

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS



Ranasinghe Premadasa: The one condition for an Indian pullout is "the decision of the president of Sri Lanka"

SOUTH ASIA

## The Colombo-Delhi Stand-Off

For the second time in two years the families of Indian diplomats in Sri Lanka were moved last week into a hotel for their safety. Anti-Indian feeling generated by New Delhi's decision to airdrop food parcels over northern Sri Lanka caused the first such move in June 1987. India was then seeking to aid citizens suffering from Colombo's offensive against the Tamil guerilla group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Ironically, current anti-Indian sentiment may be traced not to India's efforts to help the Tigers, but to defeat them. And it is Colombo that is now extending a friendly arm to the Tigers — and demanding the withdrawal of Indian troops. On June 1, President Ranasinghe Premadasa said: "The Indians came on our invitation and helped us. Now they must go and help us by going." He asked them to go by July 29. New Delhi's response: impossible. Now a tense stand-off has developed between the two nations.

A month after the 1987 airdrop, India signed an accord with Sri Lanka which led

to an Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) being sent to the island to oversee the granting of limited autonomy to the Tamil-populated northeast in return for the Tamil guerillas laying down their weapons. Five rebel groups agreed to the accord, but the Tigers were loath to surrender their arms or give up their aim of a separate Tamil state called Eelam. In October 1987, the IPKF mounted a full scale offensive against the recalcitrant Tigers.

An alliance of the other Tamil groups — led by Varatharaja Perumal's Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) — was elected in November last year to administer the newly constituted Northeastern Province. It has, however, complained of having inadequate autonomy. On May 27, Premadasa's government passed a bill granting more power to the provincial council. Colombo, Foreign Minister Ranjan Wijeratne contended, had thus kept its side of the Indo-Lankan accord: confining its troops in the northeast to barracks and granting a measure of

autonomy to a duly elected Tamil provincial government. It was then that Premadasa decided to deliver on his election pledge to ask the more than 40,000 Indian troops to leave.

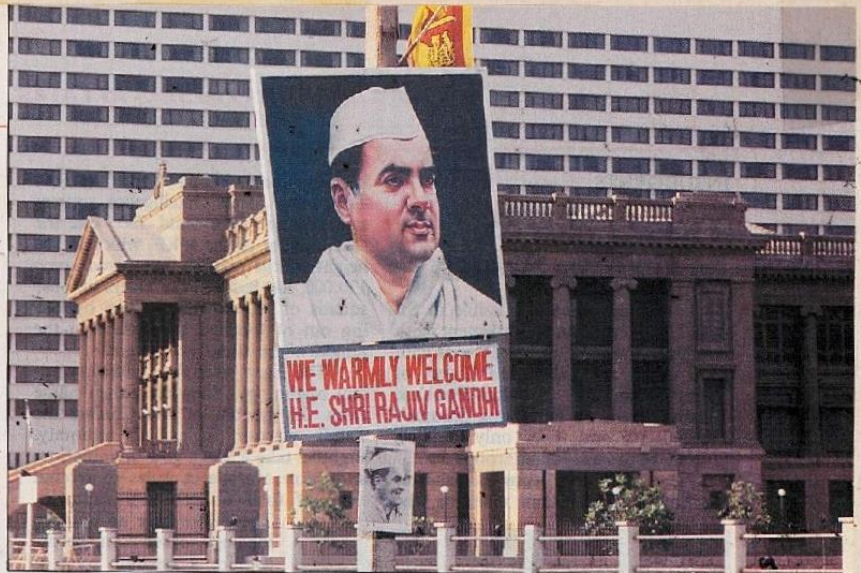
What fuelled Indian anger is the way he did it. Without advising New Delhi, Premadasa, 65, announced at a Buddhist gathering near Colombo that he wanted the IPKF to leave within two months. Three days earlier, he had reportedly told India's High Commissioner of his domestic need to oppose the IPKF, but had given no hint of his impending ultimatum. An Indian official told Asiaweek: "Our High Commissioner was informed India should not contemplate an early pullout. The Sri Lankan army brass has also recently conveyed that they wouldn't be able to handle the situation if India withdrew."

Why then did Premadasa drop his bombshell? Analysts believe one reason is because the nationalistic president, who relies on the Sinhalese majority for his support, was in danger of being outflanked by

the ultra-Sinhalese militant group, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna. Support for the JVP, which fiercely opposes the presence of Indian troops, appears to be increasing in direct proportion to the growing anti-Indian animosity. On June 9, the JVP-controlled Inter University Students' Federation held a huge rally in a Colombo suburb at which India's national flag and an effigy of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi were burned to cheering demands for an immediate expulsion of the IPKF. Such sentiments echo across other segments of Sri Lankan society — Sinhalese, Muslim and Tamil — with the notable exception of Tamils allied with the EPRLF. Given such cross-societal backing, Premadasa's call for an Indian withdrawal pleased almost all his countrymen.

It also diverted attention from the dismal economic scene: soaring annual inflation, a burgeoning balance of payments deficit, and an anti-poverty program observers regard as ill-conceived and unworkable — with all of these woes compounded by recent floods. Another possible motive, according to Indian sources, is Premadasa's desire to deflect adverse publicity from a current court case filed against him by opposition leader Sirimavo Bandaranaike alleging intimidation during last December's elections.

New Delhi's reaction to the pullout call made it clear India did not feel such a portentous matter could be decided by, as one Indian official put it, "looking at calendars." The displeasure was compounded by India's exclusion from talks Colombo entered into with the Tigers. Analyst Muthu Edward believes the rebels' main goal in these talks was to "get the Indians off their backs." In fighting the



Gandhi's '87 welcome has turned sour: Guarding the domestic underbelly?

IPKF, the Tigers have come out second-best — losing their urban bases and being driven deep into the jungle.

The talks, however, gave renewed confidence to the Tigers, who began to reappear in their former stronghold of Jaffna. "This caused the Indians to launch more cordon and search operations," says Jaffna businessman Augustus Subramaniam, "and the atmosphere of battle, absent for some months, started to build up again." Sources reported that the Indians were searching for Tiger leaders to prevent them attending a second round of talks. But these talks went ahead June 16 in a "safe house" in Negombo, north of the capital. Edward believes they could lead to the Tigers agreeing to accept greater autonomy — though less than a separate state —

in return for a vow not to harm Sinhalese and Muslims in the northeast. A senior member of Colombo's negotiating team told Asiaweek that the Tigers now "seem willing to enter the democratic process." The question is how they would treat their fellow Tamils affiliated to the EPRLF administration.

The Tigers have a record of intolerance towards other Tamil groups. While observers like Subramaniam suggest the EPRLF and IPKF are "hated" by many Tamils, he concedes they also fear "military rule" under the Tigers. Perumal has asserted that if the Indians leave he will unilaterally separate the province from Sri Lanka and declare it the Tamil state of Eelam. Observers suggest he would not have said this without the backing of India.