

Alain Cass, recently in Jaffna, sees little progress in inter-racial talks

Sri Lankan Tamils in a political trap

DRIVING across the half-mile-wide strip of sand which separates the Jaffna peninsula from the rest of Sri Lanka like a jugular exposed to a sudden slash it is easy to understand both the temptation and the folly of Tamil separatism.

To the north of the lagoon and Elephant Pass lies the Tamil heartland, less than 100 square miles of habitable country crammed with nearly a million people, their backs to the sea.

A short ferry ride away lies India, haven for Tamil terrorist groups and spiritual home for Sri Lanka's Tamil minority. Cut the causeway at Elephant Pass and you have both a ready-made fortress and a hopeless trap.

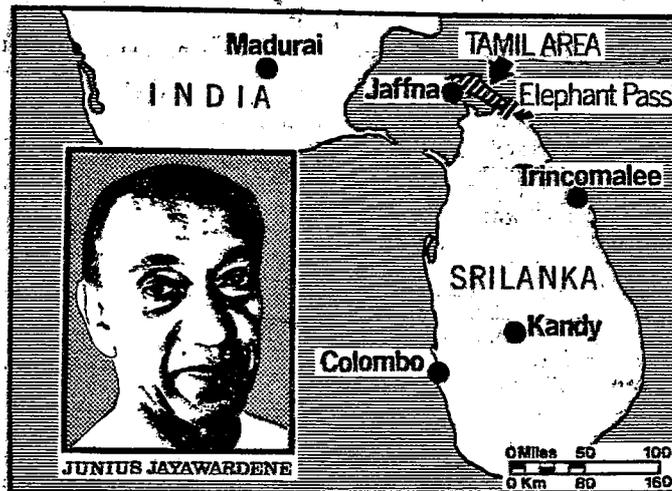
It is now just over six months since the historic rivalry between Tamil separatism and the island's Sinhalese majority erupted in the worst violence of its kind, killing at least 400 people and driving 100,000 refugee Tamils to the north.

Intensive mediation by India between the two communities, skilful diplomacy by Mr J. R. Jayawardene, Sri Lanka's President, and restraint on both sides have stopped, at least temporarily, the drift towards racial war.

Tourists are cautiously coming back to Serendip, the island's towns are regaining some of their former bustle, while businessmen, even those who were burnt-out, are rebuilding their shops and factories. The temptation to believe that things are back to normal is almost irresistible.

But this, as even the most sanguine Ministers concede, is merely a trick of the eye. The recent round-table talks appear to have made little headway.

There has been no new investment (foreign or local) to speak of since last July's troubles. Virtually every hotel on the island is making a loss. Business profits are down by at least half. Meanwhile, the Inter-



national Monetary Fund is pressing hard for painful cuts which may be necessary to cure a stick economy but which, at a time of soaring inflation, is bound to make a political settlement more difficult.

"If we don't get a political settlement," said a senior official, "we can forget about economic recovery, and, if we don't get an economic recovery, a political solution becomes almost impossible to implement in the long run."

The talks between the Government, the Tamil United Liberation Front (Tulfi) and leaders of the country's increasingly hard-line Buddhist culture are continuing in committees. The fear, now, is that, unless the framework of a solution which bridges the divide between Tulfi demand for a separate Tamil state and strident Sinhalese nationalism is found soon, then the extremists on both sides will intervene.

That, in turn, has raised for the first time the distant possibility of Indian military intervention on behalf of the Tamils, partly to assuage India's own Tamil sentiment and partly to demonstrate that New Delhi's

writ runs across the subcontinent.

The lesson of India's intervention in 1971 to carve Bangladesh out of East Pakistan as a home for the Bengalis is lost neither on the Sinhalese, who have always feared extinction by their powerful Hindu neighbour to the north, nor on the Tamils, who see India as their refuge of last resort.

Superimposed on this rift between competing cultures is the complication of superpower interest. Sri Lanka's position astride the sea lanes of the Indian Ocean and, in particular, the deep-water port of Trincomalee (once a major British naval base) gives the country an importance far beyond its size to the U.S. and the Soviet Union as they compete for influence in the area.

None of this is lost on the Tamil leadership, which plays the card of separatism with consummate skill. But, as its own supporters readily admit, that leadership has also become a prisoner of its own rhetoric.

Since last July's riots—in which Sinhalese mobs, often encouraged and sometimes led by the Sri Lankan armed forces, attacked Tamil communities—more than 5,000 young Tamils

are believed to have gone to India to join the feared Tamil Tigers, Sri Lanka's Provos.

There is also a clear drift away from the TULF towards an even more hardline group of separatists. In the refugee camps in Jaffna, the fear is palpable. There is no confidence that the national authorities will protect them.

"We know a separate state makes no sense on an island this size," said one refugee who lost a brother and a son-in-law whose eyes were gouged out before he was put to death, "but I can never trust the Sinhalese again."

The total breakdown in law and order at the time of the riots and the apparent failure to take any effective punitive action against the units involved by the Government has left the Tamil minority (and some Sinhalese) with a real fear that a new round of violence could lead to civil war.

One of the key issues between the Tamil community, Sri Lanka and India are the estimated 200,000 - 300,000 "stateless" Tamils of Indian-origin working on the island's tea estates. A final settlement, in Tamil eyes, should see them getting full Sri Lankan statehood. "Not if they will stay to encourage a separate state," says the high priest who attends the round-table talks. "They should go back where they belong."

For the present Mr Jayawardene is exercising patience and restraint in the hope that, in time, both sides will see sense. He believes that there will be a solution because, as one Government official put it, the alternative is unthinkable.

But President Jayawardene, who is 76, does not have all the time in the world. There is concern that his patience may be interpreted as drift. Either way, the present initiative to resolve the conflict may, as another commentator put it, be the "first attempt and the last chance."