

Guerillas, fisherboys, fishermen, all together, push the boat into the sea: established bonhomic

## n a guerilla boat to Sri Lanka

The Sri Lanka Tamil guerillas have been making boat runs between Vedaranyam in Tamil Nadu and Jaffna for three years now. KAJAL BASU tried to get into Jaffna through the "unofficial" guerilla route, but the boat came under fire from a Sri Lankan gunboat five kilometres from the Jaffna coast and had to turn back. Photographs by SADANAND MENON

thrice a week, each carrying 18 aguerillas wearing casual lungis, sarongs or just swimming trunks. The 25-ft-long Cey-Nor (Ceylon-Norway collabora-tion) fibreglass boats were originally meant for fishing along the shallow Jaff-fa coast but have now been converted into guerilla speedboats running the into guerilla speedboats running the gauntlet between the overlapping ter-grorial waters of India and Sri Lanka.

HE guerilla boats leave the

bleak, marshy Vedaranyam coast in Tamil Nadu twice or

We hit the placid, grey beach at 3 pm on Saturday, August 25. The Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) "safe house" in Vedationary and village, a hideout from the public fit eye, is an old single-storeyed affair with thick walls and low, cool rooms. Twentyfive lithe young Sri Lankan Tamils—some of them freshly trained in the surrounding marshland, some care-takers of the safe house—give it a college hostel atmosphere: batches of boys cook, clean the place, carry messages to differ the boats on the beach. after the boats on the beach.

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Tairly intensive. Sadanand Menon, a freelance photojournalist, and I wait it tout chewing our nails in Madras while messages tack to and fro between India and the EPRLF activists in Jaffna. The tother side has been told that two journalists are going to make the guerilla run, and will stay in Jaffna before making the run back.

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ing the run back.

The trip from Madras to Vedaranyem, via Kumbhakonam, is bone-breakng. The Sri Lankan Tamils are careful
not to declare themselves openly, but
their peculiar Tamil—a mix of Indian
Tamil and Malayalam—sometimes gives
them away On the bus to Kumbhako. them away. On the bus to Kumbhako-nam, the conductor asks Shenkanal (Red Embers), a well-known Eelam poet with two poetry volumes to his credit, whether he has the tickets. Shenkanal replies, "O'm" (yes), instead of the Indian Tamii "A'mma." The conductor impores the slip. gnores the slip.
At a dinner stop, Shenkanal casts fur-

tive glances at two other Tamils. He tells us that they might be Prabhakaran's Ti-gers—who are at ideological and tactical loggerheads with the other Eelam grou-

ps—tailing us.
The long, flat Vedaranyam beach is littered with fibreglass boats. Three of them 200 yards to the left of the EPRLF landing point are Tiger boats, a few to the right belong to the Tamil Eelam Li-

the right belong to the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO). Each site is marked by a thatched hangar.

At 4 pm, the beach is crowded with little Tamil fisherboys plunging in and out of the water like porpoises. The sea is brown, glutinuous. When the boys notice the guerillas, they run to a boat as if the routine has been followed for years. The boat is hauled out to the shallows in a collective orgy of straining dark boa collective orgy of straining dark bo-dies, fisherboys, guerillas, some fisher-men, all together. It is an established bonhomie and there seems to be no

question of hiding the run to Jaffna.

Rocking in the shallows, the boat is outfitted with three 40 horsepower outbolards—two Edinrude, one Johnson, and another 40 hp Johnson inside as an extra. The 120 hp combined power will give the boat a speed of 40 knots an hour, raised by wind assistance to 45 knots. It is enough to outrace Sri Lan-

The EPRLF also has two 115 hp mo-tors and is hoping to buy another 125 hp soon, all of them to be fitted on to larger fibreglass boats. The larger boats are necessary to break through a tighter Sri Lanka naval cordon that the Eelam fighters expect in the next few months. The Abo said to be beefing up.

The seagreen boat, with a pilot, copilot and watch aboard, snarts out to sea for a test run. It parks in neck deep water while we wade in balancing loads of polythene-wrapped packages on our heads. Fisherboys cling like limpets to

The Admiral—as we have named our rather ferocious looking pilot—picks them off one by one and, helped by those who will stay behind, deposits

them gently on shore.

The leave-taking is emotional, demonstrative. Although no EPRLF boat has ever been sunk by Sri Lankan gunboats, every trip could be the last for that boat. Six months ago, one of Uma Maheshwaran's People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) boats—which operate from. Tutico-rin—was caught out by searchlights on its way back from Sri Lanka. The PLOTE people had made two mistakes: first, they disregarded a warning, by a them gently on shore. first, they disregarded a warning by a smugglers' trawler that they had had a

it wouldn't be safe to make a run back to it wouldn't be safe to make a run back to India that night; second, there was no replacement pilot. The Sri Lankan gunboat just picked off the lone pilot, leaving the PLOTE boar rudderless and then merciessly gunned down 19 PLOTE men. Four were captured alive. Now no feclam boat leaves without a co-pilot. Last messages are given for families in Jaffna. Twelve people are to be deposited in Jaffna: six boys under 20 years of age, honed to a sharp political consciousness, a few older men, two journalists. Some women guerillas were booked on that ride, but are offloaded for the

wave out.

We make mid-point, the Indian territorial limits, at 5 pm and there is consternation. The sun is still high enough to shatter our luck if a gunboat happens by. This has never happened before. Normally the Admiral putters to the mid-point and then opens the throttles wide, cutting toosily but fast through Sri Lanka naval surveillance.

The Admiral decides to reduce speed and we coast along, whiting for the sun

and we coast along, waiting for the sun to sink. He begins locarsely singing an MGR film song. The poet is in the prov laughing and warbling a revolutionary song. The Admiral and co-pilot have been lighting a series of cigarettes in complete violation of safety precau-

of perrol on board and a spark could fry

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the lot of us.

These are guerillas at complete variance with the guerillas that the West projects. They don't seem to be mournfully
serious about a hard political purpose
that overshadows every other consideration. They are not dressed in latigues, do
not have the stubble of struggle on their
chins and do not cradle Kalashnikovs or
Armalites or burp guns casually. When
asked if they sympathise with the
Sinhalese working class, all of them say
yes. They also say that a revolutionary
struggle might ultimately have to in-

the point of invisibility, for well over 15

The guerillas say that two American ships—probably frigates—from the Seventh Fleet have been parked inside Sri Lanka's territorial waters for well over a Lanka's territorial waters for well over a month. The ships came in just after an American nuclear submarine docked at Trincomalee six weeks ago on a "friendly visit". The ships probably help, out the Sri Lankan gunboats with radar surveillance.

At about 7 pm, when the sun has gone down and the sea turns gunmetal grey, and we are half an hour from landing, the watch spots a gunboat on the hori-

the watch spots a gunboat on the horizon. We still coast along. The singing has stopped. The young boys sit hunch-

It is obvious by now that we are neck deep in trouble. We can feel it in the stance of the Admiral, in the riveled eyes

The red ball of the sun glowers to our right, the gunboat is to our left. Our boat must be silhouetted beautifully on the horizon, encircled by the sun. It is a sitting duck situation, a tactical mistake no scaman would make unless he were overconfident, and we know that the Sri Lankans would be blind not to catch us

Later, the Admiral tells us that the American ship probably spotted us on

sees the gunboat very close, guns working, blips of light. The Admiral revealed later that it had been a very close shave. "The gunboat had feinted and come at us through a shadowy patch. If it had been noticed a few seconds later, it would have been upon us." Just one bullet in our exposed fuel tanks could have blown us apart. A young guerilla said later, "You've taken a risk today. We put our lives on the line twice a week. We encounter a gunboat quite often. Once we had even escaped from a gunboat a quarter of a mile away."

Since they believe that it's war against

Since they believe that it's war against the Sri Lanka government, why didn't they return fire? "We never fire back," and a voung guerilla. "We show them.

damage of sink a gun-boat, the Sri Lankan navy will just lake it out on the civilians in Jaffna. We want to avoid reprisals as far as possible. Our people have suffered enough."

This time, we skid around, and assisted by a harrowing wind from the rear, hit 45 knots. We turn towards safer Indian waters. The morse code of lights from the guns of the gunboat are swallowed up by the churning wash of three screaming outboards. We weave, trying to make aim difficult. The gunboat, firing continuously, chases our wake. firing continuously, chases our wake, phosphorescent green, for about 18

Everyone but the Admiral and the watch is down, huddled, heads between knees. Wings of water cut by the high prow curve around and inundate the open boat. There is a biting wind. The terror is palpable. Anyone who can be so frightened is not a politicised, dehumanised metal man. Prabhakaran's Tigers—unafraid and dedicated—ritually commit suicide with potassium cyanide when they are caucht. In their struggle when they are caught. In their struggle for liberation, the Tigers believe in relax-ing rules neither for civilians caught in army reprisals after Tiger raids, nor for

After the boat slows down, the Admiral and the co-pilot go through a vitriolic argument. The Admiral wants us to return to Vedaranyam. The copilot scoffs at him, calls him a coward, and says that he has run many such cor-

and says that he has run many such cor-dons before.

Then the gunboats are sighted again, ringing the Jaffna coastline like beads on a string. There are five or six of them now and the Admiral says that he has never seen such security before. "If never seen such security before. "If there were two gunboats, we could have broken through. With so many of them, they will probably have motorboats for close coastal surveillance. If we break

close coastal surveillance. If we break through the motorboats, we'll still have to fight shore army patrols."

When the navy raided Valvettiturai a month ago, it had towed away 20 fibreglass fishing boats. According to reports, these boats have been fitted with outboards, are manned by three people and are possibly faster than the guerilla boats because they carry far less weight. The pipsqueak Sri Lanka navy is being beefed up.

Reports also say that the Sri Lanka government purchased two patrol ves-

government purchased two patrol ves-sels from Singapore two weeks ago. The Delecika and Monrovia, sources said, Delecika and Monrovia, sources said, will probably be refitted with radar systems and night sights, with American expense. They will be parked on the Jaffina coast. Also, westwind Season reconnaisance unceralt and Dabur-class retrol weeks from lorged bour class. pairol vessels from Israel have been

ordered.
The Indian government is said to
know that the 3ri Lanka government is
looking for maritime arms. Three Indian

frigates are said to have docked at Madras last week, on their way to Ramesh-waram.

Darkness comes down like a blight on the way back and the waves are choppy. The deluge continues. To the left, about 10 kms away, lightning flickers like a beacon. Shenkanal is morose, and he tells me softly that he has a wife—an EPRLF union activist—and three children in Jaffna. He was asked to come down to Madras for an EPRLF central committee meeting and is a bit homesick.

Furious at the Admiral for having re-

Furious at the Admiral for having rejected his bravado, the co-pilot settles an unsteady hand on the rudder. The Admiral directs him voicelessly of a straight path shown by the North Star. There is no talking at all.

The Admiral is a perfectionist in his own way. He is dark, bearded and round, a complete foil to the faulty muscular Eelam guerillas. He gurgles a bottle of arrack on the boat, and he is allowed to do so because he is the most valuable of the EPRLF activities. You bear the start of the start o

command, he is quiet, unflappable. "I know the way," he said. "I've been doing this route for 15 years." Fifteen years? Eelam wasn't even a concept then. "Smuggling," he said blandly. "I've been smuggling ever since I was 13."

Somewhere along the way, the Admiral counts the lighthouses and veers left to the lindian coast. A red dot blinks on and off. The co-pilot flashes a powerful sea torch beam and the boat closes in. When we beach it is 10.30 pm, six and a half hours from the time we left. Every bone in the body is aching; everyone is shivering uncontrollably. The EPRLF men on land are surprised to see this dishevelled parade of wet sparrows. This is the second time in three years that the Admiral has had to run from the Stanka navy.

Lanka navy.

We return to the safe house to mutter things over. It is clear that the guerillas themselves are flustered by the sudden flap along the coast. Security had never been so professional before. It is decided that the Admiral, the co-pilot and the watch will make reconnaissance runs on the next two days and then attempt a landing on the third. An expensive proposition, since each run costs between Rs 8,000 to Rs 10,000, depending upon what kind of evasive action has to be taken. Petrol in such massive qualities is also difficult to purchase on the open market. Somewhere, some petrol dealer

market. Somewhere, some petrol dealer has to be paid off.
Back in Madras the next day, we tearn that Sri Lankan security minister Lanth Athulathmudali had been hauled over the coals by prime minister Premadasa for lax security on the Jaffna coast just a day before our landing attempt. The EPRLF also blames too-frequent runs by the Tigers, and sporadic attacks on the army, for the increased security. the army, for the increased security

The Tigers are expected to be isolated by the other groups in the next few weeks. Uma Maheshwaran—Prabhakaran's arch enemy—is said to be coming closer to a tactical merger with the United Front consisting of the EPRLF, EROS and TELO. That will leave the Tigers acting alone.

Indian intelligence, according to the Indian intelligence, according to the guerillas, is keeping an eye on their movements. Every other conceivable intelligence agency in the world—including the Mossad—is also said to have its men posted in Vedaranyam. With increased protests from Sri Lanka, however, the Indian government might take upon itself to drive the guerillas truty underground. A few weeks ago, it seized Uma Maneshwaran's clandestine broadcasting equipment after protests by the Si Lunkan government. Mahesh wiran had outlitted a boat with the equipment, and when the 3ri Lankan government jammed the broadcast wave, had boosted his transmitter. The Indian government earne in just when to be oadcaste had resumed full strength.



The boat in mid-sea, just before crossing into Sri Lankan territorial waters

journalists. Three people will return; the Admiral, the co-pilot and the watch. Runs normally begin at 5.30 or 6 pm, so that the approach to Jaffna is in total darkness. We leave in light that will

allow photography.

Spirits, initially subdued, rise as the boat nears the Indian territorial limits. Sri Lanka, in spite of the carnage going on, is still home to most people in the boat. The lactian coastline, which we follow for at least 15 kms at a distance of about 5 kms, is dotted with six lighthouses. The Admiral keeps steady at about 20 knots and the prow wavers etween cutting into waves and jumping them. Fishermen on returning trawlers

olve Sinhalese as well. An EPRLF central committee member says that they "have connections with some Signal ese: and are working towards a tactical first strike against the Sri Lankan government and capitalists. Prabhaka-ran's Tigers, who are the only guerillas taking on the 5,000-man Sinhalese army posted in Jaffna, do no! believe that the struggle can extend to the Sinhalese

The sun is just touching the sea when a young guerilla spots an "American beat" just on the horizon. The Admiral decides to coast along hoping that we won't be sighted. It is 6.20 pm. We watch the American boat, flickering at

radar and informed the Sri Lankan gun-

The Admiral has probably been waiting for a signal from the watch. When the watch does let out a short yelp, the boat lurches and in a matter of seconds is darting away from the gunboat. The watch had seen the gunboat swivelling round towards us.

We run towards the Jaffna coast, now about 5 kms away but shrouded in the dusk. The Admiral clearly hopes to cut around the gunboat and make the landing. After about 4 kms of running parallel to the coast, the Admiral throttles wn again, glances around and relaxes.

A few minutes later, a young guerilla

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