

SRI LANKA

A Diplomatic Deadlock

India rejects Premadasa's quit deadline



IT was a no-win situation. The Sri Lankan President R. Premadasa and Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi were caught in a bind last fortnight over the question of the withdrawal of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) from the north-eastern provinces. First, Premadasa tried snubbing India by demanding that the IPKF leave the island by the end of next month, then Rajiv hit back by making it clear that he would order the withdrawal according to his political convenience.

On June 12 when an official spokesman announced in New Delhi that the Indian Government had rejected the "unilateral deadlines" fixed by some Sri Lankan leaders for the IPKF withdrawal, a major diplomatic row between the two countries seemed imminent. "The withdrawal schedule of the IPKF can be decided only by mutual consultations as has been done till now and not through unilateral deadlines," said the spokesman.

The controversy was ignited when Premadasa attempted to score a point or two over Rajiv. He chose a Buddhist temple ceremony near the Parliament complex at Battaramulla, on the outskirts of Colombo, to inform a surprised nation that he had decided to request India to try to complete the withdrawal of the 50,000-strong IPKF by the end of July. His logic: "How can Sri Lanka host the SAARC summit with self-respect when a foreign army is operating in the country?" While New Delhi was clearly annoyed by Premadasa's announcement, the Tamils in Sri Lanka, with the exception of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), were anxious about the repercussions of the pull-out.

The President himself was quick to whip up support for his call. The Government parliamentary group passed a unanimous resolution on June 6, thanking him for initiating the move. Addressing the group, Premadasa, a known critic of the Indo-Sri Lanka accord, asked opponents of the withdrawal whether the desired peace had come with the presence of the IPKF in the country for two years, and what more harm would come if they left. The group had met after an unsuccessful mission by Foreign Secretary Bernard Tilakaratne to New Delhi to persuade

Rajiv to accede to Premadasa's call.

Though Tilakaratne, a known hawk, was given proper diplomatic attention in New Delhi, the foreign office was tough in its dealing with him. In fact, General A.S. Kalkat, who was holidaying in Europe was summoned back to India to help in

port with Premadasa.

Observers feel that Premadasa's call was not just an attempt at oneupmanship, but prompted by domestic compulsions too. Having failed to persuade the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) to join the negotiations, he opted for a course which would either neutralise the JVP's offensive or appeal to the Sinhala sentiments. And he did succeed partially in that respect. The Sinhalese political parties, the Buddhist clergy and student organisations have come out in support of

Rajiv and Premadasa: equally adamant



While Premadasa is determined to oust the IPKF soon, Rajiv feels normalcy should be restored first.

the consultations. Tilakaratne was firmly told that under the Indo-Sri Lanka accord, the troops could be withdrawn only after normalcy was restored.

The Indian side also quoted the statement given by Chief Minister V. Perumal of the North Eastern Provincial Council opposing the IPKF withdrawal. And when the Indian Government was told that the IPKF had failed to disarm the LTTE, it retorted by saying that what was the guarantee that the Sri Lankan Army would be able to do that and also ensure the safety of the Tamils on the island. However, there seems to be a feeling in the Government that the current mess in Sri Lanka policy was also due to the high commission's inability to establish a rap-

Premadasa's call.

This new aggressive stand also helped Premadasa consolidate his control over the party and the Cabinet. Declared Ranjan Wijeyeratne, foreign minister and minister of state for defence after the cabinet meeting which endorsed Premadasa's call: "We are still insisting that they should leave by July end. You know how speedily they came in when we invited them. We know Rajiv Gandhi is an honourable man. His credibility is at stake. We are confident that he will not like to lose his credibility".

Back in India not all political parties backed Rajiv's stand, thus further embarrassing him. The National Front, of which the DMK is an important constitu-

ent, demanded the total withdrawal of the IPKF. In what looked like the first part of a deliberate move to garner support for the tough stand, P. Thangabalu, a Congress(I) Rajya Sabha member from Tamil Nadu met the prime minister and opposed the withdrawal of the IPKF.

THERE were two views in Sri Lanka too. The Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) and other pro-accord Tamil groups have strongly opposed the pull-out call.

IPKF jawans being welcomed in Madras



The Tamils, except the LTTE, are anxious about the repercussions of the IPKF withdrawal.

Even as Premadasa was trying to drive home the advantage, there were signs that he would have to contend with stiff resistance. The EPRLF, which is in power in the north-eastern province, held a demonstration in the eastern Trincomalee town in support of the Indian stand, while the provincial council passed a unanimous resolution asking Premadasa to "unconditionally withdraw," his demand for the pull-out.

But a surprise opposition to the withdrawal has come from the Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students, which was considered close to the LTTE and had emerged as the largest single Tamil group in the parliamentary election, winning 13 out of 31 seats in the north and east.

Premadasa's detractors feel that the announcement was more an attempt to grab the initiative for the anti-India campaign from groups like the JVP. Also, Premadasa, though no lover of India, would have obviously realised that any anti-India campaign by other groups could snowball and ultimately turn against his government.

His fears are not unfounded and distant rumblings can already be heard. Leaders of a front composed of pro-JVP university students, monks and Sinhala groups have styled the Premadasa regime a "puppet government looking after the

High Commission even toyed with the idea of shifting its personnel to a hotel for security reasons. Earlier, the High Commission had asked all Indian nationals to register themselves with the mission and avoid visiting sensitive areas.

Such precautions are essential as many scary incidents have been reported. "For most Sinhalese the term Bora connotes all Tamil and Muslim traders. Therefore, the JVP campaign could escalate into another anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim riot," a Sinhalese journalist said. Vegetable vendors have refused to sell to Indian buyers. And a senior minister has asked the people to change the name of masur dal to rattu dal and Bombay onions to 'big Lanka onions'. The island, he said produced enough of these onions and the 'Bombay' prefix was unnecessary.

The fact that Premadasa's quit notice to the IPKF came at the conclusion of the first round of peace talks between an LTTE delegation and a team of ministers has given rise to speculation, encouraged by optimistic official indications, that the two sides had reached an understanding for a possible settlement. The arrival of London-based LTTE leader Anton Balasingham in Colombo on June 10 for the third round of talks only emphasised this feeling. "We know that the Sri Lankan Government has agreed to dismiss the North-Eastern Provincial Council and entrust the provincial administration to the Tigers," claimed a Tamil MP from the east. "There will be chaos in the north and east if the IPKF is withdrawn and the provincial council is dismissed. The Tigers backed by the Sri Lankan troops, will commit genocide of all other Tamil groups," warned provincial minister Abu Yusuf.

"It is incredible that Premadasa made such an important public announcement without first holding informal consultations with New Delhi," said Liberal Party leader Chanaka Amarantunga, who felt that the President was in for "very embarrassing and difficult times," if India refused to heed his call.

The EPRLF and others may have a selfish interest in opposing the IPKF withdrawal, but they have a point when they say that it was on India's behest that they laid down arms and joined the democratic process. The situation, it seems, will be a replay of the pre-accord days. It is not going to add to India's prestige if the IPKF pulls out and the island witnesses a massacre of all pro-accord groups. And even if it doesn't, the island is likely to witness yet another round of bloody encounters.

—P. JAYRAM in Colombo and PRABHU CHAWLA in New Delhi

interests of the Indians".

Meanwhile, the JVP's threat against Indians—the Bora community has been singled out as the main target—has created a degree of panic among the Indian community in Sri Lanka. The terrorist group has issued a call for boycotting Indian goods (which account for less than 8 per cent of Sri Lankan imports) and asked all Indians to leave the island.

On June 12, the police was forced to open fire on a JVP-sponsored demonstration of 3,000 people in the town of Kurunagala in western Sri Lanka. Three people died in the police firing while several others were injured. Fearing retaliation by the JVP, the Indian community in the island panicked. The Indian