

The gathering storm

Peaceful possibilities get sidelined as hawks gain the upper hand

DARK clouds of disintegration have gathered over Sri Lanka as the rival Sinhala majority and Tamil minority ethnic groups are busy gathering their last piece of arms to prepare for what could be the bloodiest war between the two since independence in 1948.

The Sinhala government has meanwhile launched a massive programme to settle families of armed Sinhalese, most of them ex-convicts in Tamil majority areas and has backed this programme with a stepped-up rampage by the armed forces against the civilian Tamil population in the strife-ridden north and eastern provinces. At the same time, the Eelam Tigers have decided they should all come together and strike back before it is too late. The badly divided Tamil youths, have now decided to group together though with what degree of success remains to be seen. Joining the band of violent activists is Appapillai Amirthalingam, secretary general of Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF). He has been virtually banished from Sri Lanka and is forced to abandon his Gandhian strategies and throw in his lot with the militants.

The Tigers and the moderates who are planning their moves at Madras, as well as the Tamils remaining in Lanka, hope that India, which is right now giving shelter to nearly 70,000 refugees who had fled the island since July 1983 riots, "will do something and come to our rescue." The Indian government is in a delicate position as it cannot openly declare help to the Eelam movement while, at the same time, it cannot remain a mere spectator to the atrocities being committed on Tamils of the neighbouring island country.

Of the 15 million population in Lanka, the Tamils—both Lankan and Indian—account for 3.5 million and are largely settled in the northern and eastern provinces. About eight per cent of the population are Muslims and they have chosen to side with the Sinhalese, even though they speak Tamil. And out of the 25,000 sq. miles of Lanka, the Tamils are demanding about 8,200 sq. miles for their Eelam. For ever since the island gained independence, the Tamils have been systematically deprived of all rights being reduced to second class citizens.

"We have come to this demand for Eelam only after exhausting all other avenues for a peaceful co-existence on equal terms with the Sinhalese," said Amirthalingam. "Now we are convinced there is no going back on the demand for Eelam. We have finally parted ways," said Yogeswaran, a former TULF MP from Jaffna town.

The TULF had for long kept itself away from the militant youth movements and hobnobbed with the Jayewardene government in the hope that a political solution could be worked out. But Jayewardene had his own problems within the ruling United National Party as also with the chauvinist Buddhist clergy. He made many promises to the Tamils only to break them subsequently. He promised some kind of regional autonomy for the Tamils, but the moment protests were heard within his own camp against such concessions he quickly abandoned it. Meanwhile, the round-table peace talks the President was holding for several months with the different Sinhala parties, the Buddhist clergy and the TULF also

broke down with Jayewardene announcing on January 21 that he would no more talk with anyone advocating a separate Tamil state. The TULF had no other alternative but to join the militants, where after a lot of argument and hesitation, it was accepted as partner in the struggle for Eelam which will now be more military than political.

It is with the realisation that things are getting tougher day by day for the armed forces that the Sinhala ministers in the Jayewardene cabinet are ranting and raving over the Tamil issue. "What is at stake is our independence, the unity of our country, the democratic way of life," National Security Minister Lalith Athulathmudali told Lankan Parliament in November last. And the dismissed minister Cyril Mathew, long identified as a Tamil-hater, also made a speech in Parliament on January 9, justifying his attack on the packet of concessions Jayewardene was preparing for the conference and the Tamils. "If these (Tamils') demands are granted, what will happen to the majority Sinhalese community which



Well-armed. A PLOTE guerrilla carrying a grenade launcher

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is 74 per cent of the entire population of the country? They will be compelled to the southernmost tip of Sri Lanka, and thereafter jump into the Indian ocean," Mathew said in Parliament. It is hardliners such as these in the UNP that have made solutions difficult to arrive at for Jayewardene.

The Lankan army meanwhile has been vicious in its anti-Tiger campaigns ever since the racial riots in July 1983, in which over 400 were killed by Sinhala mobs in and around Colombo (Tamil sources put this figure at over 2,000). The past three months alone have seen over 650 deaths in the army action in the northern and eastern provinces and armed combat is likely to escalate further in the coming days.

The Lankan government has enlisted the help of the Israel's Mossad to train its armed forces, which have been labelled by many as "the most undisciplined force in the world." In fact, the president has expressed helplessness to control the rampaging forces, who have been butchering civilians in the Tamil areas whenever an attack is made on them by the Tigers. The Mossad has, it is said, instilled a little bit of confidence and a lot of training in the latest arms. A sample of what is in store for the Tamil militants was seen when a plane belonging to Zaire, recently detained in Trivandrum, was found to be carrying a consignment of sophisticated arms for the Lankan forces.

Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi has ruled out Indian military intervention in Sri Lanka, though he admitted the refugee influx would create serious problems in India, specially in Tamil Nadu. Rajiv's statement disappointed the militants but they quickly reconciled themselves to the fact that India cannot afford such an action. Now the hope is centred around getting all the militant groups to unite or at least to come under a common programme. The TULF will, in all likelihood, provide to such a unified Eelam body, an official spokesman to canvass support from sympathetic foreign powers. India, these Eelamists feel, might come to their help at such an appropriate time. Their hopes centre around the fact that with the violation of human rights on such a large scale as has been going on for a number of months now, and the stepped-up genocide by the troops, India cannot remain passive for long.

"We want India to intervene directly," Amirthalingam told this correspondent. "India has to give us security now," added Yogeswaran. "When the

US could justify sending its troops to Grenada supposedly to save a few of its students why can't India send its troops to save thousands of Tamils from the Sinhalese butchers?" he asked.

THEY are over 20 militant Tamil groups even though only five are fairly well known. They are Prabhakaran's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Uma Maheswaran's People's Liberation Movement of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), Sri Sabaratnam's Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO), Balakumar's Eelam Revolutionary Organisation (EROS) and Padmanabha's Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF).

But despite their common goal, the militant youth groups are finding it difficult to come together on the basis of an agreed line of action. Even so, the present efforts initiated under the good offices of some influential common friends seem to offer some hope. Six groups have already agreed to cooperate with each other and three of them—the EPRLF, EROS and TELO—are already working as a united front. The PLOTE and the TELA are the new additions, along with the TULF. The six groups met several times recently at Madras to chalk out a common programme for the struggle for Eelam, and it is likely that, before long, such a unity would be announced and the frequent

clashes among the groups would be avoided.

But even this unity is incomplete as the powerful LTTE of Prabhakaran alias Thambi has chosen to stay out of the unity dialogues. The LTTE is said to have expressed serious suspicions about Amirthalingam's participation in the moves for peace and coordination among the youth groups, whose militant methods he had been condemning before.

"They need some excuse for staying out," said Amirthalingam when asked about the report. "But they must come for unity, as, otherwise, they are surely going to be isolated in the Eelam struggle. People will be angry with the LTTE if it did not participate in the unity talks."

Each Tamil militant group reportedly has about 2,000 trained youths. "The Lankan armed forces together would number about 18,000. Even if we have just half that number with us, we can surely get our Eelam. Because, you know what type of undisciplined and moraleless force the Sinhalese army has always been," said Skanta, a spokesman for the PLOTE. "And besides, we will add up to much more than a mere half of that 18,000," he added.

All the groups claim they are either Marxists or Socialists, or both. Their Eelam would be a Socialist republic where people would have freedom to choose their government, these militants say. A few of the groups have been to training centres for guerillas in countries in the mid-east. Uma Maheswaran had his first training with the PLO, it is learnt. And now the complaint from Colombo is that India is training the Eelam boys and providing them with the arms.

According to latest reports from Jaffna, the TELO group and carried out two successful operations, one at Kallundai in Jaffna district and the other in Killinochi. On February 28, they had placed land mines and destroyed four army trucks. The death figure was put at over 60 by TELO sources at Madras the next day. The second incident was the attack on Killinochi police station which, TELO said, was done by EPRLF. Four truckloads of Tigers dressed in uniform drove to the police station and killed most of the inmates, including a large number of Sinhalese, and destroyed the police station with bombs and rifle fire. "Such individual attacks no doubt boost our own image while sapping the spirits of the Sinhala army. But imagine the impact such an operation would have if only the boys come together," said Yogeswaran.

—BHAGWAN R. SINGH



Ready to kill and die. A guerrilla in training