

The war for

With the Tamil Tigers putting up stiff resistance, will the Indian Peace-keeping Force be able to gain control of Jaffna and ultimately restore peace and normalcy in Sri Lanka?



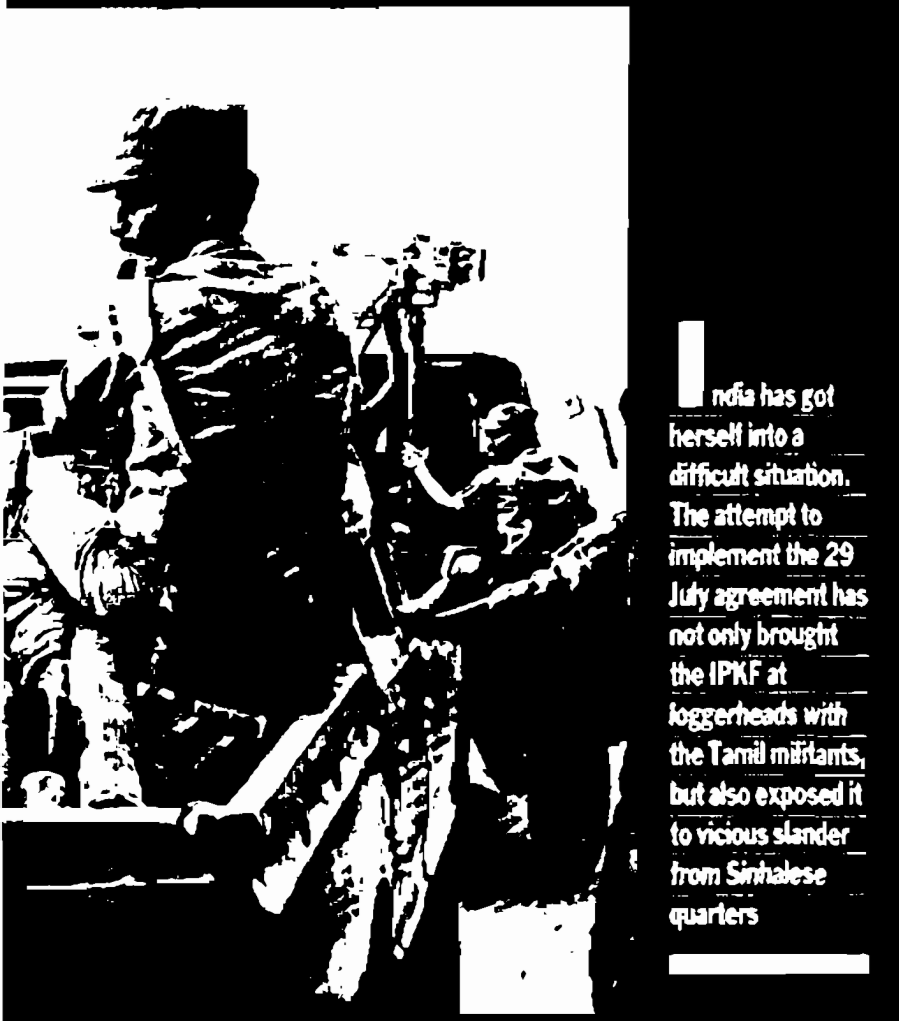
(Top)
IPKF arms set off
from Palaly:
tough going

LTTE supremo
Pirebhakaran:
never-easy die

The operation was swift and businesslike, but hopelessly restrained. The Indian Peace-keeping Force (IPKF) charged with the responsibility of salvaging a collapsing accord, threw a noose around Jaffna and proceeded to tighten it. By 20 October, it was consolidating its position in west Jaffna, joining up with a group of soldiers beleaguered in Jaffna Fort, cutting off the LTTE's (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) Jaffna lagoon where they had stored arms and ammunition earlier. Finally, the IPKF was advancing on Jaffna from five different directions.

Once the Indian Navy had destroyed several 'supply boats' in the LTTE

peace



India has got herself into a difficult situation. The attempt to implement the 29 July agreement has not only brought the IPKF at loggerheads with the Tamil militants, but also exposed it to vicious slander from Sinhalese quarters

stronghold of Gurunagar, the IPKF flew in 300 more troops to start mopping up operations. The Tigers then switched from conventional warfare to guerrilla tactics, sniping at IPKF troops from buildings and laying booby traps and mines in their way. The battle, even in its final stages, was fierce and bloody. And even though the IPKF was avoiding the use of offensive artillery and air support, it could not prevent the increasing toll being taken on civilian lives: by 22 October, the fighting had left 300 citizens dead, and some 500 injured. The IPKF itself had lost 100 of its men, while 500 others were wounded—several of whom were flown to the military hospital in Pune. Nevertheless,

the Indian forces pressed on relentlessly, refusing to suspend hostilities unless the LTTE surrendered unconditionally and agreed to abide by the 29 July accord. Noticing that several LTTE guerrillas wanted to end their resistance, the Indian forces even offered a general amnesty to all those who surrendered. But the LTTE leader, Velupillai Pirabhakaran, who had himself escaped and was directing the battle from afar, was clearly determined to make his men fight to the bitter end.

The irony is inescapable. Once regarded as a patron and benefactor of the Tamil militants, India, having committed itself to a treaty with Sri Lanka, now finds itself in the role of a peacekeeper

fighting Sri Lanka's war against its own friends. And with the LTTE resisting dourly, there is another fear: will the war against the insurgents come to an early end, or will it spill over into Tamil Nadu, where the Tigers might take their fight for an Eelam (Tamil homeland)? "Only in that event," said a foreign ministry official, "does the question of having any regrets arise, not otherwise. And from all indications, it seems the problem will be settled." One will have to wait and watch. But by the third week of October, there were rumours that the Indian army had suffered more casualties against the LTTE in Sri Lanka than it had in Bangladesh in 1971, and also that a number of senior Indian military officials were against sending the army into the island nation with its hands tied. Is this war proving too high a price to pay for statesmanship and diplomacy? Has India bitten off more than it can chew?

Apparently, during the fighting, the LTTE had sent a letter to the Prime Minister, through the DMK leader in Madras, M. Karunanidhi. The Tigers would like to surrender but insisted that their political differences with the Indian government must be settled through negotiation. An LTTE commander in Jaffna had sent a note to the IPKF, on the same lines. But the IPKF stood firm—the surrender had to be unconditional. Soon after this, the IPKF learnt, by intercepting radio communication between LTTE units, that a debate was going on about how long to continue the fight. While the IPKF claimed that the Tigers were debating the question of surrender, travellers from Jaffna who spoke to journalists in Colombo said their actual objective was somehow to slip out of Jaffna and continue the struggle in other places. The IPKF, however, took this opportunity to drop leaflets all over Jaffna, appealing to the militants to surrender, and assuring them that if they did so, they would be able to participate fully in the democratic and political process and live with honour and dignity.

"This is not a war," said a government official in Delhi, "so the question of negotiating a cease-fire does not arise. It is an operation to disarm the Tamil militants, and stop the violence. The LTTE has brought it upon itself." On 14 and 16 October, Indian government spokesmen, in response to the reports saying that Pirabhakaran has sent a letter to Karunanidhi, reiterated Rajiv Gandhi's statement that he still hoped that the LTTE will join the process of ensuring the restoration of peace and normalcy and help secure the legitimate

Will peace reign?

How did the post Indo-Sri Lankan accord situation suddenly worsen? With both the Sri Lankan President, J.R. Jayewardene, and the Indian government trying their best to accommodate the seemingly unreasonable demands of the LTTE, the stage was being set for the transformation of the war-torn land to one where democracy reigned. It was then that the signs of panic within the LTTE leadership began to show. The LTTE wanted seven of its representatives on the 12-member Interim Administrative Council (IAC) which was not part of

The capture of the trawler 'Kadal Pura' with 13 of its leading fighters came as a sort of boon in disguise. The LTTE could not blame the Sri Lankan navy for the capture of the trawler. It was being used for mid-sea transfer of arms, and Kumarappa and Pulendran who were in it were alleged to have been behind the massacre of nearly 100 other Tamil militants.

This is where the first major failure of the IPKF occurred. They did not succeed in preventing the captured Tigers from being transported to Colombo. Even before

If the LTTE had not shattered the facade of the accord, would it have survived? Says Chandrasenan, the leader of the the sidelined Organisation for the Protection of Tamil Eelam Against Genocide (Proteg): "It is just not possible to find a negotiated settlement. Otherwise it would have been solved a long time back. For instance, the District Development Council Bill which was passed in 1981, giving concurrent powers to district administrations, would have worked. Similarly, let the provincial councils be tried out and it will be seen that it will not work. The mistake was that the political process was worked into the accord. Politically, you have to break up the country. It is impossible to solve it any other way." Much of what Chandrasenan, who was once declared *persona non grata* by the Indian government says, makes sense, since the major obstacle to a peaceful co-existence of the two ethnic groups is the widely known Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism;

This chauvinism has found its expression in several legislations passed by Colombo in the last three decades—the factor responsible for the snowballing of Tamil anger. The 1956 Act popularly known as the Sinhala Only Act, giving predominance to the Sinhala language, the Standardisation Act of 1972 by which Tamils needed more marks to enter college, the 1970 Act by which Buddhism was declared the national religion and by which the Constitution ceased to be secular, and the 1971 insurrection of the Janata Vimukti Perumana (JVP) had all caused deep wounds in the Tamil psyche.

But most of the militant groups knew that the demand for a Tamil Eelam was too unrealistic a demand. "Eelam was a symbol of resistance. We never saw ourselves as secessionists," said Ketheeswaran of the EPRLF.

From the Indian government's point of view, the accord served the immediate purpose of an end to hostilities. Moreover, the accord served the objective of buying time to talk over the other controversial aspects regarding the power of the administrative council. The interim council was not part of the accord but was thought to be the right forum to smoothen the transition. Why then did the other militant groups sign the



A mother whose son was killed by the LTTE with Padmanatha of EPRLF : dirty war

the accord. As Ketheeswaran, the spokesman of the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), told SUNDAY, "The so-called interim government dominated by the LTTE could take on a permanent character." The LTTE knew this well.

Then came its claim that the administrator should be its nominee. One of its three nominees, Sivagnanam, was picked by Jayewardene as administrator. The LTTE tried to stall again and demanded that Padmanathan be appointed as administrator. Padmanathan, when in prison, had, according to reliable sources, been involved in raising funds for the Sri Lankan Defence Fund in order to be released. The LTTE then started looking for other excuses and placed five new demands including an immediate ban on colonisation, opening of new police stations, and the predominance of English and Tamil over Sinhalese.

they could be forced into the plane they consumed the cyanide tablets which hang from the necks of all LTTE boys. The LTTE was at war.

How popular is the LTTE in Sri Lanka? Does it have the mass support to back its incredible fighting power? "Pirabhakaran is a creation of RAW, MGR and Rajiv Gandhi," said Murali Maran, the DMK strongman and son-in-law of Karunanidhi. Even as early as the 1986 Bangalore SAARC conference when the idea of an administrative council was first mooted, Pirabhakaran had wanted a predominant position. The very fact that Pirabhakaran had no qualms about turning his ever-smoking guns against leaders of other Tamils groups showed that his group feared that they would be pushed behind in the race for mass support. "The LTTE has to be converted from their belief in the bullet to faith in the ballot," an external affairs spokesman said.



Tamil refugees in Rameswaram: troubled existence

George Francis / AP

preceded the military action. 25,000 of them were accommodated in camps inside the country, and a lakh outside the country. Inside Jaffna, the IPKF has been providing regular medical aid and assistance to the population, as well as airdropping food packets. While wounded IPKF soldiers have been brought to military hospitals in India, sick and wounded Tamils have been accommodated in Jaffna Hospital.

No doubt, India has got herself into a difficult situation. The attempt to implement the 29 July agreement has not only brought the IPKF at loggerheads with the Tamil militants, but also exposed it to vicious slander from Sinhalese quarters. In any event, India is now committed to intervening if there is any conflagration. Apart from the costly military operation it has had to conduct, the IPKF now faces the onerous task of either bending or breaking the Tamil Tigers. But can the LTTE be wished away, even if it is temporarily defeated? Even today, many hope that the LTTE will surrender its weapons to the IPKF and join the search for a political solution to the ethnic problem. That represents the brightest hope for peace. The LTTE, after all, has to be recognised as an important political factor in the northern and eastern provinces. As long as Tamils remain part of Sri Lanka's political set-up, the Tigers will be an influential group. But what are the available choices if the militant faction, committed as it is to Eelam, is set on a course of self-destruction?

Is the Indo-Sri Lankan accord collaps-

ing? If the accord had ever given rise to any illusions about India bringing about a quick solution to the ethnic tangle in Sri Lanka, they have now evaporated. At the time of writing, it had become amply clear that even the capture of Jaffna would not end the battle. Instead, it would mark the beginning of a long Indian involvement in Sri Lanka—depending on the political situation there. The fact that Sirimavo Bandaranaike's Freedom Party and other Sinhalese groups are virulently opposed to the agreement does not augur well for its longevity. But that is another matter.

It is clear that the militants will not give in. The LTTE, still rigid about not surrendering its arms, is reluctant to accept the Indo-Sri Lankan agreement *in toto*, and its cadres might spread out into the surrounding jungles, and creeks

and lagoons to carry on a protracted war of attrition—which is precisely what the IPKF is trying to avoid. And if Tamil militancy continues, it might become harder to control the southern Sinhalese extremist elements, spearheaded by the banned Janata Vimukti Peranama (JVP), which has already become active again, after the signing of the agreement. The JVP, apart from killing and injuring members of the ruling United National Party in the southern districts, has been raiding Sri Lankan army camps in a drive to collect arms. President Jayewardene has himself said that he feared the JVP and Tamil extremists had established convenient links, and that they were determined to overthrow the Sri Lankan government and set up one of their own. "Guerrillas, with their commitment," said a political observer, "rightly or wrongly, are never obliterated, they spawn and proliferate."

The ethnic situation is confusing and volatile. Apparently, there are various national and international forces at play. The international powers which have been applauding the Indo-Sri Lankan agreement are said to be none too happy about India's re-emergence as a regional superpower, and are anxious to see that the accord does not succeed. Within Sri Lanka, the cynicism is confined to the Freedom Party, influential sections of the Buddhist clergy and a cross-section of the Sinhalese people. Some members of the ruling UNP are constantly whipping up anti-Indian feelings by criticising the IPKF's presence and playing up the fact that it poses a serious threat to Sri

The IPKF used the conventional "pincer movement" strategy employed for any large settlement. They approached Jaffna from all sides, sealed off the escape routes and linked up their columns

accord? The groups other than the LTTE were running short of firepower and appreciated the positive aspects of the accord: that it had the protection of India which the groups knew would go to any length to protect the accord, a feeling which has now been proved right.

The Indian Peace-keeping Force (IPKF) was initially seen as another manifestation of the Tamils' fight for hegemony. The militant groups like the People's Liberation of Tamil Eelam (PLOT), EPRLF, etc., willingly laid down arms mainly because of this factor, but the LTTE was obviously gearing up for another fight.

Apart from many loopholes in the accord which President Jayewardene could use to his own advantage, the granting of powers to the Provincial Council has raised constitutional problems. No less than 39 petitions have been filed in the Sri Lanka Supreme Court against the granting of executive and legislative powers to the provincial councils in the bills which have been introduced in the Parliament. The structure of the Constitution does not allow for decentralisation of power and the central legislature and executive are sovereign bodies. This is one of the reasons why all the early attempts at devolution of power to the Tamil areas never worked out. Mrs Bandaranaike who is one of the petitioners against the bills presented after the accord has argued that they violate the basic features of the Sri Lankan Constitution.

PROTEG leader Chandrasaran argues that the Indo-Sri Lankan accord does not even have provisions for some of the basic demands, such as land settlements, unlike the 1957 accord which Mr Bandaranaike signed with Chandrasaran's father Chelvanayakam. With such loopholes in the accord, many Tamils fear that President Jayewardene might gradually overrule whatever administrative reforms that the councils might bring about and even try to swing the referendum his way by colonisation. The Sri Lankan government had, just after the accord, made definite attempts at colonisation in certain parts of the eastern districts, which was one of the reasons why the LTTE resorted to the gun once again.

The complexity and irony of the

situation has now been laid bare. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam which the Indian government rightly or wrongly once groomed, has now turned against them. What is now of immediate concern is whether the Tamils at home will fall victims to propaganda by the LTTE and start shouting against the Indian army. It is this dilemma that is reflected in the attitude of the DMK and the AIADMK.

For the first time since the hostilities in Sri Lanka started, Pirabhakaran turned to the DMK president Karunanidhi, in what seemed a desperate measure. Quick to grab any opportunity, the DMK president appealed to the Prime Minister for a



B. Ramachandran and MGR: dilemma

ceasefire, and organised a public meeting, addressed among others by N.T. Rama Rao to capitalise on the situation. Said Murali Maran: "Why is the army fighting the people? Jayewardene is getting free service. The situation now is worse than being on square one." Parvati Ramachandran, the acting chief minister and conscience keeper of the chief minister M.G. Ramachandran, also voiced the dilemma of the Tamils when he told SUNDAY: "The IPKF is for the interests of the Tamils and the LTTE is also for the interests of Tamils. I don't think the LTTE is arrogant. The LTTE leaders might have faced pressures from within to make some demands after the accord was signed. After all, cabinet formation is always a delicate process." Ramachandran also felt that the future is quite bleak. "It is one thing to disarm and another to ensure peace."

Bino K. John/Madras

Lanka's sovereignty.

These critics—who are counting on Sinhalese pride to push and prod their case—maintain that the IPKF first sided with the Tamils, and is now taking much too long to accomplish its task in Jaffna. In an interview with the daily, *Island*, Mrs Bandaranaike said: "... Reports do not indicate an overwhelming success by the IPKF. I do not think that one of the biggest armies in the world would run into so much difficulty against terrorists who, in the estimation of Mr Dixit (the Indian high commissioner) himself, had only 30 per cent of their weapons." She went on: "Now that the Indian army has launched an offensive in the north and many Indians have died, they will not leave without getting what they came here for." She said it was not for nothing that Indian forces had brought with them armoured cars, anti-aircraft guns, field guns and powerful tanks.

The Sri Lanka government itself is hopelessly divided on this issue. Apart from President Jayewardene, the agreement seems to have more opponents than well-wishers. The recent statement by Prime Minister Premadasa, who, to the astonishment of Indian representatives had accused India of nurturing the Tamil guerrillas, and the manner in which the Indian and Sri Lankan governments have been contradicting each other on the question of granting amnesty to Pirabhakaran and other LTTE guerrillas, are not very encouraging signs either. While the IPKF has assured all members of the LTTE that they will be free men if they surrender, the Sri Lankan government has put a high price on Pirabhakaran's head—though it is said he will never be captured alive, because he has decided to swallow cyanide, like some of his LTTE colleagues, if the enemy gets anywhere near him.

The real test of the Indo-Sri Lankan accord will be now. Will the IPKF outlive its utility for the people of Sri Lanka? Or will the Sri Lankan government use it for purposes other than that for which it was brought in? The ethnic strife is unlikely to end soon. Already, it has caused extraordinary damage to the country: the losses in terms of destruction of public buildings and railway tracks, as well as the total collapse of certain important sectors and roads amounts to an estimated 15 billion Sri Lanka rupees. The island nation's agrarian economy has been greatly affected.

For India, the stakes are political credibility and goodwill; for Sri Lanka, sheer survival. Will the 29 July accord live to see a happier day?

Nirmal Mitra / New Delhi