

THE U.S. STAKE IN SRI LANKA

The June 2 attack on a busload of Buddhist monks is the latest in a series of terrorist attacks by ethnic Tamil guerrillas against the civilian population of Sri Lanka. Since April 19, these attacks, which have included a bus terminal bombing in Colombo leaving 127 dead and a series of bloody bus ambushes, have cost over 280 lives. In response, Sri Lankan security forces advanced across the insurgent-dominated Jaffna peninsula late last month, overrunning key positions held by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the most powerful of several armed groups demanding a division of Sri Lanka and the creation of an independent Tamil state.

The seeds of the current conflict were sown after Sri Lankan independence in 1948, when the Sinhalese, who make up 75 percent of the population, sought to reduce the lasting influence of British colonial rule. In 1956, Sinhala replaced English as the official language. This reduced the ability of Tamils, who now comprise about 13 percent of Sri Lanka's 17 million inhabitants, to compete for government and professional employment. Although today both Sinhala and Tamil are official languages and other discriminatory laws have been revoked, mistrust and animosity remain.

Legitimate Grievance. The government's experiment with socialism in the 1950s and 1960s, which stressed education at the expense of industrial development, produced an educated group of Tamils with no employment prospects. Residual racial tensions combined with unemployment proved to be an ideal breeding ground for Marxist movements. In 1983 the Tigers' first attacks against Sri Lanka's ceremonial and largely ineffective army sparked countrywide anti-Tamil rioting by Sinhalese. Some 600 Tamils were slaughtered. This legitimate grievance of the Tamils was exploited by radicals who mounted the drive for a separate state. By the end of 1984, government authority was threatened in Sri Lanka's north and some areas of the east, where Tamils are a majority of the population.

Today, the rebels control portions of northern Sri Lanka, including the Jaffna peninsula. The Tigers have increased their power by systematically decimating other insurgent groups, causing hundreds of casualties and committing thousands of human rights violations. The Tigers have made no secret of their intention to establish a one-party socialist state. L. Thilakar, a Tiger political committee member stated, "Our basic principles are based on Marxism." Added another rebel leader in 1986: "When Eelam is set up there will be no democracy there."

The establishment of an ethnic Marxist state in northeastern Sri Lanka would not be in U.S. interests. Of major concern would be the expansion of Soviet influence in the region, already enhanced by cozy Moscow-New Delhi ties. Soviet access to the strategic deep-water port of Trincomalee, in eastern Sri Lanka, could lead to the establishment of the Cam Rahn Bay of the Indian Ocean.

Help From the PLO and Libya. The Tamil insurgents have been receiving training and assistance from the Palestine Liberation Organization, Libya, Zimbabwe, and North Korea. The insurgents have important supply and training bases in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Drug smuggling earns the rebels funds to purchase Soviet arms. To make matters worse, India seems to be increasingly supportive of the rebels, even though New Delhi publicly professes no desire to see Sri Lanka split into two states. Just last week, a fleet of Indian air force transports, escorted by jet fighters, invaded Sri Lankan air space to drop 25 tons of "humanitarian" supplies to rebel-controlled areas.

Despite developing close economic ties with the West and policies supportive of free enterprise and democracy, Sri Lanka's democratically elected government of President Junius Jayewardene has had extreme difficulty acquiring support from the U.S. The State Department, apparently, has been insisting on what seems certain to be a shortsighted hands-off policy. The main problem, however, simply may be that Washington has not been paying much attention to events in distant Sri Lanka. If so, then it is now time for the threat to Sri Lanka's national integrity to receive higher priority from U.S. policy makers. They must recognize that Sri Lanka has been a consistent friend of the U.S. Port access is routinely allowed U.S. naval vessels, providing a valuable stop between Singapore and U.S. facilities in Diego Garcia. Despite strong opposition from India, Sri Lanka signed in 1984 an agreement with the U.S. to allow the expansion and upgrading of the Voice of America (VOA) relay station located north of Colombo, the Sri Lankan capital. This will be the world's second largest VOA station.

The U.S. should take a number of steps to help the Sri Lankan government put enough military pressure on the insurgents to facilitate a political solution to the Tamil-Sinhalese violence. U.S. actions should include:

- 1) **Increase diplomatic support .** The U.S. should make it clear that it will not accept the subversion of a friendly, democratic state by Marxist forces. The U.S. should encourage India to use its influence over the insurgents to prompt a negotiated settlement.
- 2) **Train Sri Lankan police forces .** A competent, professional police force in Sri Lanka is vital for undercutting insurgent operations.
- 3) **Sell Sri Lanka military equipment .** Currently, Colombo finds itself unable to purchase needed helicopters, radars, communication equipment and patrol vessels because the State Department is unwilling to grant the proper licenses. These barriers should be lifted immediately.
- 4) **Encourage establishment of a joint Indian-Sri Lankan naval patrol in the Palk Strait** that separates those two countries. Sri Lanka would favor such joint endeavors as a sign of genuine Indian commitment to mediating a negotiated settlement to the bloody civil war.

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For further information:

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