

Indo-Sri Lankan agreement furthered, but will it bring normalcy back?

by Ramtanu Maitra

Sri Lankan President Junius Jayawardene's proclamation merging the Tamil-majority Northern and Eastern provinces, and the simultaneous release of 115 Tamil detainees, has paved the way for holding elections to a combined provincial council. If the elections are successfully held in November, as now planned, it will be a major step forward in implementing the Indo-Sri Lankan agreement. The North-Eastern Council election is the last of the provincial council elections to be held under a scheme for devolution of power worked out between India and Sri Lanka as the core of the political resolution of the island's ethnic crisis.

The crucial proclamation was issued with no publicity, at midnight on Sept. 8, and published in the gazette the next night. The ostensible reason for such a sneaky approach by the government, according to one commentator, was that the majority of Sinhalese are opposed to the merger.

The Indo-Sri Lankan agreement, signed by Prime Minister Gandhi and President Jayawardene last year, included among other clauses, the merger of the two Tamil-majority provinces, surrender of arms to the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) by the Tamil militants belonging to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and bringing them back into the mainstream of the society. While the agreement contained elements for ushering in peace, its implementation has turned out to be difficult.

In spite of repeated efforts by New Delhi, which included a two-hour talk between Prime Minister Gandhi and the top LTTE leaders just before the agreement's signing, it was clear from the outset that the Tamil militants were suspicious. Their fear was that the disarming of the LTTE is a "trick" foisted upon the unsuspecting Indians by the wily Sri Lankan President. They voiced the worry that India was being used to pave the way for eventual annihilation of the minority Tamils by the chauvinist Sinhalese. As a result, the LTTE began to resist the disarming efforts of the IPKF. It has been more than a year since some 6,000 IPKF troops were landed in Sri Lanka for an operation projected to take no more than a few months.

Using conventional methods against a fully armed group of guerrilla units on the latter's own territory, the IPKF encounter has been bloody, with hundreds of lives lost. In all probability, the IPKF will be able to defeat the militants, but the basic footing on which the agreement stands has gotten

shakier with every passing day, and it remains to be seen whether the proclamation can advance its implementation qualitatively.

A long history of distrust

The Tamils' distrust of the majority Sinhalese has a long history. Since 1948, following Sri Lanka's independence from British rule, the Sinhalese majority governments have repeatedly promised to give the minority Tamils equal rights. During the 1950s, the provincial merger was also promised, but the promises were hollow, and three decades of political efforts by the Tamils ended nowhere. In 1983, the island exploded with a wave of violent riots which drew the world's attention to the crisis. More than 150,000 Sri Lankan Tamils fled to India as refugees, and many more left the hostile Sinhalese majority part of the island to move north where the Tamils are historically the majority. Even before the riots, militant Tamil groups began to emerge. They soon developed contacts with the Palestine Liberation Organization and human rights groups outside of Sri Lanka, and began indulging in violent acts aimed at carving out the Northern and Eastern provinces as a homeland for the Tamils.

It was evident that the polarization between the Tamils and Sinhalese was acute. Political leaders such as the main opposition leader, Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, for opportunistic reasons joined the fanatic Buddhist monks, demanding there be no concessions to the Tamils. A fascist group with a Maoist ideology, Janata Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) was reactivated, and they set upon those who are "soft" on the Tamils and began to annihilate them. Within the ruling party cabinet itself, there are some, including the prime minister, who are equally chauvinistic Sinhalese.

Though President Jayawardene had earlier sought Indian assistance, New Delhi was reluctant to get involved until it became apparent that the Sri Lankan government, unable to quell the Tamil militants, was seeking external help to deal with the situation. Israeli counter-terrorist experts and British mercenaries were already on the island. President Jayawardene had also contacted China and Pakistan for advice and suggestions. None of these nations, India noted with concern, are friends of India.

If the problem preceeding the signing of the Indo-Sri Lankan agreement were complex, the Sri Lankan govern-

ment did very little to change this in the post-agreement period. As the Indian soldiers walked into the LTTE-lair, the Sri Lankan soldiers withdrew. LTTE saw in the IPKF a bigger adversary, but an adversary just the same. During the year following the agreement, the Indian Peace Keeping Force pushed the LTTE activists deeper into their well-hidden den and are now trying to ferret them out. But it would be wrong to assume that the areas which have been "cleared" of the LTTE are in fact free of LTTE influence.

On the contrary, the situation in northern Sri Lanka remains paralyzed. According to available reports, in Jaffna, the major northern Sri Lanka city, the secretariat works only one a day a month to pay the salaries of the civil servants. All other government offices are closed and the banks function three days a week. LTTE makes sure its decrees are heeded with threats of reprisals. One 24-year-old student leader of the 2,000 strong Art Faculty Student Union told a newsman, "Unless the LTTE is brought in, there can be no elections."

Reports from southern Sri Lanka are equally ominous. Although labeled as a small group of fanatics by Sri Lankan authorities, the JVP has surprisingly succeeded in dictating its terms in the southern district, espousing vitriolic anti-Indian rhetoric and systematic killing of those who support the Indo-Sri Lankan agreement. In spite of oft-repeated threats from President Jayawardene and others that they would be

eradicated, the JVP has not only grown in the last few years, but now seems to be acting with impunity. Heavily armed, the JVP is gathering strength all over the country except in the north and east. Last week, in a show of strength, the JVP called for a total shutdown to protest the death of a human rights lawyer, also a JVP activist, in police custody. The strike was total; most of Sri Lanka was paralyzed on Sept. 11.

Indeed, the JVP's rise has been phenomenal. According to his own apprehensions on this account, India's former foreign secretary, A.P. Venkateswaran, wrote in *The Hindu*: "One may devoutly hope that the special consideration being shown by Mr. Jayawardene to the JVP is not with the intention of using that organization's antipathy towards the Tamils in Sri Lanka and thereby subserving the negative policies of his government."

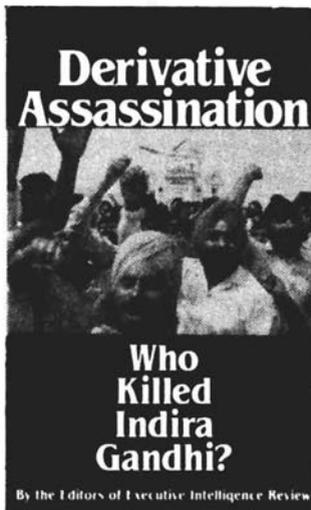
It is abundantly clear that the post-agreement policies have failed to shake loose the grip of radicals who have polarized the Tamils and Sinhalese. President Jayawardene's failure to leash the anti-Tamil Sinhalese terrorizing those who are soft on Tamils and India, is a major failure. Moreover, using the Indian soldiers to "silence" the Tamils may create a strong backlash within the Tamil community generally. If that happens, the good will on which the Agreement was based will be completely lost.

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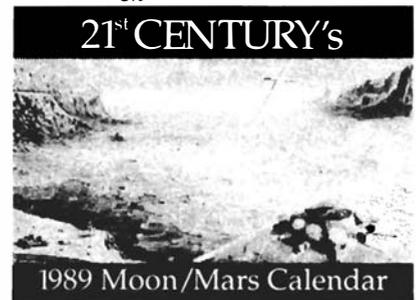
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