

### Recent events in Sri Lanka

*Produced by the British Refugee Council*

#### **GRACE UNDER PRESSURE: INDIA STAGES TOKEN TROOP WITHDRAWAL FROM SRI LANKA**

INDIA AND SRI LANKA pulled back from the brink of military confrontation when a token withdrawal of 600 Indian soldiers from Trincomalee on 29 July temporarily eased growing tension between the two nations.

Two months ago, Sri Lanka's President Premadasa demanded the complete withdrawal of India's Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) from northern Sri Lanka by the second anniversary of the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord at the end of July.

Withdrawal negotiations have been clouded by growing antagonism, sabre-rattling and brinkmanship. By mid-July, an acrimonious exchange of letters between the two leaders had been made public and skirmishes between Indian and Sri Lankan troops were reported from the north. Indian forces in Sri Lanka were reinforced by bomber aircraft from the Pune-based Sixth Squadron and a showdown seemed imminent.

A week before the deadline, while Sri Lanka's High Commissioner in Delhi Dr Stanley Kalpage tried with increasing desperation to initiate discussions, India was threatening a unilateral announcement of terms for troop withdrawal if Sri Lanka refused to come to the negotiating table.

Remarks made by Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Ranjan Wijeratne threatening to remove the IPKF forcibly from Sri Lanka, and by Indian PM Rajiv Gandhi describing Sri Lanka's diplomatic strategy as "sloppy", had not brought the two sides closer together.

At the last moment, however, a face-saving formula was agreed whereby India staged a nominal withdrawal at Trincomalee and Mr Wijeratne flew immediately to New Delhi for what promised to be difficult negotiations.

A few days later, talks were said to be deadlocked with India offering a withdrawal schedule of 1,500 troops a week if the Tamil Tigers observed a ceasefire and the Indian-backed EPRLF administration was given full civil and military powers.

Informed sources say Mr Premadasa's government has saved face but lost ground - both over any eventual Indian withdrawal and in his struggle against the Sinhalese nationalist extremist People's Liberation Front (JVP) who have engulfed the south of Sri Lanka in what is now a civil war. Political observers say Sri Lanka's diplomatic offensive on New Delhi was "unrealistic and maladroit" and have blamed the relative inexperience of Mr Premadasa's close advisers promoted over the heads of the existing hierarchy of the ruling United National Party.

#### **TULF LEADERS ASSASSINATED**

TWO SENIOR TAMIL moderates, Appapillai Amirthalingam and Vetrivelu Yogeswaran of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) were shot dead in Colombo on 13 July by three gunmen said to belong to the Tamil Tigers.

TULF General Secretary Sivasithamparam was also seriously wounded in the incident - said to be the unexpected outcome of a series of negotiations between the TULF and the LTTE.

The LTTE have vehemently denied involvement but the three assassins who were shot dead by security guards surrounding Mr Amirthalingam's home had known LTTE credentials and connections.

The second round of discussions between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government were said to have broken up over continuing uncertainty surrounding LTTE involvement in the killings.

Thousands of Tamils paid their last respects to the TULF leaders as their bodies were flown to Trincomalee on 16 July and later to Batticaloa. Over 100,000 mourners attended the cremation ceremony outside Jaffna Central College on 19 July.



### **MYSTERY GROWS OVER MILITANT KILLINGS**

RUMOURS CONTINUED to circulate into late July that LTTE leader Velupillai Prabakaran had been killed in a shoot-out with his deputy *Mahataya*. PLOTE sources say 48 militants including another senior figure *Kittu*, were killed in a clash over Prabakaran's continuing opposition to the peace talks in Colombo. The LTTE says all three leaders are alive and well and on good terms.

The LTTE's co-founder and subsequently Secretary General of PLOTE, Uma Mahesawaran, was shot dead in Colombo on 16 July. His killing has also been attributed to an internecine struggle within the militant group.

Intensive IPKF operations continued in the Valvettiturai, Point Pedro and Vadamarachchi areas of the Jaffna Peninsula this month with 15 civilians killed at Point Pedro following artillery shelling. Over 1,000 Tamil youths have taken refuge in Sri Lankan Army Camps in Vadamarachchi to escape the EPRLF recruiting drive.

In a confrontation at Alampil in Vavuniya District on 31 July, 36 LTTE militants, four Indian soldiers and four civilians were killed. Acute food shortages have been reported from Vavuniya as road and rail links remain disrupted. Nearby Mannar District is still in the grip of a severe drought and relief agencies in the area are under pressure.

### **ACCORD ANNIVERSARY SPARKS VIOLENT PROTEST**

DESPITE THE CLOSURE of the universities, the call-up of 15,000 Army reservists and the round-up of 250 JVP suspects, death and disruption continued in southern Sri Lanka throughout July. Moving a motion in Parliament to continue the State of Emergency, Minister Vincent Perera said between 21 June and 15 July, 1,088 violent incidents and 472 murders had taken place in the South. During the same period 97 violent incidents involving 70 killings had occurred in the North and East.

In the run-up to the second anniversary of the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord on 29 July, the JVP called a five-day *hartal* (general strike). The Government retaliated with a 54-hour island-wide curfew over the anniversary week-end. Nevertheless, there were widespread anti-Indian demonstrations and police firings in Colombo, Kalutara, Galle and Ratnapura. Human rights organisations say over 200 people died in the confrontations. The JVP - who successfully negotiated a wage rise for striking transport workers this month but reportedly killed 125 of them in enforcing the strike - have acquired a growing ascendancy in their struggle with the Government, observers say.

### **PRICE RISES PIN BACK SRI LANKA'S ECONOMY**

A 30% PRICE RISE on staple food items this month will bring a sharp cut in living standards to Sri Lanka's poor and disadvantaged, observers say. The price of milk, sugar, flour, fish and other essential household items have spiralled as continuing disruption to transport services creates shortages. Prices in some vulnerable areas such as the hill country have doubled. Hoarding of infant milk powder and cigarettes is pushing prices higher. There is also a growing shortage of medical supplies and drugs because of the JVP-inspired boycott on Indian-produced goods.

Economists say the Government has seized this opportunity to introduce further austerity measures and price-hikes on essential items to placate a delegation from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) visiting Sri Lanka this month. The IMF want to rein in the island's runaway economy before it will sanction financial aid to ease Sri Lanka's critical balance of payments position. The Government has also agreed to postpone for a year its controversial *Janasaviya* or Poverty Alleviation Programme which alone accounted for 50% of Mr Premadasa's first budget in March.



#### **IN BRIEF**

\* Minutes after President Premadasa left the GAMADUWA (village revitalisation) exhibition at Mahiyangana in Badulla on 2 July, a bomb exploded killing two people and injuring 39 others. Police sources blamed the JVP for the incident.

\* Prominent Attorney at law Charitha Lankapura active in student "disappearance" cases was shot dead by unknown gunmen in Colombo on 7 July. Many other human rights lawyers have received death-threats, said *Lawyers for Democracy* leader Prins Gunasekara. Some 508 habeas corpus applications were filed in Sri Lanka in 1988 and a further 341 so far this year.

\* Two grenades thrown during one of Sri Lanka's most important religious festivals at Kataragama in Moneragala District on 18 July, killed 13 people and injured 85 others including Minister for Upcountry Development R.M. Bandara. Over 100,000 people had gathered for the festival which was subsequently cancelled.

\* MP's from the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) walked out of Parliament on 20 July saying they would not attend until they were provided with adequate security. Defence Minister Ranjan Wijeratne deplored the walk-out saying security assistance was available on request.

\* Some 12 of the 13 new nominees from the Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students (EROS) took up their places as MP's on 21 July following a five-month boycott. EROS originally demanded the release of all political prisoners, the repeal of the 6th Amendment and a negotiated solution to the conflict in the North and East before joining Parliament. New MP S. Ratnarajah said EROS leader V. Balakumar would enter Parliament at the next session.

\* The head of Sri Lanka's Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) and acting Chief Censor, D.T.L. Guruge was killed by suspected JVP gunmen outside his home in Colombo on 23 July. Mr Guruge, a popular radio announcer in the 1950's, was appointed Chief Censor when Sri Lanka introduced Press Censorship on 6 July. An SLBC spokesman said Mr Guruge had repeatedly turned down offers of government security.

Sri Lanka's 18-day experiment with Press Censorship was abandoned on 24 June following a statement in Parliament by Agriculture Minister Lalith Athulathmudali that censorship was proving counter-productive and created a "rumour-mill". Minister Rajan Wijeratne called on the media to act "responsibly" and to avoid giving "exaggerated publicity to subversives". In mid-July, British journalist Kate Adie and a four-member BBC Television team were expelled from Sri Lanka.

\* Reports say the number of Tamil youths forcibly conscripted into Indian surrogate forces in the North and East by Indian-aligned Tamil groups led by EPRLF has reached almost 7,000. Sources in Batticaloa say relatives of those escaping from "training camps" have been killed in reprisal as have a number of escapees. A number of women have also been detained. Young Tamils arriving in Colombo are being registered as refugees by the Ministry of Rehabilitation and housed at a temporary reception centre at Colombo's Hindu College.

\* India has proposed delaying the Fifth Summit of Heads of State of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) due to be held in Colombo in November. New Delhi says the Summit should be held in March 1990 to allow for the forthcoming General Election in India due by December of this year. Sri Lankan President Mr Premadasa has already indicated he would not host the SAARC Summit while Indian troops were on Sri Lankan soil.



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#### **DEPORTED TAMILS WIN A REPRIEVE**

FIVE SRI LANKAN TAMILS won the right to reapply for political asylum in Britain following a series of legal decisions in London during July.

The five were deported in February 1988 after being refused asylum in Britain and were reportedly tortured by security forces in Sri Lanka after their return. An Immigration Appeals Tribunal decided in March 1989 that all five had faced persecution in Sri Lanka and should be readmitted to Britain without delay, but a series of Government court appeals prevented their arrival.

On 26 July, the Court of Appeal upheld the Tribunal's original decision and said the Government should pay the cost of their return to Britain. A subsequent attempt by the Home Secretary to suspend the ruling, pending a further appeal, was turned down in the High Court on 31 July.

Mr V. Varadakumar of the London-based Tamil Refugee Action Group (TRAG) said: "It is a notable victory and one that is long overdue. The legal system here allows an asylum-seeker to appeal on the substance of his case rather than procedural elements, only after he has been returned to the country he was fleeing from. The substance of their case has at last been examined and their struggle for freedom has been vindicated". Legal sources say the British Government is likely to continue its attempts to overturn the Tribunal's ruling.

Sinhalese socialist Viraj Mendis who was deported to Sri Lanka in January, after two years sanctuary in a Manchester church, has gone into hiding to escape the attentions of the Sri Lankan Army, his wife Mrs Karen Mendis said in late July.

In the last few months, Mr Mendis has written a number of articles and letters published in British newspapers, drawing attention to the deteriorating human rights situation in Sri Lanka.

#### **TAMIL REFUGEES PROTEST ACCORD ANNIVERSARY**

TAMIL REFUGEES mounted a series of demonstrations and meetings in a number of European capitals on the second anniversary of the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord on 29 July. In London, Tamil women's organisations marched through the centre of the city to draw attention to continuing human rights violations against Tamil women by the Indian Peace Keeping Force in Sri Lanka. A meeting the following day, organised by the Eelam Solidarity Campaign was addressed by representatives of a number of Tamil political groupings. In Copenhagen, a week before the anniversary, Tamil groups began a hunger strike outside the Danish Parliament protesting against the continuing presence of the IPKF in Sri Lanka.

#### **DUTCH POLICE GET TOUGH ON TAMIL ASYLUM-SEEKERS**

REPORTS FROM HOLLAND say Police are now using scare-tactics to reduce the number of Tamils seeking asylum. Almost all Tamil applicants are refused asylum in Holland but are allowed to remain while their appeals against the decision are in progress.

During this period, they must report weekly to the Police. Dutch refugee workers say that in a number of towns in southern Holland, Tamil refugees have been told by the Police that when they return to register the following week, they will be detained and put immediately on a flight to Colombo. Refugee workers say between 20 and 30 appeals by Tamils have lapsed in the last few weeks because the asylum-seekers have been too frightened to maintain their weekly registration with the Police. Many have gone underground or have fled to other European countries.