

## Sri Lanka : a Political Update

The present situation in Sri Lanka is most complex and chaotic. In the Northern and Eastern province the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) is in control. The IPKF, together with its Tamil militant group allies such as the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) are caught in a bloody war of attrition with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) which had emerged as the militarily dominant Tamil guerrilla group.

The entry of India into the Tamil national struggle in 1983, marked a turning point in the history of the Tamil nation. The Indian government offered arms, training and money to the Tamils who were picking up the pieces just after a massive Sinhala government instigated pogrom against them. The Sinhala mob violence left thousands of Tamils dead, homeless, their properties looted and destroyed. The five Tamil militant groups who were functioning as tiny guerrilla bands waging an incipient armed campaign against the Sri Lankan State for an independent Tamil State, readily accepted the offer of military assistance and welcomed Indian intelligence agencies and political parties to infiltrate the Tamil national movement. Tamil groups did not critically evaluate the regional aspirations and real motives of the Indian State. India took this excellent opportunity to gain a foothold into Sri Lankan politics.

With the unquestioning support of the Tamil people, Indian military assistance and massive financial aid from the expatriate Tamil community, the militant ranks began to swell in numbers. The Tamil liberation groups grew into small armies overnight and were able to inflict heavier losses on the Sri Lankan military.

### **The Growth of Militarism**

Meanwhile, Indian patronage produced two very unhealthy trends within the Tamil national movement. Firstly, the liberation groups who were all based in South India were no longer organically linked with the Tamils in Sri Lanka on whose behalf they were fighting. They became less and less dependent on them and less accountable to them. The people were not mobilised politically nor prepared militarily to participate in a protracted civil war. They were brushed aside and rendered mere spectators. Secondly, the already bitter rivalry amongst the militant groups was exacerbated by Indian assistance and manipulations to keep them divided. The liberation groups began to compete and even engage in military actions against each other which politically weakened them considerably.

The LTTE, or Tigers as they are popularly known, espoused a form of radical Tamil nationalism, invoking glorious images of the Tamil past, emerged as the dominant guerrilla group over the period of 1984 - 1987. Militarism, which had permeated all the liberation groups, especially, after the entry of India into the conflict, became more pronounced as the LTTE grew. The LTTE simultaneously with its campaign against the Sri Lankan state began a fratricidal bid for supremacy against the other guerrilla groups. One by one TELO, EPRLF and PLOTE fell victims to the LTTE onslaught. EROS the fifth group survived because it was small and agreed to toe the line. The LTTE's bid for supremacy was based on the belief that it was the true and natural guardian of Tamil nationhood and therefore should be the sole authority and

representative of the Tamil people. Its rhetoric and seemingly more daring and tenacious military campaign had caught the imagination of the Tamil people and this it felt justified its stand in pursuing these goals.

Nevertheless, the LTTE's war on the other liberation groups substantially weakened the firepower of the Tamils. Consequently, after a long stalemate and being confined to barracks the Sri Lankan Army was able to reassert its stand in the North and East. In May 1987, the LTTE lost its key base, Vadamaratchi, in Jaffna peninsula to the Sri Lankan Army.

### **Peace Accord**

The present phase began around this time, with India's direct military intervention. India imposed the so called 'Peace Accord' on the Sri Lankan government and also on the Tamil militants. It was signed over the heads of the two communities, with the blessings of the superpowers. It grants some measure of autonomy to the Tamil regions, which was seen as inadequate by the Tamils. On the other hand, Sinhala chauvinists campaigned that too much was being granted to the Tamils. The Indian government as part of the provisions of the 'Peace Accord' landed its troops on the island in June 1987, ostensibly to protect the Tamils, to disarm the militants and to set up a provincial administration in the Tamil regions. Actually, it continued to divide and strengthen the Liberation groups against each other. The LTTE felt more and more cornered in relation to the other liberation groups who were being rearmed and retrained by India. It also realised that it cannot have absolute control over the provincial administration and over the other groups who were also clamouring for a share in the administration. Thus began the hostilities between the Indian Peace Keeping Force and the Tigers.

During the 1987 October war as it is commonly known, the Tamils experienced the most serious devastation and destruction that they had ever experienced in their fifteen year campaign of Armed Resistance. They had welcomed the landing of the Indian troops shouting "Mother India, save us". Their leaders including the five militant groups had for decades nurtured this feeling of trust and dependency on India. But to their dismay, the so called protectors turned into marauding enemies overnight. The people had not been mobilised for any kind of civil defence nor were any civil structures allowed to develop by the movements to make the people self reliant with regard to even basic necessities during the period of the civil war. The LTTE which considered itself as the heroic fighting force of the Tamil nation, simply lured and dodged the enemy while the people were slaughtered like sheep by the hundreds. These massacres were cynically used by the LTTE to campaign for political advantage to the utter dejection of the Tamil people. At the end of the initial offensive the LTTE had to abandon its camps and retreat into the jungle for another period of mobile hit-and-run guerrilla war. The other groups which had been targets of LTTE hostility completely surrendered to Indian hegemony and became their allies and stooges and began to assist the IPKF's hunt for Tiger guerrillas and their supporters. Groups like the EPRLF, despite their Marxist rhetoric and fairly consistent criticism of Tiger militarism, fell victims to a worse form of militarism and became proxy killers for the IPKF. The last two years the Tamil regions have been the scene of such

vendetta killings by both the LTTE and the EPRLF-TELO-ENDLF gangs acting on behalf of the IPKF.

The Indians have been presiding while the Tamils have been fighting each other. The situation has deteriorated even further ever since the EPRLF, with Indian backing took control of the newly set up Provincial Councils. These Provincial Councils lack any real power and have not been granted any money by the Colombo government to start rebuilding the war-torn Tamil regions. But the IPKF continues to arm its stooge forces to the teeth, in anticipation of its troop withdrawal in December. The most terrifying new development is the mass conscription of Tamil youth, boys and girls, as young as twelve, into an army called the 'civil volunteer force'. Parents find their children suddenly abducted by the IPKF stooge gangs and when those conscripted try to runaway they are captured and detained and in some instances even killed. The LTTE, their support base considerably reduced are also able to recruit only very young boys, many of them in their early teens. It is now clear to everyone that once the Indian troops leave the LTTE would stake its claim over the Tamil regions once again and that fighting is bound to break out between the LTTE and the IPKF's allies. The most horrific aspect of the war is that it will be fought out between children who have all their lives grown up in an atmosphere of war.

### **The South**

The United National Party (UNP) which has been in power for the last twelve years actually brought on the systematic military repression against the Tamil nation, and also ushered in the 'open economy' policies. These policies opened up the Sri Lankan economy to foreign capital, massive foreign aid, privatisation and cuts in public spending, all of which caused severe economic debts and setbacks. These measures were taken at the bidding of its western patrons and agencies like the IMF and the World Bank. Whatever indigenous production that was there was completely crippled. The fifteen year long war on the Tamils contributed to massive build up of military expenditure and a process of militarisation of the whole society which the Sri Lankan economy could ill afford. All of this firmly entrenched the process of neo-colonial domination and economic deterioration combined with deepening political crisis. The opposition, especially the left who had been completely rejected by the people at the previous elections for their record of betrayal and political opportunism, were unable to provide any alternative. The ruling party skillfully kept them divided and weak. This strengthened the hands of the of the Sinhala chauvinists who had always been a determining factor in Sri Lankan politics.

The present head of state, R.Premadasa, emerged as the leader after a brief inner party struggle on an utterly jingoistic Sinhala chauvinist platform. It is an open secret that before coming to power he had indirectly encouraged the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) a radical Sinhala Chauvinist Party which displays a curious mixture of left, populist, patriotic rhetoric. The JVP was once before brutally crushed by the previous government for staging the insurrection of 1971. In recent times it has emerged as a strong political force in the South, with the landing of the Indian troops on the island, by raising the banner of Sinhala patriotism. The JVP's petit-bourgeois class base and political character is similar to that of the LTTE amongst the Tamils.

Within the last year and a half the JVP has begun a murderous campaign against Government officials, ruling party members, families of those who work for the Armed Forces and also those who support the Accord in the South, branding them as traitors. Their hit list includes human rights activists and even many left activists who support the Tamils' right to regional autonomy. Their popularity is due to the severe economic hardship faced by the people, the corruption at all levels of government and of course the presence of Indian troops on Sri Lankan soil. The JVP has managed by even issuing death threats to call a series of strikes involving the essential services and sectors crucial to the smooth functioning of the economy. This has made the government extremely vulnerable and unstable.

The government has reacted with extreme brutality and has begun to massacre whole villages and has detained hundreds of Sinhala peasant youth. The government in building up the armed forces has spawned all manner of paramilitary groups which act as death squads and terror gangs. The violence is so indiscriminate that often children, even infants, women and the elderly are massacred as JVP suspects. Half burnt, mutilated bodies on the river banks, in schools and universities, on the roads and floating down the river have become a common sight in the South of Sri Lanka. The government is also exploiting this opportunity to destroy all forms of resistance to it. The murder of genuine rank and file left activists by both the JVP and the Government goes unnoticed of course.

### **Current developments**

The most recent development is the LTTE's new friendship with the Colombo government. There have been several rounds of talks and agreement was reached on the urgency of the Indian troop withdrawal. It doesn't seem likely that the government is in any way inclined to grant any concessions to the Tamils as a result of these talks. Nevertheless the LTTE after nearly fifteen years of fanatical adherence to extreme Tamil nationalism seems prepared to forego many of its demands as long as the Sri Lankan government assists them to throw the EPRLF out of power and gain control over the Provincial Council. As an echo of these developments and the Indian government's decision to withdraw its troops by December an uneasy truce has been declared between the IPKF and the LTTE in the North and East. The Colombo government has been forced to call an All Party Conference to bring about some consensus in solving the present crisis that is facing the country. The LTTE is attending the all party conference as observers. It is said that the main preoccupation of the conference will be the problems facing the South and not that of the North and the East. The JVP has refused the government's invitation to participate in the conference as observers, which might render the whole exercise meaningless.

The solution to the Sri Lankan conflict does not rest with internal factors alone. Now for more than six years the decision making nerve centre has been Delhi, and not Colombo or Jaffna. Incorrect appraisal of the nature and scope of India's regional aspirations, by both the Tamils and the Sinhala chauvinist establishment has resulted in taking the initiative of solving the conflict away from Sri Lankan hands.

South Asia Solidarity Group