

Comment

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Stalking the Tiger

Talk and fight, talk and fight isn't the most satisfying approach to war, but in some of the world's more intractable conflicts, it's the only way. Sri Lanka's president Chandrika Kumaratunga operates well in this twilight: When the Tamil Tigers walked out of peace negotiations in April, she okayed the most ambitious offensive yet in this Indian Ocean nation's 12-year-old civil war. The Sri Lankan army now holds ground within four miles of the Tiger stronghold at the tip of the Jaffna peninsula.

Ready to fight, she's also ready to talk, though no longer with the Tiger leadership, who have an interest in unending strife: This week, Mrs. Kumaratunga unveiled a sweeping devolution plan to address the grievances of the 750,000 non-terrorist Tamils who've been trapped in a bloody and fruitless crossfire. Her proposal has been praised by many Tamil politicians, though notably not by Buddhist bitterenders in her own Sinhalese camp.

There remains one more shoe to drop. In early June, the Indian government asked Mrs. Kumaratunga to extradite the Tiger supremo, Vellupillai Prabhakaran, for the 1991 murder of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. New Delhi intervened once before in the civil war at Colombo's invitation, but with no military

victory and only the suicide bombing of Mr. Gandhi to show for its trouble. And yet the reasons for getting involved again are compelling.

Though nominally tied to the goal of an independent state, Mr. Prabhakaran's extraordinarily successful terrorist operation is unmoored from any real, achievable political purpose, it has become a metastasizing end in itself. He rules Jaffna with totalitarian brutality and extorts financing from Tamils worldwide. After one of his offensives, the Sri Lankan army has to scrape up the remains of pre-teenagers of both sexes press-ganged for these suicide attacks. And when his Tigers descend on Sinhalese and Muslim villages, they commit butcheries that might give a Serbian militiaman pause.

Aside from fanaticism and the helplessness of the Tamil communities under his thumb, Mr. Prabhakaran's other advantage is his outfit's growing technical sophistication. His group recently acquired shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles. His suicide frogmen have easy pickings among Sri Lankan shipping. And both Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao and Sri Lanka's President Kumaratunga have had to beef up their personal security to defend against Tamil assassins in ultralight

aircraft.

Both India and Sri Lanka are embarked on promising economic reforms, and have every reason for wanting to crush a source of terrorism and ethnic hatred that threatens stability in the neighbourhood. Instability is precisely Mr. Prabhakaran's stock in trade. He has killed an Indian prime minister, a Sri Lankan president and decimated much of the island's political class. His agents are already at work across the Palk Strait in India's Tamil Nadu state, whose 50 million Tamils make a rich target for his brand of political fanaticism and organized criminality.

Mrs. Kumaratunga's devolution proposals have undercut the Tigers' claim to any kind of legitimacy, while her overstretched army — with assistance at last from the U.S., France and other donor countries that once turned their backs — is putting real pressure on his crucial Jaffna headquarters. India's Mr. Rao has expressed support for both options. The Sri Lankan army now talks of taking Jaffna. To that end, we could only applaud if Delhi's interest in bringing Mr. Gandhi's murderer to justice should lead to a renewal of the joint military efforts of the mid-1980s, provided of course that India's role is temporary. The cycle of fight and talk, fight and talk has to end someday. *Asian Wall Street Journal*