

SPECIAL FEATURE

JAFFNA

A Confused Populace

Uncertain times for the besieged peninsula

WITH the IPKF consolidating its hold in the Jaffna Peninsula, it has become difficult for journalists to report on the situation on the ground. The only way is to enter clandestinely, as Principal Correspondent ANITA PRATAP and Photographer SHYAM TEKWANI did last fortnight. What should have been a day's journey by road from Colombo, took six tension-ridden days.

They reached Vavuniya where they established contact with Dinesh, the local LTTE commander. After a great deal of persuasion, he agreed to take them to Jaffna. The first part of the journey through the jungles of Vavuniya was on a tractor-trailer with an escort of seven armed LTTE men and in pouring rain. After five gruelling hours, they made camp for the night in a jungle hide-out.

Next morning they were transferred to a van. By dusk, they entered Killinochi, the periphery of the war zone. Walking over a mile in total darkness, they reached another LTTE hide-out near Paranthan. The third morning it was back to a tractor to a 100 yards short of Elephant Pass, the sole gateway to the Jaffna Peninsula where they were left with two guides to complete the journey's most dangerous leg.

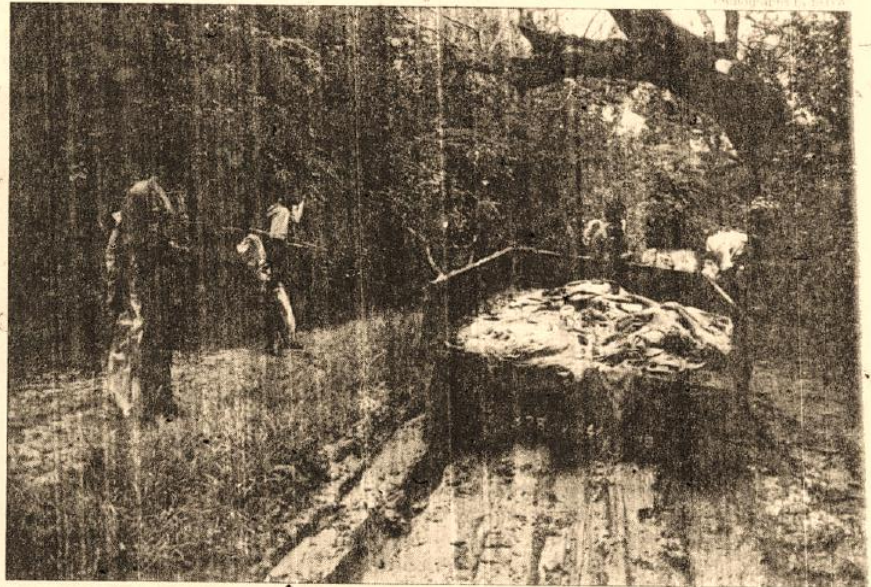
They entered the peninsula in broad daylight and for the next six hours waded through lagoons and coconut groves with the intention of establishing contact with the next LTTE commander. But the failure of the guides to do so was the first sign that the LTTE has communications problems. It was only late the next afternoon that contact was established and they reached Palaly. At Palaly, they were told to obtain bicycles to get to Chavakacheri. They were also provided with clothes similar to those worn by the local population. For about a kilometre, they had to pedal through a lane that had the IPKF on one side and the Sri Lankan Army on the other. On the fifth day, they ran into serious trouble. Turning into a lane, they ran straight into an IPKF patrol. Abandoning the bicycles, they ran blindly into a lagoon and swam for their lives with the IPKF in hot pursuit. Perhaps the

only reason the patrol did not open fire was that it was the second day of the cease-fire.

Having crossed the lagoon, they walked barefoot through swamps and paddy fields and reached a village. But next morning, the guides expressed their inability to take them to Jaffna as the IPKF was all around. But

The first stirrings of normalcy seen in the vehicular movement and staggered, but nevertheless Schools, banks and shops have. The Jaffna Secretariat has started functioning. The market-places are busy. Fish and cigarettes can be the stalls—food grains are coming. Operations are going out.

But a month after the blood drew to a close, the people of Jaffna confused about their attitude to LTTE is not a problem now, but in Jaffna, which has never known curfew more than three to four days even



■ One of the LTTE's jungle hide-outs: guerrilla warfare

determined to get to Jaffna, they bought two used bicycles for Rs 2,500 each and started pedalling. Their local disguise worked—they sailed through 18 IPKF checkpoints and reached Jaffna after a 15-km journey. The next day, they pedalled 30 km through Jaffna town, Navatkuli, Chunkidulam, Anallur, Ariyalai and Pesaiyoor. Finally, they abandoned the bicycles, and hitched a ride on a truck transporting onions from Jaffna to Colombo. PRATAP's report on the situation in the Jaffna Peninsula:

THE Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) may have lost the battle of Jaffna, but the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) is far from winning the war. Overtly, the city is slowly returning to some semblance of normalcy. The frozen terror induced by Operation Pawan is thawing. The siege is loosening.

height of the Sri Lankan aggression. There has a 14-hour dusk-to-dawn curfew. Jayarathnam, a fisherman of Pesaiy said: "We cannot step out till 8 a.m. But a good catch, I must set off at 3 a.m. Women feel it is dangerous for their venture out. And many government offices cannot function as the army occupied their buildings.

The non-resumption of electricity affected water supply and business activities. Many people trudge to army camp for daily rations. Others borrow money from money-lenders. Says S. Ravindrassessor, in the Government Land Valuation Department, in Chundikulam: "I borrow Rs 1,000 per month for which I pay a monthly interest of Rs 50." The cost of oil, sugar and rice has trebled.

Education—which got top priority in Jaffna ever since British days and was a

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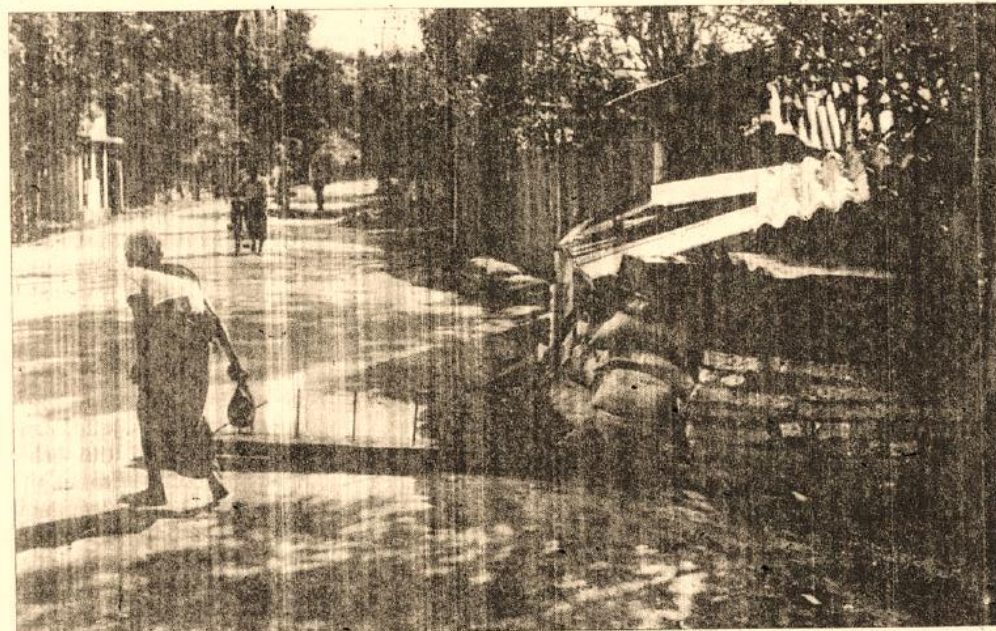
cause behind the Tamils' prosperity—is a major casualty. Schools reopened on November 25, but on the first day, hardly a few valiant stragglers could be seen attending. The situation is not conducive for children to go to school and in any case, most of the schools have been converted into camps by the IPKF. In December, the 'O' level examinations will be held, but it is doubtful whether the Tamil students in the peninsula will be in any position to appear for the examination. Laments Jaffna Municipal Commissioner C.Y.K. Sivagnanam: "The entire generation's education is ruined."

on my bicycle. The jawan on duty forced me to take off my shirt and use it as a flag. It was so humiliating."

Perhaps the worst problem is that the people are caught between the devil and the deep sea: between the IPKF and the LTTE. Rival gangs like the People's Liberation of Tamil Eelam, the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation and Three Stars are helping the IPKF with intelligence gathering. But the crucial point is that civilians too are providing information. Says a resident of Navatkuli: "When we keep silent, the IPKF harasses us. Yet if we talk, we're vulnerable to LTTE punishment."

informers. But their gain of territorial control in the peninsula is almost complete. At every street corner they have entrenched themselves in strategically located bunkers. Regular mobile and foot patrols scour the countryside.

While the conduct of some sections of the jawans is strongly resented by the public and is bringing avoidable discredit to the otherwise disciplined IPKF, almost all civilians who had any sort of dealings with higher officers showered fulsome praise on them. Says Logarajah: "From the captain rank upwards they are really nice, polite and helpful. It's the lowest



■ An IPKF bunker in Jaffna town: well-entrenched

cadre with whom the public has the maximum contact that needs to be tightly leashed." In fact, wherever possible, superior officers have been quick and harsh in dealing with errand soldiers. Two were cashiered on rape charges. On November 21, when a rich struggler's house in Ariyalai was being raided, the landlady M. Balachandran, complained that some gold ornaments were missing. Senior officers lined up the soldiers involved in the raid and had the landlady herself check their uniforms. She finally sheepishly admitted that she must have hid the gold in a sari.

The incident also highlights the fact that the IPKF has become the victim of a well-orchestrated smear campaign, with rumours of rape and damage to civilian property and lives rampant.

Asked to substantiate their allegations, the civilians refer to vague reports of rape, when in fact, the Amnesty International has a record of proven cases of rape of Tamil women by the Sri Lankan Army. In self-defence, a senior officer of the IPKF says: "Yes, sometimes civilians do get harassed because we can't distinguish between them and the Tigers."

As far as the LTTE is concerned, the IPKF seems to have broken its back. What the Sri Lankan Army couldn't do in a decade, the IPKF has managed in a month. Clearly, the LTTE is on the run. It is disorganised with its top leaders dead or holed up somewhere while the cadres function, rudderless, in pockets. Even the LTTE's mediator with the Indian Government, C.V.K. Sivagananam, couldn't contact senior LTTE leaders from November 24.

The noose of the IPKF is tightening. It

There is public resentment about the fact that the IPKF does not show the same enthusiasm for restoring civic amenities as it has for consolidating its position. Indeed, technicians can be seen laying cables—not for the public, but for better communication between their camps; all pointers to a long stay in the peninsula. In fact, a Jaffna citizen points out that the condition today in Jaffna is far worse than the economic blockade that was imposed in January this year during the Sri Lankan Army offensive.

And where they can, the LTTE has been brutal with army informers. On November 20, they kidnapped Sathish, 18, of Navatkuli for providing information. Two days later, his bullet-ridden body was found. On November 18, at Periya Kallar, S. Kanakaswamy, 45, was tied to a lamp-post and killed by the LTTE for a similar offence. And six days later, they shot down Nagarathnam, the station master of Muruvil. The LTTE has put up posters warning that civilians who rendered any assistance to the Indian Army or the Red Cross would be dealt with seriously. A. Shankaran, in whose hotel the Red Cross team is staying, says helplessly: "There is no other hotel in Jaffna, so the Red Cross is staying with us. But I am so afraid of LTTE retaliation. What are we to do?"

The IPKF may not yet be in a position to prevent sneak attacks and save their

has a stranglehold on the territory from 15 miles south of Jaffna—even the kurukuvazhis (the crooked paths) of the LTTE guerrillas are sealed. The IPKF's biggest achievement has been the smashing of the LTTE's communication network. With the walkie-talkies going out of action for fear of interception, a yawning gulf has developed between the LTTE cadres and the leadership. Observed a Major in the IPKF: "We know that many Tigers are slipping out. But there is nothing we can do as they have their national identity cards."

While the morale of the LTTE cadres in the northern province is still high, in the peninsula, most seem confused. Operation Pawan has been a major military set-back for the LTTE which virtually ran a parallel government in the peninsula. But now the ground situation is somewhat similar to the pre-1983 days. Says Dinesh, LTTE area commander of Vavuniya: "We have run out of ammunition for a sustained confrontation but we will continue our guerrilla warfare. Instead of living under an unjust system, it is better to die for a just cause." And they have been doing just that. On November 23, two grenades were thrown at the secretariat. And the stillness of the night is often broken by the sound of gun-fire.

But where the LTTE has scored is in its anti-IPKF propaganda war. When the Indian Army first arrived, there was exultation among the Tamils. Such a situation was truly dangerous for the LTTE whose role as the protector of the Tamils was threatened. They launched a massive anti-IPKF campaign. And when the IPKF began artillery shelling of Jaffna, public euphoria evaporated. Today, the population seems torn between their respect for the LTTE and their desire for peace. There is also a sneaking admiration for the LTTE for standing up to the mighty Indian Army.

The release of the 18 Indian prisoners by the LTTE, and the 48-hour cease-fire by the LTTE, failed to achieve any tangible result. One problem is that there is no direct or open channel of communication between the LTTE and the Indian Government.

What is evident, however, is that the LTTE leadership is now in a conciliatory mood. In a letter dated November 14 to Brigadier R.I.S. Kahlon, town commandant of Jaffna, LTTE deputy leader G. Mahendrarajah alias Mahattaya, made the following points:

- ▶ On declaration of cease-fire by the IPKF, the LTTE will immediately lay down arms.
- ▶ The IPKF should move back to its position prior to October 10, 1987, and patrolling and search operations should be stopped. Later, the LTTE said this was negotiable.
- ▶ The functioning of hospitals, food supplies and transport should be handed

▶ The LTTE is not against the accord as long as it safeguards the rights and interests of the Tamil-speaking people.

This was followed by another letter from Mahattaya on November 21, which the Indian Government chose not to publicise. In this letter, Mahattaya welcomed the 48-hour cease-fire and promised not to "use arms, even after the expiry of 48 hours, except to defend ourselves in case of any offensive by the IPKF". He urged India to create an "atmosphere conducive for negotiations", and ended with the comment that "the major issues about the rights and security of our people and if these are ensured, handing over arms is not a problem".

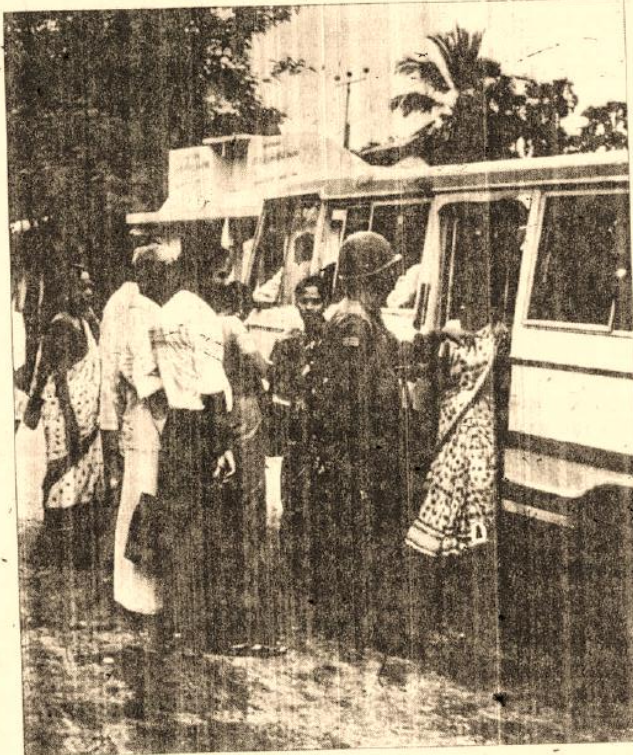
New Delhi, however, insists that any terms of surrender must be unconditional and must come directly from Pirabhakaran and carry assurance that all arms will be laid down, and must be fully supportive of the accord. New Delhi also claims that the LTTE violated the cease-fire and used the opportunity to regroup themselves.

But it is also obvious that no solution is possible without the LTTE. Most Jaffna residents confirmed the belief that an accord without the LTTE would just not work. It was time that efforts were made to bring them into the mainstream.

The Tamils also say that a determined bid must be made to win back the confidence of the civilian population, establish India's bona fide intentions. All that the civilians want is peace and this can be effectively harnessed to swing the mood once again in favour of the IPKF. For the conduct of the jawans to be strictly monitored.

Jaffna Tamils say that should be made immediately for the provision of basic civic amenities. They want the IPKF to hand over the administration to local administration.

Jaffna citizens are bristling with indignation at the "imposition" of IPKF administration. And a common complaint, particularly among the educated sections is that we are not being allowed to manage our own affairs. After all, we do have an infrastructure. The longer this is delayed the greater will be the level of suspicion in the minds of the local population.



■ IPKF checking passengers: growing resentment

over to the civilian authorities.

- ▶ The LTTE is prepared for resumption of negotiations immediately.
- ▶ Amnesty to be invoked and the ban on the LTTE lifted. The Rs 1-million prize on Pirabhakaran's head to be cancelled.
- ▶ LTTE members to be allowed to live a normal life in dignity, and rights of the Tamil people to be restored.
- ▶ The LTTE looks to India for a solution of the problems of the Tamils.
- ▶ Establishment of a Tamil police force for the northern and eastern provinces.