence had surfaced as German police pursued the case of a group of 155 Tamil exiles who traveled from East Berlin through West Germany and on to Canada.

Since 1982, when Sri Lankan nationals first showed up in drug-related cases abroad, their numbers among arrested drug traffickers in Western Europe have increased dramatically. By 1984—one year after bloody ethnic riots in Sri Lanka brought to light the Tamil insurgency—about 75% of all Asians arrested for drug trafficking were Sri Lankan. Of more than 300 Sri Lankans arrested each year in 1984 and 1985, 80-90% were Tamils. The majority of those arrested enjoy political refugee status in Western Europe.

According to the March 1986 report of Sri Lanka's National Dangerous Drugs Control Board, the Sri Lankan Tamils are well organized in the European countries where they handle the entire conveyance and distribution of the heroin they bring in from south Asia. "While some travel to India or Pakistan legally or illegally and then proceed with heroin to the West European countries," the report states, "most of these traffickers first enter the European countries as political refu-

gees [with no job and generally low educational qualifications] and travel from there to India and Pakistan to pick up the heroin for the organizations established in the European countries. These organizations consist of Sri Lankan Tamils and other international criminal and terrorist organizations which handle details of travel, stay, documentation, and financing, and also help such persons to establish their claim for political refuge."

The Sri Lankan couriers have made close contact with drug dealers and criminal syndicates in Paris, Rome, and Amsterdam, and, according to international agencies cited in the Sri Lankan Control Board report, they have become involved with Indians, Pakistanis, Iranians, and Nigerians, all of whom have proved to be significant heroin traffickers.

But perhaps even more worrisome, Sri Lanka's problem is by no means simply one of "transiting" or trafficking. Except for one clandestine heroin lab discovered in 1981, there is no evidence that heroin is being refined in Sri Lanka. But, as the March Control Board report documents, heroin consumption has soared. According to the government, India and Pakistan are the source of almost all the heroin brought into Sri Lanka.

Since 1980, when heroin was first detected in the country, about 6,000 persons have been arrested annually in Sri Lanka for drug-related offenses. In the 1984-85 period, heroin-related cases increased tenfold—from about 15% of total drug offenses in 1984 to

51% in 1985.

Given the international norm of 80 users per 100 arrests, about 2,400 of the 3,000 arrested in 1985 can be assumed to be heroin users. And, taking 1:10 as the ratio for identified to actual users, Sri Lanka estimates its heroin-addict population at 24,000 as of 1985. By the government's calculations, Dope, Inc. is sucking more than \$600 million a year out of this tiny island nation of some 15 million, not to mention the destruction of whole families in a social tragedy no longer confined to Colombo City and a few tourist centers.

In 1984 Sri Lanka overhauled its drug laws, establishing the death penalty for possession of more than 2 grams of heroin or 3 grams of opium or marijuana.

Some success was registered in special eradication campaigns in 1980-83 against marijuana, which is currently grown on an estimated 200 acres mainly in south-southwestern and several jungle regions of the country. But since 1983 the separatist-terrorist crisis has diverted resources from enforcement. In 1981, Sri Lanka had an estimated 18,000 chronic cannabis users, but according to latest reports, the local supply now exceeds demand and marijuana is being exported to Europe.

Hashish is smuggled into Sri Lanka from Pakistan or India, and opium from India by sea via the Palk Strait. In 1980 it was estimated there were 5,800 opium users in the country, at an average age of 55. The decline in opium abuse in 1980-85 coincided most with the rapid increase in heroin consumption and a reported reduction in opium supplies. The latter may be due to the presence of government security forces in the traditional landing areas in the north, the center of the separatist battleground.