

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Sri Lanka wants Indian troops out

Premadasa's move took Delhi by surprise, but it hardly seems to portend a resolution of the island's ethnic crisis.

On June 4, Sri Lanka's Foreign Secretary Bernard Tilakaratne landed here on something of an emergency mission. Three days earlier, speaking before a Buddhist monks' congregation, Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa had announced that the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) would be withdrawn fully from the island by July 29.

In Delhi, Tilakaratne, an old India hand, was told that it was not possible to meet the timetable. The Indian side did, however, inform the presidential emissary that the bulk of the Indian soldiers would be pulled out at the earliest possible moment.

Indian soldiers were deployed to Sri Lanka's northeastern province two years ago as part of the effort to resolve the island's ethnic crisis outlined in the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord signed by then-President Junius Jayewardene and Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Premadasa was elected President on Dec. 19, 1988, succeeding the retiring Jayewardene as the candidate of the ruling UNP party.

President Premadasa's sudden and unilateral statement took India by surprise. Although the slow withdrawal of Indian soldiers had in fact already begun, India did not expect the Sri Lankan President to go public with a total withdrawal timetable without so much as informing Indian authorities, or consulting the IPKF commander.

Charged with a complex—or, as some would argue, impossible—task, the Indian Peace Keeping Force has found itself more in the role of a peace enforcement than a peace-keeping agency.

It was the IPKF's duty to keep the militant Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the most powerful Tamil group that is still holding out militarily for an independent Tamil "homeland," at bay, while at the same time encouraging the democratic Tamil political organizations to participate in elections to form the government for the newly created Tamil-majority North-Eastern Province under the terms of the 1987 Indo-Sri Lankan Accord.

The result was—invariably—that the IPKF had to engage in full-fledged warfare against a faction of the Sri Lankan Tamils, in whose eyes the IPKF came more and more to look like an occupation force using military power to enforce "peace" at the command of Colombo, the Sri Lankan capital. But if the IPKF's role looked ambiguous to the Tamils, its very presence became the target of hatred of the chauvinist Sinhalese—a motley mix of Maoists, Buddhist monks, and opposition politicians who could not tear themselves away from the vote-bank the Sinhalese majority represents.

Of this group, the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP), a Maoist terrorist organization armed to the teeth and based in the southern and western parts of the island, became the vanguard of an anti-India hate campaign. Calling the Indian government "imperialist," and killing Sri Lankan politicians who condoned the presence of the IPKF, JVP began a reign of terror that reached a new high point in May with the issuing of death threats to Indians living in Sri Lanka.

Whatever Mr. Premadasa's political calculations are in moving to abruptly bundle off the IPKF, it is certain that India's *locus standi* in the situation has been undermined. That the Sri Lankan President would push in this direction became evident in early May, when he offered to hold peace talks with the LTTE without any preconditions.

Oddly, this move came at a time when by all accounts the LTTE was on the defensive, and an elected government had been brought to power in the troubled North-East Province. (Earlier Premadasa also made the same offer to the JVP, to no effect.)

In the event, the LTTE accepted. Though it is not clear what agreements were reached during the week of talks, the LTTE reportedly demanded abolition of the newly elected North-East provincial government (LTTE had boycotted and tried militarily to prevent the elections, which occurred last Nov. 19)—a demand whose acceptance would clearly put the entire crisis back to square one.

The LTTE was also categorical in demanding the exit of the IPKF, and even hinted that it would seek a Nuremberg-style trial of the peacekeeping force's alleged atrocities and excesses.

To be sure, removal of the IPKF is the one thing upon which the three most visibly powerful forces in Sri Lanka—the LTTE, JVP, and the Premadasa administration—can all agree. It is no secret that Premadasa has favored an early withdrawal of IPKF, and his defense minister, Ranjan Wijeratne, a close associate, has been outspoken on the subject.

But it is just as sure, that the agreement among these three forces would end with the IPKF's exit. What Premadasa's gameplan is remains unclear, but his recent moves certainly raise worrisome prospects.