

SRI LANKA

Taming The Tigers



A diplomatic row between India and Sri Lanka on the extradition of Tamil extremists

from the island nation caught last month in Madras seems to have been averted for the time being with Sri Lanka going slow on its extradition demand. The Sri Lanka Inspector-General of Police, Rudra Rajasingham reportedly told External Affairs Ministry officials in Delhi last fortnight that extradition proceedings would be requested only after the arrested extremists had been tried for offences committed in India.

Three pistol-packing members of the Liberation Tigers, a group which is banned in Sri Lanka because it wants a separate Tamil state on the island and uses violent means to achieve its ends, were nabbed on a busy thoroughfare in Madras on May 19. A fourth involved in the same incident was later caught in neighbouring Chingleput district. Ironically, the four were apprehended because the Tigers movement is sharply split and two of them tried to gun down the other two of the opposing faction.

According to Madras police, Prabhakaran and Sivakumaran had just emerged from a café when they spotted rivals Jyotheeswaran and Uma Maheswaran alight from a motorcycle. Prabhakaran was the first to open fire. Jyotheeswaran was hit by five bullets but Maheswaran escaped and took to his heels. Prabhakaran and Sivakumaran also tried to get away but ran smack into a traffic outpost near the café. Police constables who were alerted by the commotion quickly nabbed them.

As the three were foreign nationals, the case was transferred to the state Crime Branch of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) because, as Police Commissioner S. Sripal puts it, "it was bound to have international ramifications." As a matter of routine protocol the Sri Lanka Deputy High Commissioner in Madras, K.N. Samarasinghe, was informed about the arrests. When Samarasinghe telephoned the Sri Lanka Defence Ministry personnel in Colombo and told them of the capture, they could hardly believe their ears. For years the Lanka policemen had combed the northern province for the very same people but to no avail.



Tamil Nadu police party escorting Prabhakaran (left) and deputy Sivakumaran: prize catch

"The Tigers have been tamed," announced President J.R. Jayawardene in Colombo matching the occasion with his usual dry sense of humour. He was addressing a Lord Baden Powell commemoration meeting. The thought that the Tamil Liberation Tigers, now riven by a bloody fratricidal strife that has led its two top leaders, Uma Maheswaran and Velupillai Prabhakaran into a Madras jail will turn into nice little boy scouts may be wishful at best. On the other hand, the possibility that the "Tigers" will cease armed actions against the state, at least temporarily, and slip back into their jungle hide-outs and lie low, is a strong one.

The Inspector-General of Police, Rudra Rajasingham shares his President's optimistic view but is also willing to share the credit for breaking the back of the Tamil armed resistance with the Tamil Nadu police. "What we have done," says Rajasingham, "is to give the Indian authorities a complete dossier on terrorist activities here, and soon you may see the whole lot of them in Indian police custody."

The Tiger movement began around 1972 as an extremist wing of the TULF. Not much is, however, known about the actual origins of the movement. Initially, the main targets of the Tigers were Tamilians who, they believed, had betrayed their cause for a separate Tamil state. At one stage of their terrorist campaigns, their grip over the northern province of Sri Lanka was so complete that policemen from the southern half considered a transfer to Jaffna as a form of punishment.

When the Sri Lanka Government found out that although it had proscribed the Tigers in 1977 they continued their activities merrily, it appointed a special security force commander of the army and police, headquarters in Jaffna to control extremist activities. With the special force proving effective, both Prabhakaran and Maheswaran slipped into Tamil Nadu in early 1979.

Of the three extremists that the Madras city police had caught, 28-year-old Prabhakaran alias Thambi, Maniam and Kari-galam, was one of the chief leaders of the

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Tamil Nadu police party escorting Prabhakaran and deputy Raghavan

Tigers, whom the Lanka police files described as their "most wanted man". Initially a petty bicycle thief, Prabhakaran is alleged to have committed 18 murders and robbed two banks of Rs 10 million in the course of his ten-year-old career as a terrorist. The only identification the police had of him was a photograph taken when he was 15 years old. Maheswaran alias Mukundan, who had escaped in the shoot-out, was regarded as the number one terrorist and was allegedly involved in nine murders apart from a bank robbery which fetched him Rs 27 million. Each carried a reward of three lakh on their heads for their capture. "We were thrilled to hear that Prabhakaran was caught at last," said a Lanka CID officer who had been unsuccessfully trailing him for the past six years.

Reward: Rajasingham, who ironically is a Tamil himself, was on tour of the hilly town of Nuwara Eliya when news of the arrests reached Colombo. The Defence Ministry immediately summoned him and asked him to fly to Madras along with a crack CID team headed by its director Amarasena Rajapakse. Even as they were flying out of Colombo, Deputy Defence Minister T.B. Weerapitaya announced a cash reward of one million rupees to the Tamil Nadu police for capturing the terrorist.

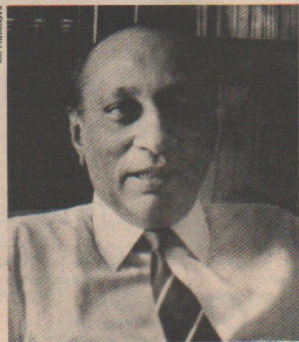
While Rajasingham was flying to New Delhi came the news that Maheswaran had been captured by the Tamil Nadu police in Ponneri in Chingleput district. Maheswaran is alleged to have injured two bystanders when he opened fire while the police were trying to arrest him.

Tiger sympathisers in Colombo flew down Chandrasenan, an advocate and son of former Tamil leader Chelvanayakam, to garner support for the extremists in Madras. Seeing this as another opportunity to display Tamil chauvinism especially after the political parties in the state had vociferously condemned the riots in Sri Lanka last August (INDIA TODAY, September 1-15) a council of four lawyers belonging to the AIADMK, DMK and Congress(I) was formed to fight against Sri Lanka's call for extradition. Said the bespectacled Chandrasenan: "If they are extradited they would be mercilessly tortured and then killed. There will be nothing left of them."

The arrests quickly became an issue in local politics where politicians vie with one another to espouse the cause of the Sri Lanka Tamils. The Crime Branch raided the houses of three members of the Opposition DMK claiming that Maheswaran had tipped them off. They also raided the home of a legislator belonging to Chief Minister M.G. Ramachandran's AIADMK party but the DMK promptly said this was "eyewash" claiming only the DMK has been helping the Sri Lanka

Tamils. DMK leader M. Karunanidhi then called a press conference and announced he would fight any move for extradition. His close associate Murasoli Maran immediately called an all-party meet to extend support to the caged Tigers. MGR, realising that the arrests had become a local issue, instructed his police to cool off. "Let the law take its own course for extradition," he said tamely when he realised that the Tigers had unwittingly stirred a hornet's nest. Says IGP of the Crime Branch, K. Mohandas, "We are only interested in the law and order aspect and are not concerned with extradition or the reward money. We only want to prevent Madras from becoming another Chicago."

However, in Sri Lanka MGR was quoted by the *Sun* correspondent as saying, "We are not concerned with the crimes alleged to have been perpetrated by the arrested Lankan Tamils in Sri Lanka." The daily *Island* published the news that MGR had placed the "Tigers" in the same category as Subhas Chandra Bose. The lasting impression left by these reports confirmed the old suspicion that the Colombo Government



IGP Rajasingham, sharing the credit

(and the Sinhalese) may have friends in Delhi but none in Madras.

Extradition: Meanwhile the issue was being hotly debated in New Delhi, as Sri Lanka has no treaty with India for extraditing criminals. With India seeking the extradition of the self-proclaimed Khalistan leader Jagjit Singh Chauhan from the US, New Delhi could not really give a straightforward negative reply. The Indian External Affairs Ministry also had to contend with the turmoil building up in Tamil Nadu against extradition. Moreover, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's relations with President Julius Jayawardene are reportedly not all that friendly which could be another factor slowing the Indian response.

Both the Government and the Sinhalese public however are intrigued and irritated by the way in which the arrest of seven men, including two of Sri Lanka's "most wanted" men has become an issue in the tangled politics of Tamil Nadu. Correspondents reporting from Madras to the Sri Lankan press have written of public meetings, demonstrations, poster campaigns and petition to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, all on behalf of "The Madras Seven". They vehemently oppose the idea of extradition, and want the men tried in India.

Judging the lukewarm Indian reaction, Sri Lanka, which had initially announced that it wanted the extremists to be extradited, clarified that no application for extradition had yet been made formally to the Indian Government but such a move was on the anvil. The Sri Lanka policemen were not so "thrilled" when they flew into Madras and faced a barrage of Tamil chauvinism. A visibly perturbed Rajasingham said, "It's a traumatic experience for us. Our bandits seem to have been forgotten completely. Instead it is becoming political. We still have a lot of things to be ironed out with the External Affairs Ministry. But we are hoping that the cards will turn in our favour."

Movements: What has irked Sri Lanka most is that in recent years Tamil Nadu has become a "haven" for extremists. The Indian coastline can be reached within two hours by boat from the northern tip of Lanka and extremists can easily slip into Tamil Nadu. Said Rajasingham: "They move into Tamil Nadu like a lot of flotsam and jetsam." Most of them use motorboats to land at Rameswaram, Vedaranyam and Kezhakkarai. They smuggle electronic goods and jewellery to sell in India. Salem is considered the key Indian base because a lot of the Tigers' relatives are reportedly staying there. Although the Tamil Nadu police know of their movements in the state no action is taken because, as one officer put it: "They had not created a law and order problem in the state till now." Many of the Tigers have close links with political parties in the state and frequently visited their offices in Madras.

The interecine battles of the Tigers appeared to have intensified in the wake of the October 1981 riots in Sri Lanka. Matters came to a head when Prabhakaran is said to have killed Maheswaran's deputy in Jaffna. Subsequently, Prabhakaran slipped into Tamil Nadu with Maheswaran hot on his heels vowing to finish him off. But the Tamil Nadu police had other plans for them. Prabhakaran is reported to have told one of his lawyers after his recent arrest: "This is the price of disunity."

—RAJ CHENGAPPA in Madras



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Tamil Nadu police party escorting Prabhakaran (left) and deputy Sivakumaran: prize catch