

## Colombo crisis poses dilemmas for Indian government

# New Delhi offers to mediate in Sri Lanka

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After equivocating for several days, the Indian government announced over the weekend that it was prepared to act as mediator in the deepening military conflict in Sri Lanka as long as this was agreed by both sides—the Colombo government and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). At the same time, however, India has firmly turned down Sri Lankan requests for military assistance in fighting the LTTE or help in evacuating its 35,000 to 40,000 troops from the north of the Jaffna peninsula in the event of fresh military defeats.

Since April 22 the Sri Lankan army has suffered one military debacle after another—first the loss of the strategic Elephant Pass military complex at the southern end of the Jaffna peninsula, then a week later the fall of the Pallai army base. On Wednesday, fierce fighting took place just three kilometres from the centre of Jaffna town—the second largest city in Sri Lanka and home to around half a million people. The Sri Lankan military are desperate to retain control of Palali airport just to the north of Jaffna—its only supply link to the south of the island.

The crisis in Sri Lanka puts India in a dilemma. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government is under pressure to intervene. If Jaffna falls it would greatly strengthen LTTE's claims for a separate Tamil statelet in the north and east of Sri Lanka and would encourage separatist sentiment in India itself, particularly among the Tamil-speaking population of Tamil Nadu state. Moreover to leave Sri Lanka to its own devices could allow other countries to step in and undermine the ambitions of New Delhi to establish India as the key regional powerbroker.

On the other hand, the NDA coalition led by the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) faces opposition within its own ranks to any overt intervention in Sri Lanka to forestall an LTTE victory. Three Tamil Nadu-based parties—the Dravida Munnethra Kazagam (DMK), Marumalarchi Dravida Munnethra Kazagam (MDMK) and Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK)—which are crucial to the survival of the government, have all opposed support for Colombo to one degree or another. Together these parties have 28 MPs in the Lok Sabha or lower house of the Indian parliament. Other senior NDA figures such as Defence Minister George Fernandes are publicly identified as supporters of the LTTE.

Furthermore, the Indian ruling class as a whole is wary about any direct military involvement in the Sri Lankan conflict after the bitter experience of its last intervention. Under the Indo-Lanka Accord signed in 1987, India dispatched troops to the north of Sri Lanka to impose a settlement on the Tamil population but rapidly came into conflict with the LTTE. During the subsequent fighting the Indian army lost some 1,200 dead and 3,500 wounded before being finally forced to withdraw in 1990 after relations with the Sri Lankan

government soured.

In an article in the Indian weekly *Outlook*, Lieutenant General A.S. Kalkat, who commanded the Indian troops in 1987, warned against any repeat. "For the Indian government today, whose constituent parties in the 1989 general election had their manifestos opposing our involvement in Sri Lanka and called for IPKF withdrawal, the [present] Lankan request is 'political dynamite'. Military involvement is not an option," he wrote. "In the event Sri Lanka's unable to manage the situation and looks to the West for military intervention it would imply having a foreign military presence in our backyard with its own agenda. Our government has a difficult task ahead—it's a tightrope walk between its domestic, foreign and defence compulsions."

In a bid to defuse the "political dynamite," at home at least, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee called all-party meeting on Monday which was attended by representatives of all the government allies and major opposition parties including the Congress Party and the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI). After the meeting, Minister for Parliamentary Affairs Pramod Mahajan announced that a consensus had emerged: opposition to either Indian military intervention or the breakup of Sri Lanka, and support for a peaceful negotiated solution and full protection for the island's Tamil minority.

According to reports in the Indian press, all present supported the close monitoring of the situation "to ensure there was no third party intervention". Concerns were apparently expressed that the Sri Lankan government had turned to Israel and India's rival Pakistan for military assistance. Last week Sri Lanka reestablished diplomatic relations with Israel in a bid to get rapid access to military supplies.

But tensions emerged at the meeting between the BJP and its Tamil Nadu allies. Questioned on the government's attitude to the LTTE's demand for independence, Vajpayee categorically stated that India was not for a separate Eelam, and that it favoured a solution to the crisis "within the framework of Sri Lanka's unity and territorial integrity." The MDMK leader Y. Kopalaswamy, also known as Vaiko, made clear that his party wanted the recognition of Eelam and insisted "we have a fundamental right to say what we want without embarrassing the government, and this right cannot be curtailed."

The conflicts were simmering prior to the meeting. DMK leader Karunanidhi, who is also Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, had taken offence that the Indian government did not consult him or the three DMK cabinet ministers before taking the initial decision in New Delhi to mediate. He stated in the Tamil Nadu state assembly that the "Sinhala" armies, who were murdering the Tamils in Jaffna, should not be helped in any way. The assembly meeting was the scene of vituperative attacks on any attempt to mitigate the consequences of the LTTE's victory.

Last Saturday Karunanidhi moderated his stance after a 90-minute

meeting with Vajpayee. “Seri (OK),” he said to the national government's request to keep out of the conflict in Sri Lanka. “Our party will not tie the hands of the central government... It is the centre's prerogative to take any approach in the interest of the nation... we do not want to interfere with that”.

The MDMK leader Kopalaswamy also toned down his position after a meeting with NDA leaders. “I am happy about the government sending humanitarian aid to Jaffna,” he said. Significantly he appeared to have gained some assurances that India would do nothing to assist the Sri Lankan military. “All I can say is that nothing that will go against the interests of the Lankan Tamils will be done,” he said.

The parties may have temporarily backed away from an open conflict but the tensions remain and could easily flare again as the military situation in northern Sri Lanka changes. On Wednesday, the PMK leader S. Ramdoss urged the Indian government to lift the current ban on the LTTE as a terrorist organisation, put in place after assassination of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi by an LTTE suicide bomber in 1991.

The BJP is also likely to come under pressure from its allies among various Hindu extremist organisations wanting it to back the “Hindu” Tamils of the LTTE against “Buddhist” Sinhalese in the south. On Tuesday, one such organisation Shiv Sena, based in Maharashtra, held a meeting in Bombay with MDMK representatives after which its leader Bal Thackeray announced that he had “full support” for the LTTE, which had been “fighting for a just cause”.

As well as doing a domestic political balancing act, the BJP-led government is also seeking to bolster India's position on the subcontinent and in doing so has to thread its way through a maze of the conflicting international interests. If New Delhi is to play the role of mediator then it has to have the backing of the major powers and ensure that it has no rivals.

Earlier in the year, Norway, acting at least with the tacit support of the major European powers, launched its own attempt to broker a peace deal between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. Norwegian officials, including the country's foreign minister, made two visits to Colombo for talks but failed to establish more than a general agreement to begin the negotiating process.

Norway's special envoy Erik Solheim was due to arrive in New Delhi yesterday for talks about Sri Lanka. The BJP government has already indicated some displeasure over Norway's independent initiative in Sri Lanka. Even before the visit, the *Statesman* newspaper noted the chilly Indian response.

“India is, however, cool to the initiative and Mr Solheim, during his one-day stopover, may get to meet only external affairs officials and not any senior politician or Cabinet minister... The government's lukewarm response to Mr Solheim suggests that India has decided not to accord too much importance to the Norwegian initiative to discuss the Lankan situation. The External Affairs Minister, Mr Jaswant Singh, has said last week that India did not think Norway's role of facilitator had much chance of success in the prevailing circumstances.”

India's growing ties with the US were evident during the recent Clinton visit to the Indian subcontinent when the US president all but snubbed Pakistan—a former Cold War ally and India's rival. Now the US appears to be turning to India, in preference to Norway, to mediate between Colombo and the LTTE.

Jaswant Singh indicated to the all-party meeting on Monday that the Clinton administration had informed New Delhi that the US would

support “whatever India does”. The *Hindu* newspaper quoted the US official sources as saying: “Washington takes India's views on Sri Lanka very seriously and would not want to do anything that might go against India's interests.” US undersecretary of state Thomas Pickering is due in India later this month and may include Colombo on his itinerary.

India has also reportedly been engaged in a frenzy of behind-the-scenes diplomatic moves designed to strengthen its position as the crisis in Sri Lanka deepens. It has been contacted not only with the US but also Britain, France and other EU members as well as Russia and Israel. That the major powers are pushing for a negotiated halt to the conflict is indicated by the statement of UN Secretary General Kofi Annan this week expressing concern over the situation in Sri Lanka and its “humanitarian consequences”.

Colombo has already indicated its willingness to accept India as a mediator. On May 9, the Sri Lankan High Commissioner in New Delhi, Mangala Moonesingha, welcomed the Indian offer to mediate: “India is a regional power and has a lot of clout ... the entire Sri Lankan constituency would favour it.” The sharp military defeats have also produced a rapid about face in the attitude of extreme Sinhala chauvinists to Indian intervention. Colombo's “Saffron Brigade”—Buddhist monks clad in saffron robes—who vociferously opposed the use of Indian troops in 1987, are now making ardent public appeals to New Delhi for military assistance to Sri Lanka.

The nature of India's intervention in Sri Lanka depends on many factors, not least of which is the military situation on the Jaffna peninsula. A military collapse of the Sri Lankan army resulting in a disastrous loss of soldiers and equipment would radically alter the whole political equation and compel all those involved, including India, to make a major reassessment overnight.

The BJP government has committed itself only to “humanitarian assistance”. But according to Indian Defence Minister Fernandes, the country's armed forces have been prepared to meet any eventuality. Media reports indicate that substantial supplies have been moved to the Trivandrum in the southern state of Kerala. The Indian Air Force's Southern Air Command has been put on the alert to provide aid to Jaffna. Air Force helicopters and heavy transport aircraft have also been moved south. Communication links have been established with hot-line facilities to the Indian High Commission in Colombo, military headquarters in New Delhi and the air command in Trivandrum.

When and for what purpose these preparations will be set in motion will have nothing to do with the plight of people on the Jaffna peninsula. Extremely limited news reports describe tens of thousands of people in the area already experiencing difficulties getting adequate food and water. As was the case in the Balkans last year, “humanitarian concern” can be used as the pretext for both the major powers and their more minor allies to prosecute their strategic and economic interests with cynical disregard for the impact on the lives of ordinary working people.



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