

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Relief all around

The tension between India and Sri Lanka over the food and medicine airdrop has been resolved, but what next?

On June 15, agreement was reached between India and Sri Lanka on the modalities of further Indian shipment of relief supplies to the people of Sri Lanka's northern Jaffna peninsula, which has been under siege for nearly a month as the Sri Lankan military pursues a "fight to the finish" against the leading Tamil separatist-terrorist organization, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) based there.

The agreement defused a crisis between India and its small island neighbor that has mushroomed ominously in the wake of India's June 4 airdrop of 25 tons of food and medical supplies over the Jaffna peninsula from a squadron of AN-32 transport aircraft accompanied by a military escort of Mirage M-2000 fighters. Two days before, India had attempted a "sea lift" of the relief supplies on motorized fishing boats, but Sri Lankan authorities denied them entry. Frantic consultations in New Delhi resulted in the airlift, of which the Sri Lankan government was given about 40 minutes notice.

Though the Sri Lankan air force operating around Jaffna was given orders not to fire at the Indian planes—Sri Lanka's entire military is no match for even a single component of the Indian military—Colombo's outraged protest was immediate, terming this a "naked violation of Sri Lanka's sovereignty and territorial integrity." Sri Lankan Prime Minister Premadasa, an outspoken Sinhala chauvinist and India-baiter, accused India of a dress rehearsal for an invasion.

Pakistan and China immediately

condemned India's move. The rest of the international community expressed disapproval in more cautious terms, but even the Soviet Union refused to come to India's defense. Within India itself, the move was by no means universally acclaimed, in part because of the negative diplomatic fallout. Romesh Bhandari, former foreign secretary and now head of the ruling party's foreign affairs cell, told the *Sunday Observer* that the move was technically lawless.

Others have wondered out loud why India acted unilaterally when Colombo had stated on June 1 that it was willing to discuss ways and means of receiving and distributing relief supplies. The action also gave convincing new validity to the perennial paranoia of India's small neighbors, and this on the eve of the June 18-20 ministerial summit of the barely two-year-old South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

Though the June 15 agreement had considerably muted all these concerns, it still leaves the major issue—the ongoing ethnic warfare in Sri Lanka—untouched. India is interested now in resuming the dialogue for a political settlement of the tragic crisis which has pitted Sri Lanka's Tamil minority against a bigoted Sinhala majority population.

The crisis has been stalemated for more than six months, since an Indian-inspired compromise package accepted by the Sri Lankan government was rejected by the LTTE. In January, Colombo attempted to force the militants to the bargaining table by impos-

ing an economic blockade against the Jaffna peninsula—a move decried by New Delhi.

By April, pressure was building on Colombo from within the country to act decisively in the face of a series of terrorist bombings that targeted Sinhalese. The decision by M.G. Ramachandran, the chief minister of India's southern state of Tamil Nadu, to send aid to the Tamils on the Jaffna peninsula, added fuel to the fire. On May 21, "Operation Liberation," intended to be the "final offensive," was mapped out by Sri Lanka's military chiefs.

Starting May 27, the Indian government issued stern warnings to Colombo to halt the "genocide" on the Jaffna peninsula, and on June 17, in a meeting with opposition leaders, Prime Minister Gandhi affirmed that the June 4 airdrop had been both a gesture to the Tamils in Jaffna and a message to the Sri Lankan government. Though India's interest in a speedy peaceful resolution of the crisis, and its rejection of the Tamil demand for a separate state, reiterated by Rajiv Gandhi recently, are undeniable, India's ability to intervene effectively at this point is in question.

Rajiv Gandhi's June 4 "message" and the subsequent agreement on relief supplies notwithstanding, Colombo's "Operation Liberation" is still on. In fact, the effect of the airdrop operation within Sri Lanka has been to catalyze a vehemently anti-India mass sentiment that will greatly strengthen the Sinhala chauvinist leverage on a beleaguered President Jayewardene.

India has already demonstrated its lack of leverage on the Tamil side. Though the LTTE was the only force to applaud the air drop, whether it was enough to win back their trust in Delhi's mediation remains to be seen.