

SRI LANKA

Election Moves

At Premadasa's request, two IPKF battalions pull out



THE Indians are leaving, the Indians are leaving. That seemed to be the universal cry of joy in Sri Lanka on January 6. The occasion: the departure of one

battalion of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) from the country's shores.

That night Sri Lankan television reported the event with the fanfare usually reserved for a major cricket victory. In the background were shown a long line of Indian soldiers, knapsacks on their backs, marching briskly on Talaimannar pier to board Indian vessels on their way home. In the foreground was the Indian Army chief, General V.N. Sharma, hopping out of a helicopter to be warmly greeted by Sri Lankan Army Chief Lt-General Hamilton Wanasinghe. The two were then joined by Lt-General A.S. Kalkat, commander of the IPKF. General Sharma was on a routine annual inspection tour of Indian Army units, but the report seemed intent on making it appear that he was present to oversee the pull-out.

It was not for nothing that the January 6 pull-out and that of a second battalion two days later was given such wide publicity. On February 15, the country goes to the polls to elect a 225-member Parliament. For newly-elected President Ranasinghe Premadasa, who narrowly won the December 19 presidential election against Sirimavo Bandaranaike, a slight swing in the vote could mean he faces a hostile Parliament.

And if his United National Party (UNP) is to win against Bandaranaike's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) with the same manifesto which earned him victory in the presidential poll it is essential he be seen to keep his promises. Else, the SLFP, campaigning on a jingoistic manifesto, may upstage him.

In his speech after being sworn in as president, Premadasa said: "I shall not surrender an inch of Sri Lankan territory nor a shred of sovereignty." At the same time he held out an olive branch to the

ultra-nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), warning it however that "terror must and will end soon".

The JVP is unlikely to participate in the elections. Nor will the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). But other

Lt-Gen Kalkat with IPKF officers; and Premadasa (bottom)



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To win the parliamentary elections it was necessary for Premadasa to implement at least partially his election promise of getting the IPKF withdrawn.

organisations representing the Tamil minority are getting ready. Their chances of winning seats are better than ever before, thanks to a change effected by Jayewardene in the rules for representation in Parliament.

In Sri Lanka, parliamentary candidates are selected by a method of proportional representation. Parties submit lists of candidates to the election commissioner who selects members of parliament depending on the percentage of votes that the party wins. But to be considered for selection a party must get more than a minimum percentage of

votes. Earlier the cut-off point was 12.5 per cent which meant many of the smaller parties had no representation at all in parliament. Now that Jayewardene has reduced the cut-off point to 5 per cent, the smaller parties are getting ready to contest the polls in the hope of winning a few seats.

The exiled leaders of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) have formed a new alliance along with three militant groups that control the North-East Council after elections in the region were held in November. Opposing it is the Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students (EROS), which is close to the LTTE. Also contesting is a left parties

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alliance, the USA (United Socialist Alliance) which has allied with the TULF in the north-east and is contesting alone in the Sinhala south.

Preparations for the elections are in full swing. Even as the Indian troops were leaving Talaimannar pier, UNP party leaders were handing over nomination lists to the election commissioner. And to win votes Premadasa was insisting the

pull-out be accelerated. After the elections though, he may take a more sober stand. The compulsions are clear. On his own he cannot take on both the LTTE and the JVP. Worse, a total Indian withdrawal may undo whatever progress has been made by instituting the Tamil Provincial Council in the north-east.

The Sri Lankan Army chief, Wanasinghe, may have been speaking for many in the country's administration when he warned that the pull-out of Indian troops may create a "vacuum" in the security situation.

—MERVYN DE SILVA in Colombo