

Taming the Tigers, (1986 November 30). *India Today*

CURRENT EVENTS

TAMIL NADU

Taming the Tigers



FOR the Tamil militants, it was the biggest single setback in their protracted war for Eelam, a separate Tamil state across the Palk Straits in Sri Lanka. What made it infinitely worse was the fact that the crackdown launched against the militants was not conducted by the Sri Lankan security forces but by battalions of heavily-armed Tamil Nadu policemen.

The main targets of the dawn raids last fortnight were the key leaders of the militant movement. A posse of policemen led by an assistant commissioner of police swooped down on the residence of the military commander of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Velupillai Pirabhakaran, stripped his eight personal guards of their revolvers and whisked them off to a police station. "We are under orders to search your house and bring you and your people to the police station," the police officer politely informed the Tamil Tigers' leader.

Pirabhakaran, like the rest, was bemused by the suddenness of the operation and the interrogation that followed. Said he, after he was released: "It wasn't necessary for the police to mount such a massive operation on us and to march us off to a police station like common criminals. We have always been willing to cooperate with them."

The pattern of the raids was similar. From Pirabhakaran, the police collected a range of weapons including machine-guns, revolvers and ammunition. From V. Balakumar, the convenor of the Eelam Revolutionary Organisers (EROS), the police recovered a sub-machine-gun in his Anna Nagar (west Madras) house. Another EROS leader, E. Rathnasabapathy, Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO) leader A. Selvam; and the leaders of the Peoples Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), R.R. Vasudeva, S. Skanda and Madhavan were also simultaneously rounded up from different parts of the city. The people who escaped were K. Padmanabha and K. Ketheeswaran, leaders of the Eelam Peoples Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) and Uma Maheswaran, PLOTE's secretary-

general, as they were in Delhi. The immediate provocation for the action was an unprecedented shooting incident last fortnight. A street brawl between locals and some members of the EPRLF in the Choolaimedu area in west Madras on Diwali, ended with the militants spraying 60 rounds from Sten guns into the crowd in which a Harijan social-worker, Thirunavukarasu died. Police Commissioner Walter Dewaram arrested 10 members, including the chief of staff of the group's armed wing, Douglas Devanantha. The same day, armed cadres of PLOTE launched an attack on a Thanjavur village though the shoot-out between two militant groups in a Madras suburb last May was still fresh in public minds. In an editorial the *Hindu* said: "The time has certainly come, in a strict law and order sense, to ensure that the Tamil militants functioning in India are not allowed to carry or store arms for any reason, while it is unlawful for Indian civilians to possess any kind of gun without a licence."

The mopping-up operation on November 8 was not just confined to the Tamil militant groups in the city, but was state-wide. "The whole exercise was planned with ex-

The crackdown and disarming of Tamil militants in the state was to curb their growing tendency of taking the law into their own hands.



The house (behind the pole) from which EPRLF men fired: indefensible

