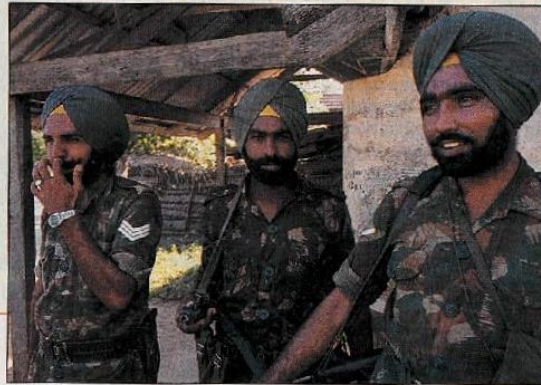


THE PEACEKEEPERS

Oh, Not a Lovely War

It has not been the best of postings. The casualty ratio of Indian troops in Sri Lanka has been among the highest since they fought China in 1962 — but that was war, and this is supposed to be peacekeeping. Though loathe to admit it, many officers dread the prospect of being sent to Sri Lanka. “Things would have been different if we were fighting for our country,” says a Gurkha captain. “But here it’s difficult to explain to troops why we are in it at all.” For their wives it is as bad. When they gather for tea in New Delhi’s Dhoola Kuan defence enclave, the talk invariably turns to Sri Lanka. Those with husbands on the island talk yearningly of when their men will return.

Island duty: “It’s difficult to explain why we are in it”



Asiaweek Pictures

But the IPKF seems to have made the best of a harrowing assignment. After early setbacks, counter-insurgency units were brought in and soon had the Tigers on the run. The 57th Mountain Division inflicted such heavy casualties that the guerillas were virtually eradicated from Batticaloa District in the east when their camp “Beirut” was over-run. Complaints of brutality have generally been quickly redressed. “In the first months, we did have instances of indiscriminate firing,” concedes a senior officer, “but that has been checked.”

While not uncritical of the Indians, Amnesty International reported that the number of “disappearances” of civilians fell markedly after the IPKF arrived.

For the Indians, the exercise has provided authentic battle training. Says Lt-Gen. Depinder Singh: “Militarily, since the operations were very close to war, it has provided an excellent opportunity for the bleeding of our troops.” ■