

NORTH-EAST TAMILS

Trapped in the Middle

JAFFNA is South Asia's Beirut. For years now, it has echoed with the sound of gunfire and the screams of the dying. First, hundreds of innocent civilians were caught in the cross-fire as the Tamil groups fought each other. Then came repeated assaults by the Sri Lankan Army. Now, it's the IPKF against the Tigers. Death and destruction have become a way of life.

Last fortnight, President Premadasa's demand for the withdrawal of the IPKF added to the sense of insecurity among the Tamils of the north-east. Thanks to the IPKF's presence, only recently had a fragile peace returned to Jaffna. But once again, fear is palpable in the peninsula. The average Tamil seems convinced that the IPKF should stay longer. But the fear of reprisal from groups supporting Premadasa's call— notably the LTTE—has made them cautious. Except for the politicians, no one wants to be quoted by name or have their picture taken.

Said a retired government official in Kaithady: "We will be terribly insecure if the IPKF were to leave now. The various groups would go on a rampage killing each other. Even if we survive that, who is to protect us from the Sri Lankan Government? Colombo can never be trusted." Last fortnight, the north-east witnessed a series of protest marches against the withdrawal demand. The biggest was the Eelam Peoples Revolutionary Front (EPRF) march in which over 15,000 people took part.

Said the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) leader Appapillai Amirthalingam: "While all are agreed that the IPKF should go, New Delhi should first carry out its obligations to the Tamils under the Indo-Sri Lanka accord." S.P.T. Tambimuttu, MP from Batticaloa, argues that as India had signed the accord on behalf of the Tamils, it is the guarantor of peace and therefore it is incorrect to say that the IPKF should withdraw when the President wants.

The withdrawal call has only added to the deep distrust of Colombo. Even Premadasa's peace talks with the LTTE are being viewed with suspicion. Said a prominent Jaffna Tamil: "The tragedy of the Tamils is that the Sinhalese have always found some collaborator to deny

the community justice. This time that role has been assumed by the LTTE."

The mistrust of Colombo's motives has given the call for Eelam a fresh lease of life. Said a trader in Chunnakam: "There can be no room for cooperation between the Sinhalese and Tamils. Eelam has always been our goal."

Though the people are more or less unanimous in opposing Premadasa's call, the various Tamil groups are not. While the pro-



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MURUGANESAN
EPRLF

Says A. Muruganesan, political coordinator of the Provincial Council's Jaffna district: "There will be a bloodbath if the

IPKF pulls out now. Our intelligence reports say that the Sri Lankan Government is providing the LTTE with arms and that the Tigers are on a conscription drive in Trincomalee."

Warns the Chief Minister of the Provincial Council, Annamalai Varatharaja Perumal: "The Government should not think that once the IPKF goes they can do what they want with Tamils. It will be a big mistake."

He has a point. A sudden exit of the Indians



India EPRLF—which controls the Provincial Council—has warned of bloodshed if the IPKF were to withdraw, the LTTE contends that normalcy can be restored only if the Indians pull out.

Division on this issue means that an end to the constant bloodletting between the various Tamil groups has become even more distant now. "It is the survival of the fittest," says V. Balakumar, general secretary, the Eelavar Democratic Front. "And the IPKF shouldn't interfere in inter-group rivalries. Nobody can ever stop this bloodshed. It will be there forever."

Groups opposing the LTTE are understandably nervous. The EPRLF, TELO and the ENDLF are entirely dependent on the IPKF for protection against the Tigers.

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would certainly result in widespread violence and may trigger off another exodus of refugees to India. But it would be naive to think that once the IPKF withdraws, the LTTE and the Sri Lankan security forces could wipe out the EPRLF and other pro-agreement groups—though they will suffer losses. There is no guarantee that the LTTE will regain its dominant status. Like the Najibullah Government

in Afghanistan, Varatharaja Perumal and his men may prove that even without a foreign army to prop them up, they are no push-overs.

—SHYAM TEKWANI in Jaffna