

Peace Keeping in Sri Lanka

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On January 1, the day before Mr. Ransinghe Premadasa was sworn in as the President of Sri Lanka, the withdrawal of two battalions of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) to be completed in the first half of the month, was announced. It has been reported that Mr Premadasa has taken note of the improved situation in the north-east province and is anxious that the withdrawal does not affect the fears and apprehensions of the Tamil people.

This withdrawal is in keeping with the United National Party's manifesto for the Presidential election which commended the Indo-Sri Lanka peace accord and promised to bring about "immediate or phased withdrawal of the IPKF on attaining normalcy in north and east".

The IPKF is about 50,000 strong and consists of the better part of four divisions. Pruning of the force is now desirable and the Government of India, should welcome a phased withdrawal of its Armys' strategic reserve. The infrastructure of the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam) has been delivered some heavy knocks and their ability to contest issues militarily has been shattered. Low intensity insurgency continues and this can be kept under control by a very much reduced strength now that provincial elections have been held and an elected government installed.

India's role in helping Sri Lanka find a political solution to the ethnic problem in general and the induction of the IPKF in particular has come in for a great deal of comment and criticism. A brief review of this role and an appraisal of the IPKF is therefore called for.

INDIA'S ROLE

The demand for a separate state in the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka by the Tamils of that country required a political solution. The Tamils constitute 12.5 per cent of the population of the Island state and form the majority in the northern and eastern districts. Riots had erupted in 1977, 1981 and again in July 1983. Over a period of time, a number of militant groups had come up of which the LTTE was the most predominant. Severe military measures by the Sri Lankan Government could not control insurgency and the LTTE were literally in control of the Jaffna peninsula. The situation was ripe for interference by extra regional powers. In fact president Jayewardene is reported to have approached the USA, the UK, Pakistan and Bangladesh for help in July 1983. Geopolitically, it was in the regional inter-

est that the existing state system in South Asia should not be disturbed; the unity and integrity of Sri Lanka had to be preserved. It was also necessary to ensure that Sri Lanka retains its non-aligned status and is not forced into the lap of a super power.

Secondly, the killings as a result of riots, insurgency and counter - insurgency, in the Tamil areas of Sri Lanka, could have produced a serious backlash in Tamil Nadu. India was therefore concerned that a political solution be found to Sri Lanka's ethnic problem. Unfortunately, until after the first round of Thimpu talks in July 1985, Sri Lanka had serious misgivings and did not correctly perceive Indian objectives mentioned above. This was understandable as the Tamil militants had bases in Tamil Nadu where they conducted training and collected funds. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's categorical statement at a news conference in July 1985 helped to clear the air. Referring to the constitutional arrangements for the Tamils in Sri Lanka, he said, "we will not support anything more than what is available in India".

Dialogue for a political solution between the two Governments started soon after the July 1983 riots and was protracted as the Sri Lanka government offered nothing more than District Development Councils (DDCs). Equally, occasionally, it entertained the futile hope of a military solution. Therefore killing and counter killings continued. After the failure of the Round Table Conference convened on 21 Sep 84, the moderate TULF (Tamil United Liberation Front) put forward a demand for a regional council embracing the northern and eastern Tamil predominant areas. Government of India (GOI) supported a solution based on provincial autonomy and the leader of the Sri Lankan delegation to Thimpu, Mr Hector Jayewardene, spent over a week in Delhi from Aug 22 to 30, 1985 studying the Indian system. However, it took the GOI almost two years to get provincial councils accepted in the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement signed on 29 July 1987.

THE AGREEMENT

The agreement accepted one administrative unit, the provincial council, for the north-eastern province subject to a subsequent referendum in which the eastern province would decide whether to remain linked or to constitute a separate provincial council. The devolution of power to the provincial council was to be on the basis of three lists on the Indian pattern.

Hostilities were to cease on 31 July 1987 and the militants were required to surrender arms. General amnesty was to be granted to the insurgents including those held in custody. The responsibility for their rehabilita-

tion was accepted. It was agreed that the GOI would provide a peace keeping force to enforce the cessation of hostilities, accept the surrender of weapons and to ensure the security of all communities.

The accord was hailed internationally by the USA, USSR, Algeria, Australia, Bangladesh, the EEC and Netherlands. The Sri Lankan Tamil groups, except the LTTE, welcomed it. Soon after the signing of the agreement, Prabhakaran, the LTTE Chief, expressed serious misgivings. However, the militants did commence surrendering arms. On 2 Aug '87, TELO (Tamil Elam Liberation Organisation) handed over 75 weapons. On August 4, Prabhakaran announced the decision of the LTTE to hand over arms and his cadres handed over 488 weapons subsequently. However, his intention to continue militancy soon became apparent.

PEACE KEEPING OPERATIONS

The induction of the IPKF began on July 29, 1987. By August 4, about one division was deployed; one brigade in Jaffna peninsula, one in area Mannar - Vavuniya - Mullaitivu and one in area Trincomalee - Batticaloa - Amparai. Apart from the task of giving protection to all communities, it established contacts with the militants to facilitate peaceful handing over of arms. The LTTE held back bulk of its weapons and used these to establish its dominance over other groups, in particular, the TELO, so as to spread its influence in the eastern areas. By September 21, it had killed at least 200 people in attacks on rival groups.

The LTTE forcibly closed police stations and started interfering with the operations of the IPKF by, for instance, deploying school children and girls to stop the movement of their vehicles. At the same time it kept a dialogue going for the formation of an interim administrative council in which it was offered 7 out of 12 seats including that of the chief administrator. Its diabolical game forced the IPKF to commence military operations to restore as near a state of normalcy in the north and the east, as possible. On October 7, the LTTE's Radio and TV stations were seized. In a pre-dawn sweep on October 9, the IPKF raided militant camps in the north and the east and apprehended over 200 of them.

The strength of the LTTE cadres at that time was assessed as 1500. This force was supported by 3000 "podiyans" (informers and helpers) making a total of about 4500, armed with about 1400 rifles mostly of the AK 47 and 7.62 SLR variety, about 200 pistols and carbines, over 100 machine guns, a number of mortars and grenade launchers. As mentioned earlier, 488 weapons were surrendered but, consignments have continued to be received and

young Tamils have continued to be recruited. Affluent Tamil groups abroad continue to provide funds and the world arms bazar is full of all kinds of weapons sold at a price. Equally, it is impossible to prevent small fishing boats getting through all the vigilance established by the Navy.

From one division inducted initially, the IPKF strength was built up to the better part of four divisions, that is excluding armour, of which only one regiment was inducted and artillery, of which only four regiments were inducted. Thus a strength of about 50,000 formed part of the IPKF. Its flushing operations commenced in the Jaffna peninsula; where the LTTE were literally in command, on October 10. By October 14, the siege of Jaffna was broken after heavy fighting around the old Dutch fort, the University area and at Urumpirai where the LTTE fought from houses. On October 18, the IPKF had flushed the Jaffna town. In these operations 507 militants and 86 personnel of the IPKF were killed. On October 20, leaflets were dropped by air offering amnesty to those militants who surrender their weapons. However, a large number moved into the forests of Vani and the eastern province.

The IPKF deployment was adjusted to one division in the Jaffna peninsula and one each in the Vavuniya, Trincomalee and Batticaloa sectors. Flushing operations continued and casualties mounted; an estimated 753 LTTE cadres were killed by October 30 and the IPKF lost 15 officers, 14 JCOs and 185 other ranks. The LTTE operated from their jungle hide-outs attacking stray vehicles, ambushing patrols and planting mines as well as improvised explosive devices (IED). On November 20, an unilateral ceasefire for 48 hours was announced by the IPKF commencing November 21, offering an opportunity to the LTTE to hand over their arms and support the agreement. However, there was no response and operations were resumed. Apart from incidents of mine blasts and IED, the LTTE attacked unarmed civilians of the minority community in the eastern province. The rampage during night of December 30-31 at Kattakundy near Batticaloa resulted in 25 villagers being killed; 8 were wounded and 11 were abducted. Throughout the year 1988, incidents of the type mentioned above against the IPKF and civilians have continued. The IPKF have maintained pressure and even though the tempo decreased from about mid January 1988, low level insurgency continued. The casualty figures as on December 1, 1988 had risen to 678 IPKF personnel killed, the assessed figure of the LTTE cadres killed upto that date is 1765.

APPRAISAL

On the face of it a military force more than 10 times as strong as the LTTE should have been able to make a short work of the militants. However,

dealing with insurgents is a complicated matter. Firstly, the insurgents are not treated as enemy against whom no holds are barred. They are considered own people who have gone astray and have taken up arms against the government. Therefore, one guiding principle when operating against them is that of applying the minimum force. Secondly, insurgents operate with the sympathy and support of the locals, who provide them shelter, food as well as funds and information. It is therefore necessary for the troops deployed against them to win the minds and hearts of the people of the region and create an environment in which the militants become amenable to a political solution through negotiation.

With this in mind and the fact that LTTE was involved in the negotiation of the agreement, had actually handed a largish number of arms and were holding a dialogue for the establishment of an interim administrative council, it was the IPKF's endeavour to facilitate the implementation of the political solution envisaged in the agreement. The IPKF was, however, compelled to use force when it became clear that the LTTE would do all it could to impede the accord.

The obliteration of insurgents is not a military possibility for reasons discussed above. It is however, possible to make insurgency irrelevant by a political solution; to make it ineffective militarily and let it efface itself gradually as is happening in Nagaland and Mizoram. The IPKF has achieved these objectives in the North-Eastern province of Sri Lanka. Given the satisfactory devolution of power to the elected council, the insurgency will fizzle out in course of time.

Let us also look at some other aspects of the IPKF's activities. During its initial flushing operations, 375,000 Jaffna residents sought refuge in Schools and temples under the protection of the IPKF. After these operations in October 1987, administrative normalcy was brought about by the IPKF by restoring or providing supply of water, electricity and communications, food supplies and medical facilities. In due course banks, courts, post and telegraph offices, hospitals as well as educational institutions were re-activated. All communities have been provided protection. However stray incidents of killing of civilians have taken place throughout 1988 and are likely to continue this year also. This is a serious matter indeed but one of reducing frequency and ultimate disappearance.

India's participation in the process of finding a political solution of Sri Lanka's ethnic problem was inevitable particularly as the militants would not enter into direct dialogue with the Sri Lankan government and wanted GOI

to negotiate. The agreement ultimately arrived at was the best possible under the circumstances safeguarding Tamil aspirations as well as the unity and integrity of Sri Lanka.

The Tamils had lost faith in Sri Lanka's security forces and the police. Thus the induction of the IPKF was a necessity. Its operations have created near normalcy and made the holding of elections possible even if the intimidation caused by the LTTE prevented the participation of the TULF and resort to a single candidate list for the northern districts. The turn out in the eastern districts was, however, over 60%.

The elected government needs security against the LTTE. Until such time that local arrangements can be made to provide this and ensure that the writ of the established authority is not challenged by militants, the presence of the IPKF is essential. The agreed political arrangements would need time to stabilize. The pruning of the strength of the IPKF and its phased withdrawal should also be progressed accordingly.