

The Sri Lankan Conflict:

A Detailed Backgrounder

(IPKF and After)

By

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Indian Peace Keeping Force

As per the Agreement, India ceased assisting the Tamil insurgents and took control of the law and order situation in the Northeast. However, there were several issues which were not properly addressed and complications developed quite soon. The pro-LTTE, Tamil Information Centre (TIC) in London complained that several thousand Sinhalese had been moved into the Tamil areas since the Agreement was signed. Although the Agreement had a provision for general amnesty for all political prisoners (2.11), only a minority of the prisoners was released and the Government tended to relate the release of prisoners to the amount of arms being handed over by the Tamil groups. The Tamil Information Centre claimed on August 27 that only 1,700 prisoners had been released from the Poosa camp and approximately 3,500 were still in detention. No official statement or document clarified if the general amnesty covered the persecuted or convicted Tamils living abroad.¹ On the other hand, the Tamil groups were unsure of the nature of the whole peace process and felt uncertain about the safety of the Tamils in the event of Indian forces' withdrawal. They had no confidence in the Sinhalese politicians and Government that they would not abrogate the Peace Agreement suddenly. Consequently, the LTTE and other groups were cautious and surrendered only a small portion of their weapons.

The Tamil groups were divided into two rival camps, with the powerful LTTE on the one side, and the remaining groups on the other. LTTE, who lost the political, juridical and military authority on the arrival of the IPKF, maintained that they were the real "freedom fighters" and wanted to assure their role in the future political leadership of the Northeast Province.² The LTTE slaughtered more than hundred and fifty members of the

¹ Ann Belinda-Steen, pp.8 & 10

²Ibid.,p.7

rival separatist groups, raided homes, waylaid buses, and opened fire in the streets. The intense internecine fighting among the Tamil groups and the deteriorating credibility in the eyes of the common Tamil population obliged the IPKF to tighten its peace keeping role.³

It was when the LTTE was negotiating for control of the interim council for the Northeast Province, the unexpected quirk happened. On October 3, 1987, seventeen LTTE members were arrested by the Sri Lankan Navy off the northern coast as they were bringing arms in a trawler. Despite Indian officials' strong opposition, the National Security Minister, Lalith Athulathmudali, insisted on taking the men to Colombo for interrogation. As they walked toward the waiting Indian Air Force plane at the Palay Airbase in the Northeast Province, they swallowed the cyanide capsules they had always carried on their persons and all but four died on the spot. The Tigers quickly reacted to the mass suicide of their men by killing the eight Sri Lankan soldiers they were holding captive and four police men on October 5. The next day, the LTTE announced that they were opposed to the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement and went on a rampage in the east. They stopped trains and buses and massacred the Sinhalese passengers, and according to one estimate, they killed more than two hundred people in four days.⁴

In his meeting with the Indian Chief of Army Staff, General K. Sundarji, on October 9, Jayewardene demanded that India meet its obligations under the Agreement and disarm the LTTE; or he would be forced to send the IPKF back. The IPKF initiated action the very next day to destroy the guerilla organization beginning with their stronghold, the city of Jaffna. Despite the huge disparity in weaponry and number of men, the IPKF had

³*The New Yorker*, March 21, 1988,p.79

⁴*Ibid.*,p.79

to fight a real war in every sense of the word before taking over Jaffna as the Tigers put up a formidable resistance with their single-minded dedication, hysterical bravery, fighting skill and their intimate knowledge of the local terrain. The battle for Jaffna inflicted a very heavy casualty on both sides and also among the civilians. The Tigers set booby traps and land mines with the help of civilians and the IPKF soldiers had to patrol with a constant fear of sniper fire. The 50,000-strong IPKF found itself locked in a bloody police action against the LTTE.⁵ Periodic reports that the LTTE was ready to disarm and enter the mainstream political process proved premature. Even after two years of the signing of the Agreement, IPKF remained active in the Northeast Province.

On August 4, 1987, the LTTE Supremo, Prabhakaran, had said:

The soldiers of the Indian Army are taking up the responsibility of safeguarding and protecting us against our enemy....However, I do not think that as a result of this Agreement, there will be a permanent solution to the problem of the Tamils. The time is not very far off when the monster of Sinhala racism will devour this Agreement.

But on April 11, 1989, the LTTE's Political Committee, in an open letter to President Premadasa, said "You may go ahead and mortgage the birthright of the Sinhala people. But we will not mortgage the rights of the Tamil people to anybody....Until the oppressive Indian Army leaves our land, there will be no such thing as a ceasefire."⁶

Peace Process and Bloodbath

While the IPKF and the LTTE were locked up in a war in the Northeast, a

⁵Ibid, pp.79-80

⁶*The Hindu*, April 21, 1989.

burgeoning insurgency of the JVP complicated the peace process further. The dangerously violent group, who were relatively quiescent since the 1971 insurrection, began to reassert themselves in 1987. The JVP had been a Sinhala chauvinist group and totally anti-Indian; in sharp contrast to their communist class consciousness, they denounced the plantation Tamils as the vanguard of Indian expansionism. They were strongly opposed to the granting of official language status to Tamil and considered India's interference in the Sri Lankan crisis as a betrayal of the Sinhalese people.⁷ Snatching the opportunity, the JVP capitalized on the widespread opposition to the Agreement in the Sinhalese community and launched an intimidation campaign against the supporters of the Agreement. Many UNP, USA (United Socialist Alliance) supporters including the SLMP leader Vijaya Kumaranatunga were assassinated. Having been relieved of its security burden in the Northeast by the IPKF, the Sri Lankan Government intensified its anti-JVP drive in the South.

In November 1988, elections for all eight provincial councils were held and the poll in the Northeast Province was astonishingly peaceful and relaxed as a safe and credible environment was created by the IPKF. The Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) and its allies, the Eelam National Democratic Liberation Front (ENDLF) and a faction of the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO), won most seats. While the LTTE was clinging to an extremist rut, the TULF was a non-participant in the election, in which between 80 and 90 percent of the registered Tamil voters participated.⁸ The EPRLF formed the ministry in the Northeast Province under Varadaraja Perumal as the Chief Minister.

⁷For a detailed historical treatment of the JVP, see A. C. Alles, *Insurgency-1971*, (Colombo: Trade Exchange (Ceylon) Ltd., 1976).

⁸*The Hindu*, November 22, 1988.

In the following month, the presidential election was held under the most trying circumstances. The UNP candidate Premadasa took a less extreme, if not a moderate, position on the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement and the IPKF was opposed to the SLFP aspirant Mrs. Bandaranaike's extreme stand. Bandaranaike promised to send the IPKF back within 24 hours while Premadasa wanted the IPKF out "as soon as conditions are created." The former assured scrapping of the Agreement as against the latter's view that it be re-negotiated or substituted by a friendship treaty.⁹ Despite the JVP's warning of killing and violence, the voter turnout was 55 percent and Ranasinghe Premadasa easily won the Presidency. Observers felt that the JVP threat may have ensured Bandaranaike's defeat by frightening large sections of the voters away from the election.¹⁰ The results of both the elections for the Provincial Councils and the Presidency held under the threats of the LTTE and the JVP, amid wanton violence, deaths and destruction, and fear clearly demonstrated the people's aversion for terrorist violence, negative politics and the deep desire for democratic transition.

The new President took immediate steps to make devolution of powers to the Provincial Council Governments effective. New Delhi, on its part, decided to withdraw two battalions of the IPKF. The press release dated January 1, 1989 issued simultaneously from Colombo and New Delhi on the withdrawal of two battalions of the IPKF said:

With the successful holding of the Provincial Council and Presidential elections, the formation of a Provincial Government and the beginning of genuine devolution of powers to the Provincial Government, some of the Indian troops deployed in the North-Eastern Province are in the process of being withdrawn. Some troops have been withdrawn since November. Another two battalions will be withdrawn in the

⁹*The Hindu*, December 21, 1988.

¹⁰*The Hindu*, December 22, 1988.

coming few days. As the situation in the North-Eastern Province improves further, as the devolution of power becomes effective, as the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement gets progressively implemented and as the mischief-making potential of extremist elements opposed to the Agreement is reduced, Government [of India] is hopeful of making further withdrawals in consultation with the Sri Lankan Government.¹¹

In a meeting with the Indian High Commissioner, J. N. Dixit, on January 17, Premadasa indicated that he would be presenting the draft of an Indo-Sri Lanka Friendship Treaty for Indian Government's approval in the near future.¹²

Indo-Sri Lanka Confrontation

Nonetheless, Colombo started acting out of political exigencies in the following months. Ranjan Wijeratne, the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister, who was also Minister of State for Defense, virtually announced on Indian television that President Premadasa was not with the Agreement. Premadasa complicated the matter further by telling his United National Party's executive committee that he was not under any political obligation to anyone except the people who elected him. Moreover, his administration also tended to pursue another approach from Jayewardene's, which had been totally against going after the armed Sinhala and Tamil extremists. Accordingly, Colombo proceeded to hold secret talks with the LTTE, overlooking India. The Tigers, who were cornered by the IPKF in the Vavuniya jungle, responded swiftly to the vague overtures from Colombo. Thus, both the antagonistic Sri Lankan political actors, the Sinhala chauvinists and the Tamil extremists as well as the Sri Lankan Government came to have a common interest in removing India,

¹¹*The Hindu*, January 2, 1989.

¹²*The Hindu*, January 19, 1989.

its role and its interests out of the arena.

As editorially noted by "The Hindu", both the Premadasa Government and India had "quite different things in mind ... in relation to the bilateral track." The paper also pointed out four different factors which were worth noting. First, Colombo did not intend to ask the LTTE to surrender their weapons despite the facts that it was one of the main requirements underscored by the Agreement and that it was the issue for which IPKF fought a bloody war and sacrificed so many lives. Second, it was the antipathy to the IPKF and India's legal and legitimate role which brought the Tigers and Colombo together. Third, the EPRLF-led Provincial Council was looked down on as a villain and the question of devolution of power was belittled. Fourth, no kind of consultation with India was seen necessary by the Premadasa Government before inviting the LTTE for talks and the unilateral approach was strongly adhered to after the first round of talks.¹³ At this juncture, the Tigers were said to have received some fresh supply of arms and ammunition and Indian intelligence sources suspected the role of some elements within the Sri Lankan Government.

In the meantime, the JVP called on the nation to boycott Indian goods, withdraw their money from Indian banks and cease all economic dealings with India from June 14. Declaring war against Indian imperialism, they asked the wealthy Indian businessmen, who had been granted distinguished citizenship, to leave the country by that date. The DJV, the military wing of the JVP, threatened to treat those who would not leave as "conspirators against the fatherland" and to deal with them accordingly.¹⁴ The Hindu correspondent reported that the Government's low key response was a noticeable feature

¹³*The Hindu*, June 10, 1989.

¹⁴*The Hindu*, June 8, 1989.

of that agitation and that the police who would normally strip off JVP posters left them undisturbed.

It was against this backdrop, Premadasa requested the Indian Government at a Buddhist religious function on June 1 "to try as far as possible to complete the withdrawal of the entire IPKF by the end of July."¹⁵ The Indian stand was made clear in the aide memoir given to Premadasa by the new Indian High Commissioner in Colombo L. L. Mehrotra on June 3, just two days after Premadasa's speech at a Buddhist temple.¹⁶ It objected to the way in which a solemn bilateral commitment was dealt with and clarified that India did not appreciate settling issues, which were the subjects of serious discussions between the Governments at various levels, at a public square.

In the same first week of June, the Sri Lankan Foreign Secretary, Bernard Tilakaratne, visited New Delhi and delivered a message from President Premadasa, requesting the withdrawal of the IPKF by the end of July. Obviously, the call for withdrawal was made because of several domestic compulsions. On the one hand, the JVP was unleashing horrendous terror in the country; on the other hand, the LTTE demanded the withdrawal of the IPKF as the first step to any peace settlement with Colombo. Colombo, which once considered the IPKF as the safeguarding factor of the country's sovereignty and integrity, now saw it as a domestic liability which generated antagonisms and threatened the Government's stability. Every political actor in Sri Lanka was striving for a deal at the expense of India without giving any consideration whatever to the perfectly legal and legitimate role of India, ensured by a bilateral Agreement which could not be altered or rescinded unilaterally. The Indian government reacted that the

¹⁵K.K. Katyal, "IPKF: The Pull-out Puzzle," *The Hindu*, (June 19, 1989).

¹⁶*The Hindu*, June 13, 1989.

time-table indicated by Premadasa was not feasible and the presence of Indian troops was linked to the implementation of the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement.

The Indian position was that the Provincial Council had to be strengthened and more powers devolved so as to make Tamil self-Government a reality before considering the departure of the IPKF. But this was not to be achieved without disarming and bringing the LTTE into democratic politics. The LTTE, on the other hand, insisted on the IPKF's withdrawal and the dissolution of the Northeast Provincial Council as the conditions for peace. The JVP demanded the removal of Premadasa Government and fresh elections at neutral environment for stopping their carnage. There emerged an impasse with the impossible task of finding a solution acceptable to the various parties involved in the crisis. No solution seemed to be possible without the cooperation and consultation between the Indian and Sri Lankan Governments in the spirit of the Agreement.

Although Sri Lankan Foreign secretary, Bernard Tilakaratne, had agreed in his talks in New Delhi on a framework of negotiation and flexibility regarding the IPKF's withdrawal, the Foreign Minister, Wijeratne, reiterated within a few days at a press conference in Colombo that the decision of the Sri Lankan President was the only condition which needed to be satisfied for the IPKF pull-out and that that condition had been met. He argued: "our President has said Indian troops must go back, now they must go back."¹⁷ Soon after, Premadasa himself repeated this point on the national TV and added further that Sri Lanka could not go ahead and host the SAARC summit meeting, which was to be held in November, "as long as a foreign army remains within our shores."¹⁸

¹⁷*The Hindu*, June 10, 1989.

¹⁸K.K. Katyal in *The Hindu*, June 19, 1989.

The IPKF had made a big contribution, especially in terms of Indian soldiers' lives and enormous costs, in an attempt to resolve the island's ethnic conflict within the framework of national unity and sovereignty. The IPKF held the framework together and was decisive in the Tigers' desperate decision to come around Colombo. In fact, India had felt the need for reducing the heavy military burden and disengaging the IPKF within an early but realistic time frame, but the role of guaranteeing a solution to the historic ethnic conflict weighed heavily in India's thinking. The Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, had told the Army Commanders Conference as far back as April 24, 1989 that India was seriously thinking of withdrawing the bulk of the IPKF troops "as soon as possible, while preserving the gains that had been achieved."¹⁹ As mentioned earlier, some troops had been withdrawn since November 1988 and two battalions of IPKF were pulled out in the very first week of 1989. Although the disengaging of the IPKF had already been begun, India felt that the time frame must be a matter for bilateral discussion and negotiation. Delhi insisted on getting the two basic preconditions met by the time the IPKF left: first, the devolution of power must become a political and economic reality in the Northeast province; second, a feeling of security, safety and normality among the Tamils must be created in relation to the Sri Lankan Government and the several militant groups.²⁰

Premadasa was trying to put up an ultra-nationalist image in a desperate attempt to blunt the JVP challenge, which posed a grave threat to his Government. He not only ignored the facts that the Tigers had not given up their demand for a separate Tamil Eelam, and that they were unwilling to lay down arms but tried to destroy the EPRLF-led moderate combine as had always been the trend in Sinhala politics. It was ironic that

¹⁹Ibid, *The Hindu*, June 19, 1989.

²⁰*The Hindu*, June 10, 1989.

India, who had only Agreement obligations, had to be concerned about the territorial integrity of Sri Lanka and the creation of lasting peace in the country but the Sri Lankans themselves were utterly confused which way they were heading.

The statement of the Indian Foreign Office spokesman published on June 12 resented

several recent statements issued by Ministers and officials in Sri Lanka - some fixing unilateral and unrealistic time-frames for IPKF's withdrawal, others giving one-sided interpretations of various provisions said to govern such matters.

The statement affirmed India's firm commitment to the phased withdrawal of the IPKF "as soon as practicable" and went on to say:

We had in our statement on January 1, 1989 clearly stated that a phased withdrawal of the IPKF has started and that as the situation in the North-Eastern Province improves further, as the devolution of power becomes effective, as the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement gets progressively implemented, and as the mischief-making potential of extremist elements opposed to the Agreement is reduced, further withdrawals will be made in consultation with the Sri Lankan Government.²¹

While the Indian High Commission staff and other eminent Indians in Sri Lanka were spending a tense week in Colombo hotels, the country witnessed the public transport strike, called by a new pro-JVP union, Jathika Satang Madyasthanaya (Action Front) with 11 demands including a minimum monthly wage of 2,500 rupees. The Premadasa Government was concerned to reassure the workers who had stayed away from work under the intimidation of the strike leaders. The Government also became clearly aware that its anti-Indian posture had failed to appease the JVP. Moreover, there was an impending threat of JVP taking an upper hand in the crisis as both Premadasa's

²¹*The Hindu*, June 13, 1989.

own party men and the Sri Lankan military were growing weary of his Government. Hundreds of his own party men were getting killed in the hands of the JVP. According to the Foreign Minister, Ranjan Wijeratne's statement in the Parliament on June 20, 1,705 people had been killed including 650 men belonging to political parties and supporters and majority of them were related to the UNP.²² There was also increasing pressure from the police and army that they could not tackle the JVP without emergency powers. Pressured by the growing incidence of violence and the JVP's determined spurning of his reconciliatory gestures, Premadasa declared an emergency, which had been lifted only on January 11.

The debate on the emergency in the Sri Lankan Parliament once again proved how divided the country's politicians were. Anura Bandaranaike of the SLFP noted:

The Prime Minister of India, Mr. Rajiv Gandhi, has said again and again that the time-frame has been set unilaterally by Sri Lanka. Are you thinking you can fight India and win? Do not provoke India.

Amirthalingom of the TULF argued that the relations between India and Sri Lanka had been handled in the most amateurish manner by the Government and thought that the situation in the North and East would be much worse if the IPKF left in July, leaving the people exposed to lawless elements. But Lalith Athulathmudali, a senior Minister, said that if the IPKF were sent out, there would be unanimity among all parties.²³

Taking the bilateral issue to the international arena, the Sri Lankan Government decided not to attend the secretaries-level meeting and the SAARC Ministerial level meeting to be held in Islamabad in the last week of June as a protest against India's stand

²²*The Hindu*, June 22, 1989.

²³*The Hindu*, June 23, 1989.

on the IPKF pullout issue.²⁴ Premadasa repeated his call for the IPKF to withdraw by the end of July or stay confined to the barracks. He strongly believed that the IPKF's withdrawal would bring peace to the country and do away with the threat to his Government. But the truth of the matter was that the JVP was against both "Indian Imperialism" and Premadasa, who had been described as "Idi Amin" massacring the poor under the guise of poverty alleviation programme in the JVP bulletin "Red Power."²⁵ If their only aim was getting the Indian forces out, they should have strengthened the President's hands rather than weakening his Government by their wanton violence and "curfew" calls.

In what appeared to be a remarkable shift in attitude, on June 28, Premadasa told the Indian High Commissioner, L. L. Mehrotra, who had gone to hand over the Indian Prime Minister's letter, that he wanted to resolve any dispute with India in a spirit of cooperation. When the tensions that had crept into the Indo-Sri Lankan relations seemed to subside, the LTTE announced that it had decided to transform its ceasefire with the Sri Lankan Government into a cessation of hostilities and "to resolve all outstanding issues through negotiations and discussions." The Government negotiator, Minister for Science and Technology, A. C. S. Hameed, and the LTTE's representative, Anton Balasingham, agreed that all communities and groups in Sri Lanka should rally round the President and secure the withdrawal of the IPKF and that they should settle their problems through consultation, compromise and consensus without outside interference. The Indian Government felt that Colombo could not take such a decision without consulting New Delhi.²⁶ New Delhi was quite annoyed by the Premadasa Government's strategy and style

²⁴*The Hindu*, June 27, 1989.

²⁵*The Hindu*, June 27, 1989.

²⁶*The Hindu*, June 29, 1989.

of pursuing a policy of appeasement toward militants and terrorists, and hostile approach toward the bilateral framework of cooperation and friendship with a neighboring country. The Indian Government also took exception to the Sri Lankan attitude of rendering the IPKF into some kind of scapegoat.

Emphasizing right bilateral relations as a precondition for creating the necessary climate for discussions, the Sri Lankan Minister for Rural Industries Development, S. Thondaman, suggested in New Delhi that India and his country enter into a fresh accord to facilitate the withdrawal of the IPKF.²⁷ In the meantime, Premadasa, in response to the Indian Prime Minister's letter of July 11 sent through the Special Emissary B. G. Deshmukh, said that the military action by the Indian armed forces was "unnecessary and prejudicial to a settlement by discussion and negotiation." While expressing willingness to hold talks on the issue, he stressed that the pullout and devolution of powers were "totally unconnected."²⁸

The Sri Lankan Foreign Minister, Ranjan Wijeratne announced in his press briefing on July 13 that the IPKF had to be confined to the barracks by the end of July in compliance with the orders of the President of Sri Lanka, under whose disposal the services of the IPKF had been placed. Clarifying that the July 29 deadline stood good, the Foreign Minister added that the Indian troops deployed in the Northeast would be considered an "occupation army" and, according to a BBC report, Wijeratne even warned that the IPKF would be "forcibly ejected" if they did not withdraw by the end of July.²⁹

Meanwhile, the LTTE, who had been hopelessly entrenched in violence and

²⁷*The Hindu*, July 10, 1989.

²⁸*The Hindu*, July 14, 1989.

²⁹*The Hindu*, July 14, 1989.

terrorism, assassinated the TULF leaders Amirthalingom and Yogeswaran and seriously wounded the TULF president Sivasithambaram during a session of informal discussions in the latter's home on July 13. The Tigers, who had killed the TULF MPs Alalasundaram and Dharmalingam on September 5, 1985 and the leader of the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO), Sri Sabarathinam on May 5, 1986, had been hunting for Amirthalingom as he had participated in the DDC elections in 1983. There was another immediate reason also. When the Tigers tried, at the behest of the Sri Lankan Government, to enlist the TULF's support for the immediate withdrawal of the IPKF, the TULF leadership refused to toe their line.³⁰ Although the LTTE's London office denied any involvement, their posters in Jaffna idolized the assassins as martyrs and warned the public not to mourn the death of the TULF leaders as they had been supporters of the Agreement and the EPRLF Government.³¹

At this complicated backdrop, both India and Sri Lanka were heading for a confrontation. India was insistent that the Agreement must be implemented seriously and that the role of the IPKF must be viewed in linkage with the devolution of power to the Tamils. India felt that the "withdrawal schedule should be worked out through joint consultations along with a simultaneous schedule for the implementation of the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement."³² But Premadasa refused to negotiate the IPKF pullout issue, including the time schedule, with India and assumed an adamant unilateralist course which was clearly inconsistent with Colombo's stand until mid-April. India had been responding to the Sri Lankan leaders' and officials' postures, statements and actions the

³⁰*The Hindu*, July 18, 1989.

³¹*The Hindu*, July 22, 1989.

³²*The Hindu*, July 15, 1989.

way they deserved to be. Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's latest letter clarified firmly:

[I]f, however, discussions for this purpose are not acceptable to you; we will have to decide the details of (the) IPKF's withdrawal unilaterally consistent with our responsibilities and obligations under the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement.³³

Rajiv Gandhi commented in a press conference in New Delhi on July 17 that the situation in Sri Lanka was taking "dangerous directions" after Colombo's tendency to "backtrack on contractual obligations [undertaken] to devolve power to the Sri Lankan Tamils." He also noted that the manner in which Sri Lanka was conducting its relations with India was "sloppy" and that that was not the way to conduct relations between two countries.³⁴ The two-month long crisis in Indo-Sri Lanka relations rapidly worsened and threatened to lead to an open breach of relations between them. However, Premadasa, in a letter to the Indian Prime Minister delivered in New Delhi by the Sri Lankan High Commissioner on July 20, had agreed not to press for the July 29 deadline provided a time schedule for a phased withdrawal of the IPKF was announced by India. At the same time, a Marchette bomber aircraft of the Sri Lankan Air Force carried out dummy attacks on the IPKF headquarters and air base in Vavuniya on July 20, Thursday night. Although the IPKF sources knew that it was an obvious attempt to provoke the IPKF, they did not react.³⁵

Eventually, the crisis was resolved after five days of hectic diplomatic activity which began on July 24 and was highlighted by the signing of a joint communique by the

³³*The Hindu*, July 15, 1989.

³⁴*The Hindu*, July 18, 1989.

³⁵*The Hindu*, July 22, 1989.

Indian High Commissioner, L. L. Mehrotra, and the Sri Lankan Foreign Secretary, Bernard Tilekeratne, in the presence of President Premadasa on July 28. Sri Lanka dropped all the previous conditions such as the deadline for withdrawal of the IPKF in its entirety, the cessation of hostilities by the IPKF, and the acceptance of the Sri Lankan President as the Commander-in-Chief of all forces operating in Sri Lanka. In return, India recommenced the withdrawal of the IPKF, which it had suspended following Premadasa's speech on June 1 demanding the complete pullout of the IPKF, by July 29, 1989. A high level Sri Lankan delegation, headed by Foreign Minister, Ranjan Wijeratne, left for New Delhi on July 29 to "review the implementation of the Indo-Sri Lanka agreement," and to discuss "the question of cessation of offensive military operations by the IPKF and the safety and security of all communities in the North-eastern province."³⁶

At the talks in New Delhi, Wijeratne termed the agreement on the joint communique as a victory for both the nations and the Indian Foreign Minister, Narasimha Rao, expressed his confidence that the two countries would tide over any problem through discussions as in the past. The token IPKF withdrawal was also fulfilled when a ship fetched some 620 IPKF troops from Trincomalee, a port city in the east of Sri Lanka, back to India.³⁷

The Indian Prime Minister, while talking to correspondents on August 19, observed: "Just moving out and leaving a vacuum is not really a solution. Before the IPKF moves out something else must be ready to move in." Expressing India's worry about the safety and security of Tamils and the possible division of Sri Lanka, he also disclosed that the Sri Lankan Government was considering what kind of replacement should be made

³⁶*The Hindu*, July 29, 1989.

³⁷*The Hindu*, July 30, 1989.

after the withdrawal of the IPKF.³⁸ New Delhi and Colombo signed an accord on Monday (September 17?) on the withdrawal of about 41,000 Indian soldiers; India agreed to a ceasefire with the LTTE, and Colombo along with a provincial police force would take over security control from Indian forces. While Sri Lanka held the accord as an assurance by India for complete pullout by December 31, India claimed withdrawal depended on peace being established in the Northeast.³⁹

Observers doubted if Indian pullout would end violence in the Northeast as the LTTE was bent on turning their guns on rival groups who they accused of collaborating with India. Besides the JVP and the LTTE, who were holding the whole country to ransom, there were right-wing death squads with names such as Black Cats and Green Tigers going on a killing spree in the country. Independent sources claimed that the death toll in the country averaged about 30 a day.⁴⁰ More than 11,000 people had been killed since the Tamil insurrection started in 1983. The brutal JVP launched their uprising after the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement and more than 5,000 people lost their lives in this backlash.⁴¹ The largest Tamil guerrilla group, the LTTE, disclosed that 659 of its fighters were slain during the two years of combat against the IPKF, who lost 1,100 soldiers and officers.⁴² Another estimate claims that since 1983 some 17,000 people have died in Sri Lanka and the murder rate was running at more than 100 per 100,000 - 0.1% of the population.⁴³

³⁸*The Times of India*, August 21, 1989.

³⁹*Arab News*, September 19, 1989.

⁴⁰*Arab News*, September 19, 1989.

⁴¹*Arab News*, October 2, 1989.

⁴²*Arab News*, October 11, 26, 1989

⁴³*The Economist*, October 7-13, 1989.

The Premadasa Government convened an all-party conference on September 12, but JVP refused to take part in it. Colombo declared a unilateral three-day ceasefire on September 27 and extended for another three days to allow the JVP to give up violence and hold peace talks. But the rebels spurned all peace gestures, defied the truce and went on killing with passion. Having no other alternative, the Government resumed its operation against the JVP. The JVP chief Rohana Wijeweera and ten other top leaders were all liquidated by the Sri Lankan army in mid-November.

Meanwhile, India pulled out some 5,000 IPKF soldiers from the eastern district of Amparai leaving security officially in the hands of the police and the Civilian Volunteer Force. As the IPKF left, the new Tamil National Army, created by the EPRLF and the TELO to fill that vacuum established 13 camps of 100 fighters each in several areas of Amparai.⁴⁴ The internecine fighting among the Tamil guerrilla groups flared up when the LTTE attacked these camps.⁴⁵ The Sri Lankan Foreign Minister, Wijeratne, blamed India for the Amparai clashes claiming that India had refused to deploy the Sri Lankan army before the IPKF's withdrawal. The Indian Prime Minister described Wijeratne's charge as ridiculous.⁴⁶

The change of government in Delhi offered the best opportunity for a breakthrough in Indo-Sri Lankan relationship. In fact, that was the first big challenge V. P. Singh Government faced on the external front. The outbreak of fighting between the Tamil groups, the fresh influx of refugees into Tamil Nadu, the grim picture of the security situation in the Northeast all together made the new Government non-committal about

⁴⁴*Arab News*, October 27, 1989.

⁴⁵*New York Times*, November 6, 1989.

⁴⁶*The Hindu (International Edition)*, November 18, 1990.

the IPKF pullout. Both the Tigers, who bade the dominant position in the Northeast affairs, and the EPRLF, who had run the administration during the tough period, were flexing their muscles for an all-out fight. Both the two outstanding features of the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement, namely the devolution of powers to the North-Eastern Provincial Government and the enhancement of security, had faltered. On the other hand, Sri Lankan Government had been insisting on the new deadline of December 31. In view of the whole situation, New Delhi adopted a new strategy and asked the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, M. Karunanidhi of the DMK, who were also partners in the coalition Government of Vishwanath Pratap Singh, to play the important initial role of uniting all the Tamil groups, especially bringing the LTTE and the EPRLF to truce. The efforts obviously failed and the EPRLF-controlled North-Eastern Provincial Council announced its decision to constitute itself into the "National State Assembly of the free and sovereign democratic republic of Eelam" which India quickly repudiated.⁴⁷

The Sri Lankan Foreign Minister, Ranjan Wijeratne, held talks on December 8 with the new Indian Prime Minister, V. P. Singh, who required "the whole spirit should be one of trust and cooperation and of joint endeavour and mutual fulfillment of obligations assumed by both Governments."⁴⁸ When Premadasa, in his felicitation to the new Government in Delhi, had expressed hope of removing the strains and restoring relations "to their traditional cordiality and friendship," Foreign Minister Wijeratne hit out at Indian bureaucrats and questioned the integrity of the IPKF officials in a press conference in Colombo.⁴⁹

⁴⁷*The Hindu (International Edition)*, March 10, 1989.

⁴⁸*The Hindu (International Edition)*, December 16, 1989.

⁴⁹*The Hindu (International Edition)*, December 9, 30, 1989

The Sri Lankan Foreign Minister, Wijeratne, held talks with the Indian Government again and commented "bearing in mind the compulsions of both sides there must be a growing understanding of each other's problems." But the Chief Minister of the North-Eastern Provincial Council in Sri Lanka demanded that the Government of India should complete the steps for the devolution of powers to the Council and institutional arrangements be made for the permanent security of the Tamils before Delhi de-inducted the IPKF.⁵⁰

While the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister tried to bring all the Tamil groups to some understanding, the LTTE's deputy leader, K. Mahendraraja termed the other groups as "stooges of India" and indicated that they were not for reaching an agreement with them.⁵¹ The Tigers, who had formed a new political party, the People's Front of Liberation Tigers (PFLT)⁵², wanted the dissolution of the EPRLF Government in the North-Eastern Province and disbandment of the newly-created Tamil National Army, whom they considered to be a force created to destroy them. Besides their common demand regarding the TNA, both Colombo and the Tigers insisted on the speedy withdrawal of IPKF. The EPRLF held immediate devolution of power as the precondition for meeting the Tigers' demand of their resignation and accused the LTTE of being an "instrument of the Sri Lankan forces against the Tamils."⁵³ Both Delhi and Colombo held each other responsible for arming the TNA and the LTTE respectively. New Delhi was faced with different sets of demands from the Sri Lankan Government, the North-Eastern Provincial Government and the

⁵⁰*The Hindu (International Edition)*, January 20, 1990.

⁵¹*The Hindu (International Edition)*, January 20, 1990.

⁵²The party was said to have created "to fight for the right of self-determination of the Tamils and Muslims." *The Hindu (International Edition)*, December 30, 1989.

⁵³*The Hindu (International Edition)*, January 13, 1989.

LTTE, and had to tackle its own national interest.

But the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister blamed India for the failure of the whole peace plan because the IPKF could not disarm the Tamil groups, although "under the accord, it is their duty. That is why the Indo-Sri Lankan agreement had not been fulfilled."⁵⁴ Both the Foreign Ministers had concluded in New Delhi in early January that March 31 would be a firm deadline for the complete pullout of the IPKF given the logistical problems involved in the departure. Asking for advancing the pullout to January 31, Wijeratne said: "We left it in the hands of the External Affairs Minister and the Indian Prime Minister to see if it was possible to move the forces out speedily."⁵⁵

IPKF Withdrawal

Nonetheless, India kept to its March 31st deadline and the number of troops was brought down to 10,000 in February from the peak of 45,000. The IPKF's last contingent of about 2,500 personnel left Trincomalee, completing the de-induction one week ahead of schedule.

Speaking at a farewell lunch to the IPKF chief hosted by the Indian High Commissioner in Sri Lanka, the former President of the island, Jayewardene thanked the IPKF profusely for its services and said that his country could never forget the Indian soldiers who had laid down their lives in the north and east. He recalled that the IPKF had come at his specific invitation. The General Officer Commanding of the IPKF, Lt. Gen. A. S. Kalkat said that the IPKF had not "compromised with any party which did not swear to uphold the unity and integrity of this nation." He summed up the IPKF

⁵⁴*The Hindu (International Edition)*, January 13, 1990.

⁵⁵*The Hindu (International Edition)*, January 20, 1990.

operation in Sri Lanka: "When we went in, it was an island of despair. When we return now, it is an island of hope." Assessing the IPKF's operations, the LTTE's deputy leader told the editor of the "Lanka Guardian" that "the IPKF under-estimated the resistance capacity and will of the LTTE and its links with the people."⁵⁶

As the Arab News editorially noted, "Indians first intervened to save the Tigers from the Sinhalese and then the Sinhalese from the Tigers and ended up by being opposed by both."⁵⁷ But the paper agrees: "Whatever one thinks of the Indian presence, it undoubtedly brought a welcome degree of peace and order. The real tragedy is that Sri Lanka was unable to use the Indian interlude to build a lasting peace....Peace was hostage to the irreconcilable demands of the Tamil and Sinhalese extremists."⁵⁸ Even J. R. Jayewardene consented in a newspaper interview that the peace accord with India was in the best interest of the nation at that time.⁵⁹

When India intervened in Sri Lanka, Colombo was seeking a military solution to the Tamil problem causing immense damage to the lives and properties of the minority community in the north and east of the island nation. The Tamils too had adopted an uncompromising attitude toward Colombo and were keen on forming the separate state of Tamil Eelam. Both were against the interests of India as they could have direct political bearing on India where some 55 million Tamils lived. India was keen on having the Tamil issue solved politically within the united Sri Lanka, which would maintain friendly relations for obvious geopolitical considerations. The Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement stopped

⁵⁶*The Hindu (International Edition)*, March 31, 1990.

⁵⁷*Arab News*, October 8, 1989.

⁵⁸*Arab News*, February 2, 1990.

⁵⁹*The Hindu (International Edition)*, February 17, 1990.

the military solution option by confining the Sri Lankan army to the barracks and brought the Tamil groups around with renewal of their allegiance to the integrity of Sri Lanka. Some groups did that voluntarily in a democratic exercise and the main Tamil group, the LTTE, was forced to approach the Colombo Government whom they had vehemently despised and fought with. The two warring and irreconcilable parties, the Sinhala polity and the LTTE, were brought to direct negotiations in a totally unintended way as the implementation of the Agreement took unexpected turns because of the same two parties.