

Sri Lankan crisis enters perilous stage

by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan Maitra

A fierce battle is raging between the secessionist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), widely known as the Tigers, and the Sri Lankan Army in Jaffna, the northern stronghold of the Tigers. Reports indicate that the Tigers have received major setbacks in recent skirmishes, but it would be wrong to write their obituary.

In retaliation for the recent annihilation of some 300 men in the Welisari area of northeastern Sri Lanka at the hands of the Sri Lankan military, the Tigers engineered the assassination of Brig. Nalin Angammana, Sri Lanka's top military commander and the man identified with the Welisari operation.

The current battle promises to be yet another endless campaign and a clear indication that the country—notwithstanding the sincere attempts of President Chandrika Kumaratunga during her one year in power to loosen the mortal deadlock between the Hindu Tamils and Buddhist Sinhalese ethnic groups—has slipped into the bottomless abyss, drawn in by the manipulating and ruthless Tigers.

There is no question that the Tigers, who have recruited strong political backers in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu and have developed intimate links with the international drug and gun cartel, have become puppets in the hands of various intelligence agencies working on behalf of geopoliticians to keep the South Asian cauldron boiling.

The genesis

To find the roots of the decades-old ethnic conflict, one has to go back to the colonial British rule over Sri Lanka which ended in 1948. The British policy in the island nation was no different from their policy in the subcontinent: They provided special privileges to the powerful minority—Tamils, in the case of Sri Lanka. But the British colonials had another perfidious game going, too.

Tamils, who had been present in Sri Lanka since the seventh century, had their kingdom in Jaffna, and had not allowed it to be merged with the Buddhist-ruled kingdoms of Kotte and Kandy. It was only during the Portuguese rule in 1597, and then under the British, that the Tamils had surrendered this option. In 1948, when the British physically left Sri Lanka (then known as Ceylon), the Ceylon Independence Act of 1947 provided only for the grant of an order-in-council, unlike in India, where the Constituent Assembly was empowered to draft and adopt the Constitution for the entire country.

In 1970, the Sri Lankan Constituent Assembly passed a resolution to break the legal continuity with the British Parliament and drafted a new Constitution. The Tamils claim that by breaking the legal continuity, the sovereignty of the three kingdoms reverted back to the people and hence, the new Constitution is not binding on the Tamil people.

Legalities aside, the British had meanwhile created a Sinhala wealthy class (the *goigama* class in Sinhala language), which identified itself closely with the British aristocracy. Education, lifestyle, and even Anglo-Saxon names were adopted by these people to secure the so-called "British" label. The darker-skinned Tamils were naturally considered inferior by this class. In addition, the Buddhist Sangha, with its strong affinity to Sinhala chauvinism, was used to spread anti-Tamil hatred on behalf of Sinhala culture. The subsequent anti-Tamil role of the Sinhala leaders, through a series of betrayals, and enhancing the Sinhala grip on the country, at the highest level, only perpetuated the hatred between the two major religious and ethnic groups.

The intimacy of the Sinhala leaders' association with the British, the manner of the British transfer of power to Ceylon, and existing commercial ties, led to close association with Britain on security matters. Accordingly, on the day that Ceylon became independent, the Ceylon-U.K. Defense Agreement came into existence, under the terms of which Britain retained the use of an airbase in Katunayake and the naval base in Trincomalee. Although these bases are not in the hands of the British any longer, the agreement itself shows the then-intimate relations between London and Colombo, the Sri Lanka capital, and the eagerness of the Sinhala leaders to keep the umbilical cord with London intact.

The conflict mushrooms

Following a series of betrayals by the anglophile Sinhala leaders carrying Anglo-Saxon names and politically backed by the chauvinist Sangha, what emerged was the Tamil Tigers demanding "Eelam"—the Tamil name for Sri Lanka. As soon as the Tamil movement slipped away from such stalwarts as Chelvanayake and Amirthalingam and found its protector in the gun-toting Tamil Tigers, the island-nation was ready to become the "base" for the drugs-for-guns nexus of the Iran-Contra types. Now it poses a threat not only to Sri Lanka, but to the Indian subcontinent and the maritime traffic connecting the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. Arms began to pour in from Singapore, an outpost of the British and Chinese interest and a base of the Israeli Mossad-ADL crowd, to support the "Tamil victims"—now represented by the larger-than-life assassin, Vellupillai Prabhakaran.

It became evident quickly enough that the LTTE has more firepower than the Sri Lankan Army itself. The United National Party (UNP), composed of the worst anglophiles and promoters of free trade and privatization, under the presidency of Junius Robert Jayewardene, brought in the British SAS and the Mossad to train the Sri Lankan security person-

nel in counter-terrorism. What was also known, however, at the time, was that the same intelligence groups were involved in training the Tigers with explosives and the latest small and medium-size arms.

Once the conflict began to draw blood in plenty, the British moved in through Amnesty International to condemn the Sri Lankan government for committing atrocities, first against the Tamils and later against the Sinhalas in the south. In fact, less than three weeks before the massive slaughter of Tamils in Colombo in July 1983, Amnesty International had come up with a report detailing the reign of repression and terror let loose by the security forces in the north and east of the island. Amnesty International said in that report that the Sri Lankan Prevention of Terrorism Act (1979) was more draconian than similar acts then in effect in South Africa and Britain.

Later, Amnesty International went after Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa for his ham-handed suppression of the right-wing Sinhala chauvinists, the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP), which was heavily infiltrated by the Israeli Mossad. When Sri Lankan foreign minister, later defense minister, Ranjan Wijeratne rightly identified Amnesty International as "another terrorist movement," the Anti-Defamation League asset and then U.S. Rep. Stephen Solarz (D-N.Y.) criticized Wijeratne, who has since been assassinated, saying: "I am concerned about unsupported allegations that Amnesty International supports the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP)." He also stressed that he had the "highest respect" for Amnesty.

The self-destructive Indian policy

Meanwhile, in the 1960s and 1970s in India's southern state of Tamil Nadu, separated from the Tamil-dominated Jaffna by a 21-mile stretch of water known as the Palk Strait, a violent movement for a Greater Tamil State, separate from India, had begun to take shape. The events in Sri Lanka added zest to the Indian secessionists, who, in the tradition of British promoters of "nationals and sub-nationals," had declared virtual war against Delhi, citing "linguistic invasion" from northern India as the *cause célèbre*. Despite the danger that was clearly visible, the Indian government fell for the support of the Tamils, with the obvious intent of controlling Colombo by using the "Tamil card." This policy of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, which was later overturned with little apparent effect by Rajiv Gandhi, was ostensibly to "teach Colombo a lesson" for allowing President Reagan's emissary Vernon Walters to visit Sri Lanka and discuss the possibilities of acquiring military base facilities in Trincomalee, situated on the eastern coast of Sri Lanka.

As a result of this policy, the Indian state of Tamil Nadu became a shelter for the Tigers, and soon the shelter was turned into Tiger country. The Tamil Nadu state government, under the nurturing eyes of India's security and intelligence agencies, allowed the Tigers to annihilate all other Tamil groups, some of whom were decidedly moderate and against



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violence, and to emerge as the sole arbiter of the Tamil cause. However, Tigers did not restrict their base within Tamil Nadu. From Tamil Nadu, the Tigers have extended their claws northward, and have forged ties with the Naxalites who control the unmanned forests of Andhra Pradesh and Orissa. There is evidence that the Tigers have strong ties to the Libyans and the Pakistani ISI, or, in other words, with the drug- and gun-running Afghans. Besides being trained by mercenaries of the British SAS and the Israeli Mossad, and having assassinated a number of heads of government, including Rajiv Gandhi of India, the Tigers now possess missiles which can knock down any military aircraft that the Sri Lankan Air Force can deploy. These surface-to-air missiles were reportedly procured by the Tigers from Russia.

Fresh dangers

As the Sri Lankan Army has decided to put pressures on the Tigers, lodged in the north and northeast of Sri Lanka, the Indian supporters of the Tigers have begun to exert pressure on New Delhi to back the Tigers once more. V. Gopalasamy, leader of the Tamil Nadu-based political party, MDMK, says that his support extended to the LTTE and formation of Eelam in Sri Lanka was a "conscious, deeply thought-out decision." Gopalasamy, who is waiting in the wings, makes it clear that most Tamil Nadu political leaders support the Eelam movement. One of the two leading parties in the state of Tamil Nadu, the DMK, passed an official resolution supporting Eelam in 1984. Gopalasamy, dismissing any suggestion that the pro-Eelam movement is anti-national, tells reporters that there is "no need to take the permission of the Indian government" before adopting such a position.