

Unabashed Indian state terrorism in Sri Lanka. (1993, July 06). *The Sunday Observer*.

# Unabashed Indian state terrorism in Sri Lanka

by Absar Husain Rizvi

The violent death of President Ranasinghe Premadasa of Sri Lanka on May Day '93 has reminded the world small nations' vulnerability to subversion and terrorism if they happen to be neighbours of an unhappy big power like India. The May Day murder also underlines the fact that Indian intervention in Sri Lanka which has been going on for full one decade has generated forces of violence which in Sri Lanka context have become invincible and now nothing is beyond their reach. Mr. Premadasa as compared to his predecessor J.R. Jayewardene was less yielding to India's pressure on the question of granting greater concessions to Sri Lanka's Tamil minority and more vocal against India's interventionist policies and its military presence in Sri Lanka. It was he who forced the Indian troops out of his country. And it was he who preferred to fight than surrender to the Indian supported Tamil militants of Sri Lanka. His assassination therefore must have lit up many tales in the hearts and minds of his countrymen. But perhaps no tales could be more tragic than the tale of Indian terrorism which has turned into ruinous conflict what once was an island of serenity and resplendent beauty. In the last one decade 60,000 Sri Lankans have lost their lives in the Indian sponsored terrorism.

The tale of India's intervention has thus far been best told by ROHAN GUNARATNA in his recently published book "Indian Intervention in Sri Lanka." It is aptly subtitled as the "the role of India's intelligence agencies." Mr. Gunaratna enjoyed access to official documents; to major actors of the intervention drama both in Sri Lanka and India, and co-operation of scholars and researchers at Washington, Cambridge, New Delhi, Beijing and Colombo. Although a Sri Lankan who laments over the gradual destruction of his nation, Gunaratna nevertheless has maintained a scholarly discipline throughout his study and has painstakingly documented every major statement he has made.

## The conflict

According to Gunaratna, India is solely responsible for the violent Tamil vs Sinhalese conflict. It trained the Tamil terrorists and injected them into Sri Lanka; provided them arms and related facilities and thus raised them to the level of having military power equivalent to the Sri Lankan armed forces. Sri Lanka has surely been dangerously destabilized but India has also burnt its hands in the process. The differences which eventually emerged between India and its creation, i.e. Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) have proved harmful for India in several areas topped by the death of Rajiv Gandhi, which among other things put an end to the much admired Nehru dynasty.

The basis of conflict are the historic differences between

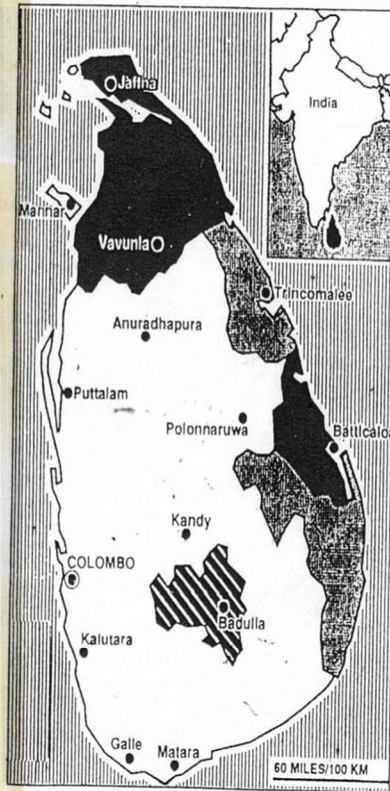
the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamil population. The latter constitute about 20 percent of Sri Lanka's population but controlled about 75 percent of country's economy including government jobs, trade and commerce, banking and service industries. Tamils are immigrants from the Indian state of Tamil Nadu and are still more loyal to their motherland than Lanka. Their terrorist activities have been directed by Tamil Nadu politicians such as M.G. Ramachandran, leader of AIADMK party and M. Karunanidhi, head of DMK party. Both these politicians and their followers are Tamil nationalists and in the views of many stand for a separate Tamil Nadu state. Over the last 20 years the AIADMK and the DMK have been advocating for a separate Tamil state in North-East of Sri Lanka and its eventual merger with the motherland.

## Three phases

Besides this continued Tamil Nadu flirtation with the idea of a Tamil homeland in Sri Lanka, which by itself amounts to interference, the history of Indian intervention and terrorism in Sri Lanka may be divided into three phases. The phase one began in 1983 with the large-scale training of Tamil militants. Phase two marks the despatch of Indian troops to Sri Lanka in 1987 and phase three, the current phase, wherein India is pressing for a political settlement between Sinhalese and Tamils which would favour the Tamils.

The year 1983 witnessed bloody ethnic riots in Colombo mainly caused by majority of Sri Lankan's frustration with the economic structure which as noted earlier heavily tilted in favour of Tamils. As the Tamils suffered more in the riots, Central government of India came under heavy pressure from Tamil Nadu leaders to intervene on the side of Tamils. Indian intelligence agencies which had already made inroads among the Tamils and were using them for spying on foreign naval movement in the Trincomalee harbour, now stepped up its activities and launched an extensive military training program for the dissident Tamils of Lanka. According to author Gunaratna, "by 1986, the number of Indian trained, armed and financed militants exceeded 20,000 and New Delhi used the militants factor to pressurize Colombo to change Sri Lanka's foreign policy."

Gunaratna continues, "The training ranged from handling weapons such as AK-47, SLR, M-16, G-3, SMG, 303, revolvers, pistols, to field craft and military tactics, with particular emphasis on guerrilla warfare. This training continued in India throughout 1984, 1985, 1986 and early 1987. Those with special skills were trained in handling and manufacture of explosives, handling of anti-tank weapons, communications and intelligence. In early 1987, a few months before the signing of the Indo-Lanka Accord of July 1987, RAW imparted training to a total of 200 recruits



nominated from each of the Sri Lankan Tamil militant groups. Those who excelled were hand picked and dispatched to Indian camps for specialized training in the Surface to Air Missiles (SAMS)."

## Reasons and objectives

What were India's reasons and objectives to inject such a large number of terrorists into Sri Lanka? In an interview with Gunaratna, former chief of India's super intelligence agency, Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), Mr. R.N. Kao outlined the following reasons:

(1) Sri Lanka was shifting from a non-aligned position to an increasing involvement with the United States. It had provided relay facilities to Voice of America (VOA) radio and India feared that Trincomalee would soon be offered to America's Indian Ocean fleet.

(2) In the 1977 general elections Indira Gandhi's Congress (I) party had lost northern states but won in Tamil Nadu and other southern states. In order to ensure the continuous support from Tamil Nadu politicians Mrs. Gandhi yielded to their pressure to provide assistance to the Tamil citizens of Sri Lanka.

(3) Mrs. Gandhi was very resentful of Sri Lanka providing re-fuelling facilities to Pakistani planes during Bangladesh crisis.

All these factors influenced India's decision to intervene in Sri Lanka.

## Dominant group

The terrorists India had injected into Sri Lanka belonged to several groups of Tamils but the dominant group was and remains that of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE). The LTTE activities paralyzed the law-enforcing agencies in north-eastern Sri Lanka. By 1987 Sri Lankan military got fully involved in the operation to eliminate LTTE. The success of the operation made India nervous. Anxiety prevailed in the state of Tamil Nadu as the LTTE losses multiplied and they had no stronghold left except Jaffna. But there too they were running out of food supplies as well as arms and ammunition. The year was 1987. Mrs. Gandhi, killed by a Sikh militant, had been replaced by Rajiv Gandhi. At this point begins the second phase of Indian intervention. In the second phase India took the following steps:

(1) Decided not to let Jaffna fall to Lankan forces. Sent a fleet of fishing boats apparently loaded with food supplies to Jaffna. Suspecting arms along with relief goods, Lankan navy intercepted and turned it back. India without permission of Lanka deployed air force to drop supplies at Jaffna. Mr. Gunaratna writes, "On June 4, 1987, Indian authorities demonstrated to the world that they were rabid over the Sri Lankan situation. Four French-built Mirage fighter planes escorted by five Soviet-built AN-32 transport planes left Bangalore at 3.55 p.m. that day and entered Sri Lanka airspace at 4.55 p.m. They dropped 25 metric tonnes of material over Jaffna, from above 1500 feet, and returned to the Indian air base at Bangalore. They had been instructed to return fire in the event that they were attacked, and the Indian air force was placed on full alert to meet any eventuality. Operation Poopthalai (garland) planned, approved and executed by the Indian intelligence, the defence

and the executive establishment was a success. Sri Lanka did not have the capability to fight back—otherwise, the mood was war." The Indian air operation which was a blatant violation of Sri Lanka's sovereignty was condemned by the SAARC countries and China. (2) Pressured Sri Lanka to give up military operation against LTTE and seek a political solution. Sri Lanka obliged but only after a few weeks of ceasefire LTTE resumed hostilities. (3) India decided to send troops to Jaffna. Sri Lanka was forced to sign an accord in 1987, almost at gun point, permitting the Indian Peace Keeping Force to enter Jaffna.

## Political solution

The accord envisaged that Indian troops will disarm the LTTE and help find a political solution. After initial success, the LTTE refused to surrender arms and disband their formations. By now Rajiv Gandhi realized that if LTTE achieved victory there might emerge a Tamil state in north-east of Lanka which eventually might lead to the separation from India of its own Tamil Nadu state and creation of an independent Tamil country constituted by Indian and Lankan Tamils. Hence the Indian troops were ordered to eliminate LTTE. Indian troops' encounter with LTTE lasted until the beginning of 1990, LTTE remained undefeated. In the meantime, in 1989 R. Premadasa succeeded Jayawardene as president of Sri Lanka. Opposed to Indian military presence from the very beginning, Premadasa asked Indians to leave Sri Lanka. Having failed to accomplish their mission on one hand, and creating serious unrest in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu on the other hand, the Indians were willing to depart. But as it left in April 1990 the Indian Peace Keeping Force had 1555 men killed, 2987 injured and Indian rupees 1000 crores expended on the operation.

However, the Indian intervention in Sri Lanka has not ceased. Disillusioned with LTTE it has created a rival Tamil terrorist army of ten thousand strong to keep pressure on both Sri Lanka and LTTE. The latter continues to receive aid and protection from Tamil Nadu government. Sri Lanka as highlighted by the assassination of Premadasa on May Day remains in a state of turmoil. India has achieved only a limited objective of crippling Sri Lanka to the extent that it could no more pursue a foreign policy which is disapproved by India. But India also continues to pay for its interventionist policy and wanton terrorism. One wonders if India would learn any lesson and develop relations with its neighbour on the basis of sovereign equality which is the only course that could ensure peace and security in South Asia.

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