

NEIGHBOURS

SRI LANKA

A New Dimension



SRI LANKA'S ethnic upheaval has now acquired another dimension that threatens to impose further strains on the island's social fabric. The three weeks

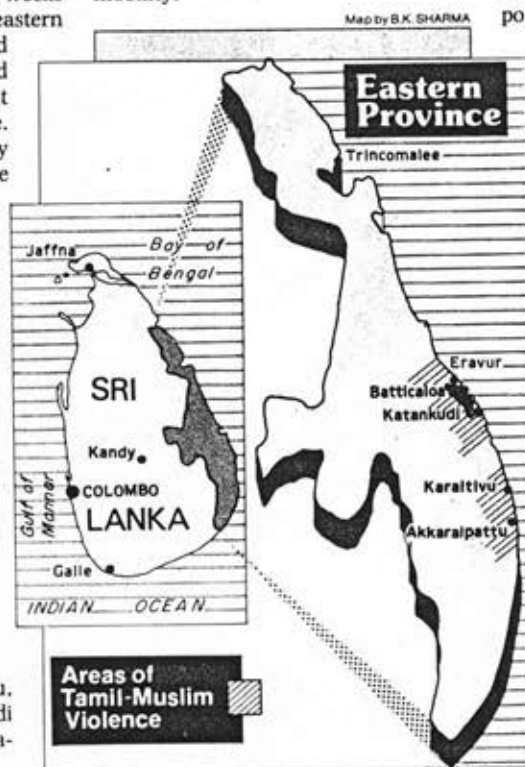
of tension and violence in the eastern province between Tamils and Muslims which left 50 people dead is likely to have consequences that are both grave and unpredictable. Last fortnight, the area slowly limped back to normalcy with the reopening of 130 of the region's 200 schools. But the physical and psychological scars still remain.

In physical terms, the toll is enormous. Though senior officials from Colombo are currently touring the province to assess the damage, over 2,000 homes and buildings, mainly shops, have been destroyed, with the loss in housing alone estimated at Rs 70 million. Some 25,000 refugees, rendered homeless by the violence, have been given shelter in the unopened schools. The majority are Tamils who fled their homes when violence broke out in towns like Karaitivu, Eravur, Akkaraipattu, Katankudi and even the outskirts of Batticaloa, the provincial capital.

The psychological damage is perhaps far greater. Tamil-Muslim violence on this scale is unprecedented. The last serious riots involving the Muslim community occurred as far back as 1915 and were religious rather than political in nature. This is the first time that the island's main minorities, the Tamils who comprise 13 per cent of the population and the Muslims (6 per cent) have been locked in violent conflict.

The upheaval has also brought into question the role of the Special Task Force (STF), the elite commando unit trained by former British SAS personnel which is in charge of security in the region. The failure of the STF to contain the violence led to the dispatching of police reinforcements to the area more than a week after the outbreak of violence. Asked why the STF could not control the

violence, National Security Minister Lalith Athulathmudali, however, told INDIA TODAY that well-armed terrorists had been operating in the area for several years and the STF faced many "logistics problems", specially that of mobility.



The tension and violence between Tamils and Muslims in the eastern province threatens to impose further strains on Sri Lanka's social fabric.

Both Tamil and Muslim leaders, currently engaged in taking out peace marches in the area, are, however, convinced that the embittered STF preferred to stay aloof when the trouble erupted. There have also been hints that "external elements" were responsible for fanning the flames, a phrase used by Home Minister K.W. Devanayagam, a

respected Tamil leader representing the local electorate, and by a Muslim deputy minister. Meanwhile, S. Thondaman, minister for rural industries and president of the powerful Indian Tamil labour union, the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC), told President Jayewardene that seven buses and two jeeps carrying armed men he described as "undesirable elements" had gone to the eastern province from Colombo.

Senior officials in the province admitted that members of the Muslim population had been given guns but explained it away by saying that they were merely returning weapons confiscated under the emergency regulations. Evidently, Muslims had been feeling threatened by the growing presence of armed Tamil youths supporting the cause of Eelam and claiming the racially-mixed eastern province as their "traditional Tamil homeland". Says Athulathmudali: "The real cause of the trouble is the resistance by the Muslims, specially the youth, to the northern terrorists and their separatist demand. When they failed to win over the Muslims, they resorted to the tactics they used in the north—robbery, assault, murder".

There is some truth in that statement. Muslim traders of the area hail from the affluent strata. Like the majority Sinhalese, Tamil militants regard the educationally-backward Muslims as a moneymaking community uninterested in politics or culture. But the new generation of Muslim youth, fired by ideological currents in the Arab-Islamic world, resent the Tamil attitude.

In that situation, political expediency could play a major role. Some Sinhalese politicians view the current tension as a means to win back Arab support and sympathy, diluted considerably in the wake of the introduction of Israeli "advisers" into Sri Lanka. Already, some newspapers in the island have hinted that the latest ethnic problem has been instigated at the advice of the Israeli personnel attached to Sri Lanka's intelligence organisations with a view to discrediting and undermining the Tamil extremists. However, the official *Daily News* warned against Sri Lanka becoming the cockpit of international conflicts. In the event, the current internal conflict is enough cause for alarm.

—MERVYN DE SILVA in Colombo