

SPECIAL REPORTS

SRI LANKA

Undiplomatic Oneupmanship

The India-Sri Lanka diplomatic war peaked with Rajiv Gandhi writing a letter to Premadasa threatening to decide the issue of IPKF's withdrawal unilaterally even as TULF chief Amirthalingam was assassinated in Colombo.

THE crackle of gunfire once again brought the simmering Sri Lankan strife to a head last fortnight as gunmen belonging to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) burst into the Colombo residence of V. Yogeswaran, a leader of the moderate Tamil United Liberation Front, and sprayed bullets killing him and his party chief Appapillai Amirthalingam. Another party leader, M. Sivasithamparam, was grievously wounded. Even as the Sri Lankan media, under strict censorship, blacked out the news, the word of the tragedy spread quickly. And as policymakers in New Delhi's South Block sat up all night rewriting the entire Sri Lankan equation once again, it was evident that the killings were going to have a major impact on relations between the two estranged neighbours. Said an official of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA): "This is just what we have been warning Premadasa about. The LTTE is not trustworthy. Can you imagine what they will do in Tamil areas if the Indian Army leaves." Officials point out that Amirthalingam had been declared a "traitor" by the LTTE because of his softer stand towards India.

In a fortnight of frenetic developments the killings came just when the game of ungainly diplomatic oneup-

manship between the two neighbours reached a new climax. In his letter delivered through his Principal Secretary B.G. Deshmukh, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi firmly told Sri Lankan President R. Premadasa that India was not going to

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withdraw the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) under his pressure and, in any case, not by his deadline of July 29. And unless Premadasa agreed to enter into negotiations, India threatened to "decide the details of the with-

Amirthalingam (left); Commuters use trucks in strike-hit Colombo: continuing tragedy



SHYAM TERKAWI

drawal unilaterally, consistent with our responsibilities and obligations under the Indo-Sri Lanka accord."

Rajiv also took the unprecedented step of releasing the boldly-worded letter to the press the moment it was delivered to Premadasa. This was done in retaliation against the Sri Lankan act of making public all the earlier Rajiv-Premadasa correspondence. Said a senior official from the MEA: "The prime minister is impatient. He has had enough. And he means business."

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