



Collision course: train blasted by Tamil rebels

## Colombo plays the US card

Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict, already externalised through the direct involvement of the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu and New Delhi's earlier role as mediator between Colombo and the Tamil separatists, could yet take on an even wider international dimension.

President Junius Jayewardene complained bitterly last year that he had remained a loyal member of the Non-Aligned Movement, but had received no help when Sri Lanka's sovereignty and territorial integrity were threatened. Most saw the domestic conflict as fundamentally ethnic, but "Marxist terrorists" were seeking to overthrow the Sri Lankan government, he said.

The local opposition attacked this as a clumsy effort to attract US and western attention and assistance. However the US aircraft carrier *Kitty Hawk* and other ships of the US Seventh Fleet managed to time their recent arrival in Sri Lanka to coincide with the latest battle between the army and the Tamil guerrillas for control of the strategic port of Trincomalee.

Though the ships kept their distance from the insurgency-torn north and east, their presence fuelled speculation about possible US interest in Trincomalee as an alternative to its naval facilities in the Philippines post-Marcos.

In 1981, a US defence department map had an asterisk against the port, meaning that "base facilities" were available. An embarrassed state department explained that an overworked clerk had made a mistake. But New Delhi was not amused. The late Indira Gandhi long believed that the US had designs on Trincomalee.

More recently, Sri Lanka's diplomatic guns have been trained on India. In an

interview with Indian journalists at the first South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation summit, Jayewardene asked: "Why does India allow Tamil militants to operate from its territory? Your government wants the Sikhs to be sent out of the UK, Canada and other countries. How would India appreciate it if I kept the Sikh killers of Mrs Gandhi in Sri Lanka?"

The day after the Saarc leaders agreed to appoint a committee to study terrorism, President Zia ul-Haq of Pakistan arrived in Colombo for a five-day visit. In April, Jayewardene had been to Pakistan, where he had called for an independent Afghanistan. Zia appealed to Sri Lanka's Muslims (8 per cent of the population) to accept the leadership of Jayewardene.

There is a heavy concentration of Muslims in the east, now the main theatre of war. Unlike the Muslims in the west, an affluent trading community, those in the east are mainly farmers who speak Tamil.

Given the racial balance in the region and the common Tamil demand for a link between the north and the east in any devolution scheme, the support of the Muslims is crucial. The government is also concerned about the impact on Muslim opinion of the growing Israeli presence.

Zia promised full support for the defence of Sri Lanka's sovereignty. "If Pakistan had been an arms exporter, we would have helped," Zia told reporters. In fact, Pakistan has trained 200 members of a new national auxiliary force, and slipped some Chinese weapons to Colombo, though it is wary of offending New Delhi.

Colombo has denied allegations that it is planning a final offensive. Yet national security minister Lalith Athulathmudali speaks of the need for "military strength" and a "position of strength" from which to reopen negotiations. The Tamils say they face a "genocidal situation"; hence their calls for political and military help from New Delhi. □

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