TIGERS BY THE TAIL

India's Quagmire In Sri Lanka

WILLIAM McGOWAN

Jaffna, Sri Lanka

From the rubble of the nearly 75,000 houses destroyed or damaged during its drive last October against Tamil Tiger militants, the Indian Peacekeeping Force has built a city of pillboxes and fortified bunkers inside this former rebel stronghold. Normalcy now prevails past the ends of machine guns bristling from sentry posts on every street corner. Yet the Indian troops deployed throughout northern and eastern Sri Lanka still find their quarry elusive. Given the opportunity, the Tigers can still paralyze civil administration and commercial life, kill political foes and collaborators and attack unprotected Sinhalese villages as well as Indian Army patrols before melting away uncaught.

Having given arms, training and sanctuary to Tamil separatists fighting the Sri Lankan military, India originally thought it could quickly tame them under the terms of last summer's Indo-Lankan Peace Accord. The accord was an attempt to resolve the longstanding conflict between the minority Tamils (18 percent of the population) and the majority Sinhalese Buddhists (74 percent of the country). The feud is rooted in the institutional discrimination Tamils say they have suffered since independence, in 1948, in education, employment, land settlement and language. But it dates further back, into colonial times and ancient antagonisms. Since 1983, when more than 1,000 Tamils were killed in Sinhalese pogroms, the nation had been in a state of civil war and de facto partition. Upwards of 7,000 civilians have perished.

India had supported the separatists because their cause was strong among 55 million ethnic brethren in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, and because the Western leanings of the Colombo government of President J.R. Jayewardene made it anxious. But when the trouble it was encouraging in Sri Lanka began to threaten India's own equilibrium, and Sri Lankan armed forces broke the struggle's long stalemate in a successful lunge against the militants in May 1987, India stepped in—at first with only a small force to back up what was intended to be primarily a diplomatic initiative. There was nominal peace for six weeks, but now, nearly a year after the signing of the accord in July 1987, the fighting continues; more civilians have been killed in the past year than in any previous year, most of them, ironically, by the Indian peacekeepers.

Any intervention into the miasma of Sri Lanka's ethnic troubles ran the risk of frustration. But India's presumptuous diplomacy and military miscalculations have turned its involvement into a daily $3 million quagmire for Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, with dark implications for his political future as well as for the domestic stability and international prestige of his country. Also on the line is the government of Jayewardene, co-signer of the accord, which has for months been under violent pressure from rabid Buddhist nationalists in the southern part of the island.

Delhi's first mistake was to overestimate its leverage on the two warring sides. The Indo-Lankan Peace Accord called for the rebels to lay down their arms in return for substantial political autonomy in their traditional areas and a guarantee that Sri Lankan armed forces—99 percent Sinhalese—would be confined to their barracks. Although the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or L.T.T.E., the dominant Tamil militant group, had gotten more than its fair share in the bargain, suspicions of the Colombo government built up over several decades were not easily dissipated. The language of the hastily prepared document left several substantive issues, like land colonization of Tamil areas, vague or unaddressed, and after provocation by Buddhist hard-liners within Jayewardene's own Cabinet, the Tigers resumed armed hostilities. At first the Indians did little to hold the Tigers back; in some cases, in fact, Indian soldiers from Tamil Nadu turned a blind eye while brethren Tamils burned Sinhalese out of their homes and shops. Before long, however, the Indians came down hard on their former charges, although for years they had warned Sri Lanka of the futility of a military solution.

The drive on the rebel capital of Jaffna was a military and intelligence debacle. The Indians basically dismissed the Tigers as low-caste youths who would never dare stand against the world's fourth-largest army—which after all had entered the conflict on their side. Having scoffed at Sri Lankan warnings, the Indians had little idea of Tiger manpower, firepower, intelligence and communications capabilities. Nor did they sense the fanatic motivation of the Tigers, symbolized by the cyanide capsule each cadre wears around his or her neck to swallow if captured. Most important, the Indians did not understand the lethal force of the Tigers' form of land-mine warfare—an innovation in guerrilla strategy. Losing face politically as casualties mounted daily, Delhi poured more troops into battle, often without proper rest, briefings, maps or equipment.

What should have taken the Indians three days took nearly three weeks, and during that time brutality against civilians—which India had originally intervened to stop—was ghastly. Here in Jaffna during the October drive, I saw random shelling of civilian areas and evidence that Indians had strafed civilians from helicopters and also shot them point-blank as they hid in their own homes for safety. In direct violation of the Geneva Accords, top Indian officers ordered the storming of the Jaffna Hospital, killing scores of doctors, nurses and patients. The Indians banned foreign journalists and the International Red Cross, making it difficult to verify or dismiss consistent reports of rape and other atrocities committed by Indian troops. Likewise, reports that the Tigers had used civilians as human shields.

William McGowan is completing a book on the war in Sri Lanka, to be published next year by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Utter bedlam reigned during the battle as a half-million panic-stricken refugees sought safety and the Tigers continued to fight--killing many more Indians than military authorities admitted--before pulling out of Jaffna still largely intact as a fighting force. When it was over, with the peacekeepers claiming victory, there was "a city of corpses and rotting flesh," as one Indian brigadier general put it, with some estimates of civilian casualties running as high as 3,000. There was also a deep bitterness among the Tamil populace toward what had effectively become an army of occupation. Conservative estimates say India has 50,000 troops in Sri Lanka, but if higher figures given by Indian analysts and journalists are accurate, it may have up to 100,000 there--almost as many as the Russians had in Afghanistan.

Whenever they are asked about the current situation, Indian troops in the field, cued by public relations officers, no doubt, smile broadly and answer "picnic"--often the only English word they know. But a picnic it decidedly is not. Despite their overwhelming numbers, Indian forces are musclebound, their bureaucratically minded officers vulnerable to the Tigers' hit-and-run tactics; convoys still leave the main roads with trepidation. The Tigers continue to train new, ever younger cadres and say that even with weapons deliveries interdicted, they can hold out for five years more with the matériel that they currently have hidden. The Indians have been unable to protect informers or stop the Tigers from mounting boycotts, general strikes and shutdowns of important administrative services.

Most important, the same pattern of terror from previous years continues under the Indians' very noses. Armed bands of Tamils, Sinhalese and Moslems still massacre civilians of other groups. Sri Lankan police have broken out of their barracks to retaliate against Tamil civilians. In other cases, the Tigers have rampaged through Sinhalese settlements with impunity, intimidating government-funded colonizers. The Indian presence has made it worse for the Moslems, an important community in the Eastern Province's war of demographics. The rise of Islamic militias has been the result, with indications of Iranian and Libyan financial support, poisoning the ethnic brew even further.

Support for the Tigers among the Tamils had been waning until the harshness of the Indian occupation. Indian commanders talk of winning hearts and minds, but detentions of suspected militants and sympathizers are arbitrary, beatings are standard and the ethnic and caste complexion of the soldiers clashes with that of the population, leading to tension. The officer corps may be Sandhurst material, but the largely illiterate rank and file have treated civilians badly and are undisciplined. The simple presence of so many gun bearers who can't speak their language has the population on the edge of nervous breakdown and wishing, ironically, for the return of Sri Lankan troops, who had a harrowing record of human rights offenses.

The upshot is that despite their war-weariness and the hardship brought about by the Tigers' rejection of the peace accord, a majority of the Tamil population supports the guerrillas. And without the backing of the civilians, the Indians can do very little. The chemistry is by no means unalloyed. Tamils may fear the Tigers' authoritarianism and question their lower-caste background and their political inexperience, yet they are recognized as a historically necessary force asserting long-denied rights for national identity and liberation. Besides, there is simply no alternative moderate group.

In fact, the Indians may also feel that the Tigers are the only legitimate force; there are many indications that the military drive against them is more of a bid to discipline than to liquidate. The Indians have seemed reluctant to go for the Tigers' jugular: For example, reporters seeking interviews have sometimes had to wait for the militants to finish cricket games within half a mile of major Indian Army encampments, the Tigers keeping their AK-47s at the ready in bat bags. Such apparent laxity signals a fundamental contradiction in Indian policy, for as much as the Indians need to neutralize the Tigers militarily, they also need to preserve them politically, a balancing act requiring great delicacy and organization, which often elude them. For the accord to work, the Indians need some kind of guarantee of compliance from the increasingly disgruntled Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists in the south, which will be hard to secure without the prospect of a reactivated Tiger threat as leverage.

Gandhi's underestimation of resentment in the south and the effect that has on Jayewardene's ability to hold up his end of the bargain may prove the real undoing of the peace accord. The southern heartland, which prides itself as the land Buddha chose to preserve his doctrine of nonviolence and compassion, has become almost ungovernable under the emotional strains of the Indian intervention. Instead of seeing the accord as an opportunity to build bridges of trust between two warring communities, Sinhalese generally see the Indian presence on their soil as a violation of national

sovereignty as well as a threat to the existence of Buddhism, which they claim to practice in its most pristine form and to protect as part of their mythic charter. The Indian presence has been popularly depicted as a reincarnation of invasions from southern India that wiped out Sinhalese kingdoms centuries ago. Most of the Buddhist majority saw President Jayewardene's acceptance of India's "help"—Gandhi would have invaded otherwise—not as a shrewd calculation of geopolitical realities but as a selling out of national interests.

Broad popular resentment of the accord sparked other latent sources of disaffection against the ruling United National Party (U.N.P.) of J.R. (as the President is popularly known). Its Western-style economic policies, which have greatly widened the gap between rich and poor and led to official corruption on a vast scale, were attacked by the Sinhalese populace as inimical to Buddhist values. Also attacked were the regime's increasingly antidemocratic tendencies: the denial of elections for the past ten years, manipulation of parliamentary procedure and the official sanction given to political thuggery. The signing of the peace accord without popular ratification was taken as the final step in J.R.'s subversion of the democratic traditions that have been cherished since independence, even if observed more in form than in substance. The widespread feeling was that the old fox J.R. had tricked the young Mr. Gandhi into bailing him out in the north so he could better defend himself in the south, where his base of support had crumbled and a rebellion was only a matter of time.

A banned ultranationalistic political party called the People's Liberation Front (J.V.P.) has capitalized on the wave of discontent, focusing anger against the Indo-Lankan Peace Accord. Since September it has conducted a campaign of political killings and subversion that has taken the lives of almost 300 ruling-party officials, nearly brought the simple exercise of civil administration to a collapse and fed worry that the Sinhalese will repudiate their obligations toward India and the Tamils. In areas where the J.V.P. is strongest, police are reluctant to leave their stations after dark, and the public cowers behind shuttered doors. Where Buddha supposedly saw a flourishing *dharma*, the people see assassinations and assault. Most members of Parliament belonging to the U.N.P. are under threat of death and shun their home districts for the security of the capital. Provincial Council elections, which are crucial to the momentum of the peace process, were called off in over half the country due to the threat of violence. Politically moderate intellectuals who have backed the peace accord have been branded traitors to the motherland by the J.V.P. It is also likely that the J.V.P. has infiltrated cadres into the armed forces, raising the specter of unreliability and coup.

The J.V.P. taps into latent Sinhalese feelings of their special destiny, advancing a program that blends masochistic nationalism, apocalyptic rhetoric and the same chauvinistic cultural revivalism that also polarized Sinhalese-Tamil relations in the 1950s. Highly xenophobic, racist and romantic, the J.V.P. calls for a return to "indigenous" thought, values and economic development that predate European colonialism and contemporary Western influence.

The J.V.P. thrives in the economically depressed far south of the island. Most of its members—their numbers still unknown—are lower-caste youths in the universities or jobless graduates with few prospects in an economy still skewed to favor high-caste English-speakers, despite decades of lip service by successive governments to the "sons of the soil." There are also widening ranks of militant Buddhist monks in the party, who see their clerical role in political rather than spiritual terms and have defied superiors by calling for armed resistance in a Buddhist holy war. "We must weaponize," ranted one of them, clad in a brilliant saffron cloth, as a full moon bathed the sentinel face of a nearby stone Buddha. "We must weaponize to kill the traitor J.R. Jayewardene."

The armed subversion of the J.V.P. has justified the government's drift to authoritarianism in the name of preserving the only "five-star democracy" in Asia. The ruling party has armed a private militia, at least 20,000 strong, many of them recently paroled criminals. Fifty thousand troops hitherto fighting Tamil guerrillas have been redeployed in the south to quell the insurgents and their sympathizers. And the government is operating death squads, which are targeting J.V.P. suspects as well as legal political activists, opposition parties claim. Many innocents have been falsely accused and summarily punished in the bid to crush the J.V.P.—the very pattern that has fed militancy in the north among Tamils over the past five years. Police have been personally indemnified against civil actions, extending a carte blanche for abuse, and international human rights groups have been blocked from investigating.

The recent announcement of an agreement between the government and the J.V.P. to end the insurrection in return for the lifting of proscription was a promising sign—until it was discovered that the Minister of National Defense had been negotiating with hoaxers. But bringing the J.V.P. into the mainstream means little when the mainstream itself—including many of J.R.'s inner circle—mistrusts the accord. Parliamentary ratification of the peace agreements, despite a U.N.P. majority, could only be secured by strongarm methods. Having whipped up his hard-liners for years, even as he tried to negotiate a peace, J.R. found it very hard to contain them. Many right-wingers preferred an outright Indian invasion so they could reap windfalls of international sympathy for once.

Sinhalese government bureaucrats have shown their true colors by dragging their feet on the provisions of the accord that require them to grant equal rights to the Tamils. For example, very few of the relief supplies and funds that Western donors rushed to the country have made their way from government ministries in Colombo to war-ravaged Jaffna as was intended. Priority has been given to the plight of Sinhalese refugees instead, even though Tamils in need outnumber them tenfold. The government also refuses to discontinue its West Bank–style settlement program in the crucial Eastern Province, and has erected bureaucratic barriers to the repatriation of Tamil refugees who fled to India—100,000 of them. On a grimmer note, virtually none of the police or soldiers involved in any of the atrocities since India

stepped in have been disciplined, sending ominous signals that the security of Tamils is still not a state concern.

In essence, the Indian presence has not, as intended, provided an umbrella under which Tamils and Sinhalese can seek reconciliation. Instead it has made the scheming more byzantine and covert, with both sides jockeying around India for position. Sinhalese bloody-mindedness has made matters worse. As a recently returned Sri Lankan expatriate scholar said, "There is simply no sense of repentance on the part of the Sinhalese, no sense that they were in the wrong for many years and are now suffering for it, no sense that they brought the very intervention they feared on themselves. The reaction is just the opposite. They say they weren't tough enough. It's a very spooky psychology." Only now coming to recognize the extent of the alienation that persists between the two communities, all that Indian diplomats can say is, "Nation-building takes time."

The Indians are in a double bind. Even if they tame the Tigers, there is very little chance for lasting peace unless the Sinhalese south gives up deep-seated anxieties and accepts the legitimacy of Tamil autonomy without backsliding. Given the current mood in the south, that is unlikely to happen. Should antigovernment pressure build to a more dangerous level, or should the 82-year-old President die, the situation may become uncontrollable for the peacekeepers. The very point of India's involvement in Sri Lanka was to stabilize its own southern flank, but any direct movement of troops into the Sinhalese south could prompt a nationalistic backlash, uniting factions that are now hostile to each other. The ensuing bloodbath could further destabilize the situation and prompt a greater Indian intervention, which would be politically dangerous for Rajiv Gandhi, who already faces widespread public opposition over what many consider India's Vietnam.

Gandhi's Sri Lanka misadventure has emboldened his opponents. The unpopularity of the initiative among the 55 million Tamils in Tamil Nadu could hand his Congress Party an ill-affordable defeat in critical upcoming state elections. Bogged down by a few thousand guerrillas, the reputation of the Indian Army has been sullied under the watchful eyes of regional rivals Pakistan and China, as well as of armed separatists inside India. And its clumsy handling of ethnic factionalism bodes ill for India's role in refereeing power sharing in post-Soviet Afghanistan.

The situation in Sri Lanka may in fact have grown so poisonous that a cathartic bloodletting is inevitable. Militants on both sides—backed up by significant bodies of popular opinion—embrace the idea of a nationalistic *Gotterdammerung* much more readily than that of compromise. The psychological breach between the two communities may be much too profound for ready reconciliation, no matter what agreements are signed and what platitudes mouthed. Even if the flames are banked for a while, the fuel will ignite again. As the Indians navigating them know only too well, the currents on both sides of Sri Lanka's ethnic divide are vicious. Far from being the light at the end of the tunnel, India's involvement in Sri Lanka may well prove to be just a sidestep in a steady descent into darkness. □