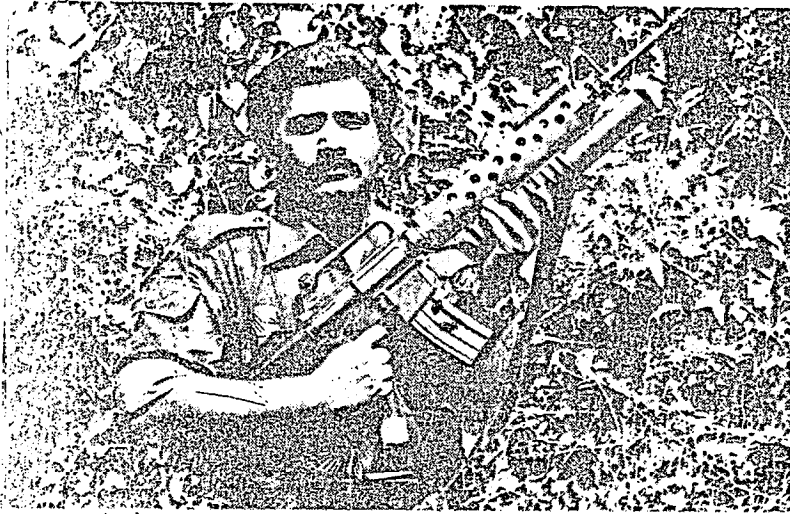


# Super-Power Game In Sri Lanka

In the island of Sri Lanka so close to the shores of India the two super-powers and their allies are deeply involved in arming and abetting the rival sides. At present, the super-power involvement is largely by proxy. But the game they are playing represents the greatest danger to our national security, to prevent which India must act now before it is too late. With Rajiv Gandhi in office it may in fact be the latter. Says Subramanyam Swamy.



V. Prabhakaran: The most wanted man of Ealem

In varying degrees of involvement, the USA, China, Pakistan, Israel, the United Kingdom and South Africa have their presence in the island of Sri Lanka. Again, in differing levels of intensity, each of the powers is helping the Sri Lanka government in combating the Tamil militants who are fighting to create a sovereign country of Ealem.

The Tamil militant groups are many, but the main ones are the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO), the Eelam Progressive Revolutionary

Liberation Front (EPRLF), the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), the Eelam Revolutionary Organization of Students (EROS). In varying amounts, the Soviet Union, North Korea, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Libya give money and weapons to these militant groups. Of course, India also trains and equips the Tamil militants, principally the TELO. PLO's involvement I came to know of when, in 1982, I tried to free prisoners taken by Israelis in south Lebanon, whom I mistook for Indians. Many had names like Mani, Murugan and Krishnan, so I assumed they were Indians. The

Israelis put me wise to the fact that they were Tamils of Sri Lanka, who had been undergoing training in PLO camps in Lebanon, when Israel invaded that country and took them prisoner with the Palestinians.

Sri Lanka is an island only 35 km from Rameswaram. In that island so close to our shores, the two super-powers and their allies are deeply involved in arming and abetting the rival sides. Yet, Indians in general are unaware of the serious national security threat posed by the goings on in the island of Sri Lanka. We have heard so much rhetoric from the prime minister about Diego Garcia, which is more than 2400 km away from Trivandrum. But we are oblivious of the much bigger dangers in an island just 35 km away, the hitherto paradise called Sri Lanka.

At present, the super-power involvement in Sri Lanka is largely through proxies. On the US side, the British and Pakistani involvement is the most significant. The British involvement is not formal, but through a private company called Keeni Meeni Services (KMS) which employs the ex-SAS (special air services) men. This company has been training a new commando group in Sri Lanka called the special task force (STF) to carry out search and destroy missions in Tamil civilian areas. Some of the KMS/SAS men (there are 60 SAS men in all in Sri Lanka) have

even flown the Sri Lanka air force planes on missions, which fact the British government can use to force the KMS company to fold up its operations in Sri Lanka. This the British authorities have not yet done, nor seem willing to do.

The importance the Sri Lanka government attaches to the STF can be seen from the fact that the entire responsibility for its operations has been vested with the president's son Ravi Jayewardene.

From the Tamil people's and the Indian government's viewpoints, the British involvement is the most serious and yet to the credit of the British diplomacy, the least controversial! What the KMS company is doing for the Sri Lankans is to raise their technical capability several notches higher than that of the Tamil militants, and effectively allow the Sri Lanka armed force to organise the genocide of Tamils from Colombo's secure Kalutara base, thus making it unnecessary for Sri Lanka ground forces to pass through land-mined Tamil dominated areas to combat the militants in their sanctuary.

Helping STF on the ground is the South African government's supply of armoured personnel carriers, the APCs, which can pass through land-mined areas without damage to the troop-carrying carriers. At present these APCs have not been much used because the Sri Lanka armed forces have not been able to establish sufficient number of sanctuaries in the Tamil areas to provide logistic support. But with growing civilian casualties inflicted on the Tamils, and the internecine and fratricidal wars between Tamil groups, the operation of the STF and the deployment of APCs can effectively tilt the military advantage to the Sri Lanka government. The present strength of the APCs is about 150, and these are coordinated with the 21 new helicopter gunships that the government has purchased from Singapore. The main problem however is that Ravi Jayewardene's handling of the STF and the glamour it has acquired in the Sri Lanka press, has created problems of jealousy amongst the Sri Lanka army and even with the Sri Lanka Interior Security Minister Lalith Athulathmudali. Now with growing Tamil militant operations in Colombo,



**J R Jayewardene: Will he keep the promise to Israelis?**

these dissensions are likely to grow, and could hamper the effectiveness of the STF.

The Pakistani involvement in Sri Lanka is also very significant. The Pakistan government has openly admitted to training about 1600 "jawans" of the Sri Lanka army, and provided light arms such as rifles to that country. Pakistan also is actively engaged in fundamentalist propaganda in the island to divide the Tamil population into Hindus versus Muslims. Together, Hindus, Muslims, and Christian Tamils are about 24% of Sri Lanka population. Hindus alone are only 12%. Muslims are 5%, and Christians 6%. Pakistan has no business at all in Sri Lanka, but emotionally it feels for the plight of the island since to them it is reminiscent of what happened to Pakistan on the Bangladesh issue. They feel that here too India is preparing the ground to "dismember" Sri Lanka. Pakistan would like to do more, but it cannot.

While we may understand the motivation of Pakistan, we have also to understand the grave national security implication of what is happening. Pakistan which had only one front — Punjab — in operation against India, has now opened up a new front in our southern shores. So far all that the Rajiv Gandhi government has done is to give a running commentary on what generally Pakistan is up to, and engage in the silly one-upmanship game in Arab world by talking about the "Israel-Pakistan nexus". No Arab country has to date been impressed. But by allowing Pakistan to

## NEIGHBOURS

establish a foothold in Sri Lanka, the Rajiv Gandhi government is gravely endangering India's vital national security.

The much talked of Israeli involvement in Sri Lanka is however vastly overrated. The Sri Lanka government has been in fact publicising the presence of Israel to scare the Tamil militants. One Sri Lanka minister went to the extent of suggesting that the Israeli "Shin Bet" is in the island to combat the Tamil militants. "Shin Bet" is the elite Israeli force to counter Arab terrorism. It cannot be deployed in Sri Lanka because this force consists of Israelis who look like Arabs, speak Arabic like natives and mingle among Arabs. Its deployment in Sri Lanka is meaningless because they would stick out like sore thumbs in the island's terrain. Israeli presence is however very much there, mostly as intelligence gathers or as Mossad personnel. Israeli motivation clearly is to reach as many places in the world as possible, and when Sri Lanka approached them, they jumped at it. Ironically, they had first approached the Tamil militants some years ago when Mrs Bandaranaike as prime minister had ordered the Israeli embassy closed in 1973. The Tamil militants, for whom India has always acted as the god-father, turned down Israeli help for fear that India would react adversely.

The present Israeli-Sri Lanka relations are brittle, and can break at any time. This is because the Jayewardene government had promised the Israelis a full-fledged embassy in Colombo to replace the "interest section" arrangement that they presently have. If in the next few months the Sri Lanka government does not deliver on their promise, the Israelis are likely to pull out of the island, and at that stage the Tamils will have another opportunity to draw on Israeli expertise.

The 1971 insurrection in Sri Lanka by the Sinhala group Janata Perumana was aided by the North Koreans and the Chinese. There is therefore always a question where these

## NEIGHBOURS

countries stand now. The Chinese in 1971 had Mao Ze dong and Lin Biao at the helm of affairs who believed in "exploiting revolution". Times have changed, and the present leadership under Deng Xiao Peng has completely reversed that interventionist policy. Therefore the Chinese are the least involved, in military terms at least. Recently, the Chinese president, on a state visit to Sri Lanka, turned down the Jayewardene government's request for Chinese military assistance. President Li Xian Nian also conveyed the Chinese anxiety for a political, not military solution to the problem. The Chinese however keep completely shy of the Tamil militants, and have declined any contact with them. This is because the Chinese are averse to extension of India's sphere of influence in Sri Lanka, and they consider any advancement of the Tamil cause as an increase, in India's power in the region.

The United States' role in Sri Lanka is much less puritanical than the Chinese. Contrary to all propaganda, the US has steadfastly declined to supply arms to Sri Lanka. Jayewardene has been hawking the Trincomalee naval base to the Americans in exchange for a "military supplier's" relationship — which would have meant that Sri Lanka could obtain sophisticated arms from the US at cheap prices. This the US has declined to do, because it "favours" a political solution to the problem. At present, all the US arms that Sri Lanka has, such as the Bell helicopter gunships have been purchased at market prices in Singapore. The US generally supports Sri Lanka in international forums, but at the same time it has not got tough with the Ealem lobby working on US soil. In fact, as the Sri Lanka Finance Minister Ronnie De Mel recently noted, the Ealem group has managed to lobby through a 50% cut in US aid to Sri Lanka. The Ealem associations have been holding international conventions in the USA to propagate their cause vigorously, without serious attacks from the US government. The US attitude



Rajiv Gandhi: Weak and ineffective

is coloured by the fact that if tomorrow the Bandaranaike group comes to power in Sri Lanka, the Tamils would provide a convenient lever to keep that government in check. There is of course no immediate prospect of that happening.

But the recently hardened US attitude to the Sri Lanka government is largely due to the successful Ealem group lobbying that Tamils are all not "Marxist, terrorist and secessionists", but in fact god-fearing democratic socialists or humanists who will settle for a federal constitution in lieu of Ealem. In this I have helped them in US circles after anchoring for my professional work at Harvard University as a full-fledged professor. This image projection of Tamils has actually helped many Ealem groups an easy access to senators, congressmen and state department officials and has put the Sri Lanka government on the defensive because of their inability to agree to share power with the Tamils through a federal constitution.

Furthermore, the Sri Lanka embassy which hitherto benefited because of the portrayal of Tamils in negative terms, is simply not equipped for the task of articulate presentation of their case. The Sri Lanka ambassador, Ernest Correa, is a corrupt person who maintains an illegal bank account in Canada, and he has told American officials privately that he is fed up with Jayewardene and the Budhists (Correa is a Christian), and is looking for an opportunity to go and retire in Canada. Such is the

motivation. In a seminar in Maryland University, another Sri Lanka embassy diplomat thundered before 20 Jewish professors that Sinhalese are "pure Aryans" and hence cannot mix with the Tamils. The Jewish professors were shocked by this Hitler-like sentiment. Such is the quality of the Sri Lanka embassies abroad, a shortcoming Ealem lobbies can exploit and ultimately weaken US support for Jayewardene.

While it is the US and its allies who are the principal supporters of the Jayewardene government, it is India, the USSR, the PLO, Libya and North Korea who are the principal benefactors of the Tamil groups. After the July 1983 riots, Mrs Gandhi cracked down on Libyan and PLO connections with the militants, and substituted RAW organised military camps and training for the Tamils in Salem, Chingleput and Chakrata (near Dehra Dun).

The TELO grew out of that policy much to the dismay of the LTTE which had by then developed links with the international terrorist circuit patronised by the PLO and Libya. The LTTE also draws support from the Tamil Nadu government headed by M G Ramachandran who treats the LTTE as a kind of private army to be kept in reserve against his bugbear, Karunanidhi. This aspect of the Ealem movement is most dangerous because the gun-toting militants' activities could spill over into Indian domestic politics. The LTTE also draws support from G Parthasarthy who as a

Nehru family retainer has been influencing the external affairs ministry. Parthasarathy was a card-holding member of the CPI, and according to some an 'Oxbridge' contemporary of Kim Philby, the KGB mole in British secret service in the 1950s. Within the Rajiv Gandhi coterie there is also another political advisor whom one Congress (I) minister told me some years ago is a KGB agent. He too apparently supports the LTTE.

With this kind of backing, and Ealem looking inevitable, the LTTE recently moved to massacre 150 TELO militants while they were asleep in their camps. They also assassinated TELO leader Sabaratnam. The nerve of the LTTE is indeed remarkable considering that their leaders enjoy India's sanctuary and hospitality, and that TELO has been nurtured and financed by the government of India. This massacre was carried out just as a central minister, Chidambaram, was in Colombo conducting negotiations on a compromise draft.

Subsequently, a bomb exploded in Karunanidhi's public meeting in Madras, missing him. It is widely suspected that the LTTE is behind that too.

If the government of India fails to act to curb the LTTE and its nefarious activities, and does not bring to book the murderers of TELO chief Sabaratnam, then it is inevitable that some of the Ealem Tamils will approach the US, Israel and China for assistance and self-preservation. If the Israelis pull out of Sri Lanka as the present trends indicate, then a Tamil-Israeli connection would be easy especially since the Ealem lobby the world over is already in contact with Jewish groups claiming that, like the Jews, the Tamils are a highly educated but persecuted minority, and like the Jews they too would like a homeland of their own.

If that happens, then the super-powers game would infect Tamil Nadu where the virus of succession is dormant but not extinct. Then in addition to Punjab, Kashmir and the north-east, Tamil Nadu will go up in flames too. With a weak, ineffective PM like Rajiv, the country's unity is in peril.

The super-power game in Sri



**S C Chandrasekaran: No faith in negotiations**

Lanka is not to create Ealem. Make no mistake about it. Not only the USA, but the USSR which is supporting several Tamil groups, is also against Ealem. The Soviet strategy is to allow the



**G Parthasarathy: Backing for LTTE**

## NEIGHBOURS

problem fester till a Marxist revolution can take over the whole island. This was the strategy they followed in Indo-China and in Nicaragua.

We in India cannot allow anything but a democratic government in Sri Lanka. If we are to be the midwife for Ealem, then we cannot allow a repeat of the Bangladesh developments. Let us frankly accept our responsibilities in this area. But will we? The Nehrus are notoriously weak in crisis, and have placed — always — their personal benefits over the national interests. Thus, while Sardar Patel could integrate 500 princely states into India, Nehru could not integrate the only one in his responsibility, that was his homeland — Kashmir. Nehru had put his international image and his liason with Edwina Mountbatten above national security. Sardar Patel put the country above self. That's the difference. Similarly, just to stay in power, Mrs Gandhi abandoned India's independence in foreign policy to tilt the nation towards the Soviet Union to woo the communists. And later, fanned extremism in Punjab to consolidate the Hindu fundamentalist vote behind her. The country is paying dearly for it. And now Rajiv Gandhi is more interested in South Africa and Nicaragua than what is happening in the country's backyard.

More Tamil people are slaughtered in one week in Sri Lanka than blacks in a whole year in South Africa, and yet Rajiv Gandhi wants to campaign for sanctions against South Africa, and could not even spare a moment for the Tamils dying like flies at the hands of the Sri Lanka armed forces.

The stage is thus set for the intensification of the super-power rivalry in our southern shores. Sri Lanka is not just Sinhalese killing Tamils out of passion, but its resolved situation represents potentially the greatest danger to our national security to prevent which India must act now before it is too late. With Rajiv Gandhi in office, it may in fact be the latter. Only time will tell.