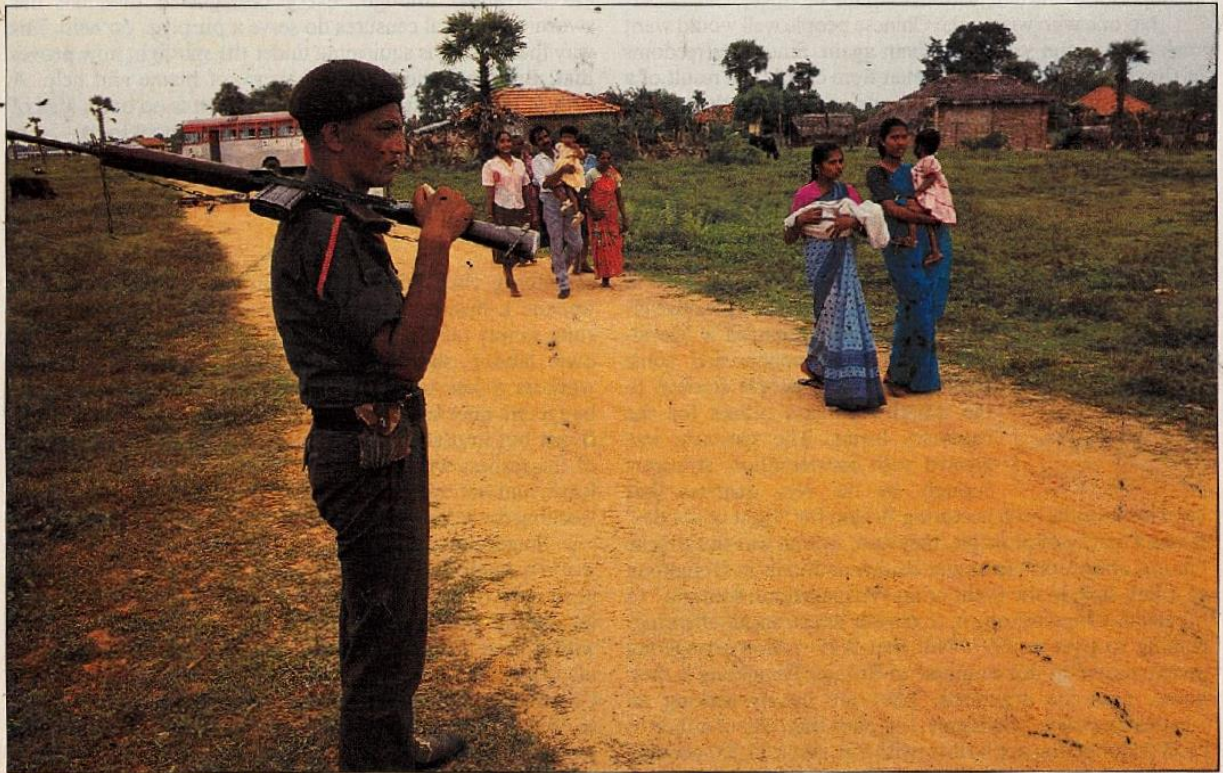


INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS



An Indian soldier stands guard in Sri Lanka's east: New "dastardly acts" darken an already gloomy picture

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Wars of Guns — and Words

At 61, Appapillai Amirthalingam was the doyen of Sri Lanka's Tamil politicians. On July 13, he and colleagues Vettivelu Yogeswaran and Murugesu Sivasithamperam arranged to meet three other Tamil representatives in Yogeswaran's Colombo residence. Telling his wife Sarojini that this trio of visitors would be called Aloysius, Sivakumar and Visu, Yogeswaran asked her to prepare sandwiches and soft drinks. He also told his bodyguards that he had met these men several times before and that they were not to be frisked. When the guests arrived, Yogeswaran directed them to an inside room where Sarojini observed them chatting to her husband and his associates. "I heard them laugh and talk in a friendly manner," she recalled. Twenty minutes later, gunshots rang out. Dashing into the room, she saw Yogeswaran writhing on the floor in a pool of blood. The lifeless body of Amirthalingam was sprawled across a chair. Sivasithamperam had also

been shot, but survived. As the assailants fled, they were cut down by state security guards who killed the trio.

An outraged President Ranasinghe Premadasa dubbed the murders of Amirthalingam and Yogeswaran "dastardly acts" and ordered the country's inspector-general of police to take charge of the case. The immediate, widespread reaction was that the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, long at odds with moderate Tamils, were behind the killings. But the Tigers quickly disavowed responsibility. They conceded that Visu had once been their "area commander," but claimed he was now no longer with them. Their political wing blamed "diabolical forces" seeking to sabotage their talks with Premadasa's administration. Responding to the president's initiative earlier this year, the Tigers consented to begin peace talks with the government — unlike the leftwing Sinhalese group, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), or People's Liberation

Front, which spurned a similar offer. Premadasa's boldness led to a breakthrough on June 28 when the Tigers agreed to a ceasefire with the Sri Lankan military.

No ceasefire exists, however, between the Tigers and the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) that was sent to the island to enforce a 1987 Indo-Lankan accord aimed at granting limited autonomy to the Tamil minority in the northeast. Although many Tamil leaders such as Amirthalingam welcomed the accord, the Tigers balked at terms that required laying down their arms. Since then, they have been engaged in a bloody bush war against overwhelming odds — the Tigers are estimated to have about 1,200 men under arms whereas the IPKF has more than 40,000. Many Indian analysts believe the Tigers only consented to peace talks because of the IPKF onslaught. Their ceasefire agreement followed a call by Premadasa for New Delhi to withdraw its men by July 29.

Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi

rejected this pullout demand because of fears for the safety of Sri Lanka's Tamil community. The Tigers are intolerant of other groups aspiring to represent Tamil interests. In a June 15 directive, the Tigers' political wing stated: "It is our duty to destroy traitors who work for our enemies as informers. Those who engage in treacherous acts, with the protection of the rival [Tamil] groups, are mainly the ones we punish."²

The Northern and Eastern provinces are currently governed as one territory (often referred to as Northeastern Province) by an alliance of these other Tamil groups led by the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF). Its chief minister Varatharaja Perumal has warned that internecine violence would erupt if the Indians left prematurely and allowed the Tigers to reassert their dominance. Indian sources assert that the recent slaughter of rival Tamil leaders lends credence to Perumal's fears — and thus bolsters New Delhi's assertion that this is not the time for a withdrawal.

On the day of the atrocity, the country did receive some welcome relief when a month-long transport strike ended and buses began to roll again. After awarding the 52,000 workers more pay, the government agreed to broadcast a message from the union which included many elements of JVP propaganda. The union has been reported to be strongly sympathetic to this group. A national state of emergency continued, however, and some 1,000 JVP suspects were arrested. On July 12, all universities were closed and security men combed the campuses, which are regarded as hotbeds of JVP activity. Meanwhile, in the south Indian city of Madras, EPRLF secretary-general K. Pathmanabha said his group had "established some contacts" with the JVP in a bid to bring "peace and order" to the country.

Amid all the political and military machinations, Premadasa did not moderate his demand for an Indian withdrawal. On July 12, Gandhi's principal secretary B.G. Deshmukh and the top foreign ministry official on the Sri Lanka desk, Kuldip Sahdev, arrived with a letter outlining the Indian PM's views on an IPKF pullout (see box this page). Premadasa promptly replied with a letter. He said he was willing to meet Gandhi's request for further talks — provided four conditions were met.

One was that Indian troops could stay only as long as the "invitation to them was extended." The second was that the 1987 accord was between the Sri Lankan and Indian governments — and did not involve other parties. It was the remaining two

²On July 16, an unknown number of gunmen killed Uma Maheshwaran of the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), a rival of the Tigers. Maheshwaran was accused of masterminding last year's abortive coup in the Maldives, which Indian troops put down.

conditions, however, that observers believed would cause the most problems. One of these was that activities "prejudicial to the unity and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka" would not be permitted on Indian soil — a clear reference to the presence of certain Sri Lankan Tamil groups in southern India. Finally, Premadasa called for New Delhi to concede that the devolution of power to the Tamil-dominated northeast and the withdrawal of Indian troops had no connection.

The talks between the two governments appeared as blunt as the letters. Said an Indian spokesman: "It has not come to a stage where we rail at each other even in private discussions, but we are very close to it." New Delhi officials reported that Deshmukh and Sahdev returned from Colombo with the impression that Premadasa's government was split over the demand for a prompt IPKF pullout, with dissenting ministers declining to speak out.

One minister who needed no badgering to support his president was Foreign Minister Ranjan Wijeratne. An Indian spokesman threatened that New Delhi would break off negotiations if a statement ascribed to Wijeratne were not retracted. He referred to Wijeratne's alleged remark that if the IPKF has not left by July 29, then Sri Lankan troops would

"have to take action to eject the occupation army." Told of this at his recent meeting in Islamabad with Pakistani Premier Benazir Bhutto, Gandhi commented: "I hope better sense will prevail." Added Gandhi: "If the Indian troops were not there, Sri Lanka would have disintegrated two years ago." He remarked that Sri Lanka's handling of the situation had been "very sloppy" and hoped the Colombo government realized "the gravity of the situation."



Premadasa

Indeed, the extreme tension was indicated by a tragic incident on July 15 when Sri Lankan troops opened fire on Indian soldiers in what was officially described as an "accident." A platoon of recently deployed Gurkha troops on a training exercise near Vavuniya in the country's northeast stumbled on a Sri Lankan army camp. Shooting broke out and there were several casualties on both sides, with two Indians killed. Unit commanders met to resolve the incident, which has now been officially "closed." New Delhi sources say they are worried that this type of clash and the increasingly acrimonious war of words may presage more violence in the already tension-charged run-up to Premadasa's July 29 pullout deadline.