

Indian foreign minister's balancing act in Colombo

Dianne Sturgess**16 June 2000**

Indian External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh arrived in Sri Lanka on June 11 for talks with the government and other political leaders about the ongoing war in the north and east of the country. The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has made significant military advances against the Sri Lankan military over the last two months.

Singh's visit involved a delicate balancing act between conflicting pressures, both inside India and internationally. The US and Europe have been urging the Indian government of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to intervene more vigorously in Sri Lanka to bring about a negotiated end to the war on the basis of maintaining the unitary Sri Lankan state. India and the major powers fear that any concession to the creation of a separate LTTE-dominated state will encourage secessionist movements elsewhere on the Indian subcontinent.

India, which has ambitions to become the dominant regional power, is also keen to prevent any of its rivals from using the crisis in Sri Lanka to gain a foothold on the island. New Delhi will certainly have noted that Sri Lanka has received arms from both Pakistan and China. Colombo has publicly praised Pakistan for coming to its aid in its hour of need by selling sophisticated weapons and ammunition. China has donated multi-barrelled rocket launchers to the Sri Lankan military.

At the same time, the Indian government faces pressure from within its own ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Several of the coalition partners are based in the southern state of Tamil Nadu where there is considerable sympathy for the plight of the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka.

Only a week ago, the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, M. Karunanidhi, whose DMK party is an NDA partner, provoked deep concerns in both New Delhi and

Colombo over his call for a division of Sri Lanka along the lines of the breakup of the former Czechoslovakia. The potentially damaging rift was quickly patched up, publicly at least, but the Indian government has been cautious not to be seen to directly aid the Sri Lankan military in its war against the LTTE.

Singh held talks over two days with President Chandrika Kumaratunga, Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadiragamar, Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe and the leaders of some Tamil parties. A joint statement issued by the Foreign Ministry in Colombo on the evening of June 12 provided Kumaratunga's Peoples Alliance government with crucial political and economic support. It remained limited, however.

Singh reassured Kumaratunga of "India's continued commitment to the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka" and the "support of India to the restoration of a lasting peace through a political settlement". India announced the provision of credit to Colombo to the tune of \$US100 million in addition to providing a facility to purchase wheat, rice and sugar on a counter trade basis from India.

With an eye to its allies in Tamil Nadu, India has insisted that the economic aid is for "humanitarian purposes only". Publicly the Indian government can claim that it is not assisting Colombo's war effort. Privately, of course, it does so with a nod and wink to the Sri Lankan government. Everyone knows full well that the money will go a long way to helping the Colombo Treasury out of a deep hole.

Sri Lanka's foreign reserves have dwindled to a level only sufficient to cover normal imports of two and a half months. Recent huge purchases of weaponry, aimed at preventing a complete collapse of the army on the Jaffna peninsula, have left the country on the verge

of bankruptcy.

According to the joint statement, “President Kumaratunga welcomed India's offer to be of assistance in the humanitarian as well as economic sphere to ease any constraints that may be currently faced by Sri Lanka.” The Sri Lankan government understands that the offer allows not only for humanitarian assistance but also for economic aid to the Colombo regime to boost its expenditure on more modern weaponry.

In mid-May, the *Times of India* reported that Kumaratunga had been in tears during discussions with visiting Indian Air Force Chief Tipnis during which she asked for Indian military assistance. But she was clearly buoyed by the outcome of the talks with Singh. She welcomed India's commitment to the unity of Sri Lanka.

Obviously, however, the Colombo government was looking for more. Since the fall of Elephant Pass army base in April, there have been calls from extreme right-wing groups, including the Buddhist hierarchy, for India's direct military involvement. So far the Indian government has refused to provide direct military aid, no doubt concerned at the reaction of Tamil parties in the ruling NDA.

When asked during an interview with the *Hindu* newspaper if she felt betrayed by the refusal of India to provide military aid, Kumaratunga said: “In politics, one does not feel betrayed by anything or anybody. Obviously, one asks hoping that the other party will say yes. If not, one would never ask... I have always said that India has a crucial role to play in South Asia...”

Nevertheless, the limited character of India's involvement has drawn sharp criticism in Sri Lanka's ruling circles. In an editorial on June 14, the *Island* newspaper commented: “Humanitarian assistance and credit facilities offered by Mr. Singh are not among Sri Lanka's priorities right now... Fond hopes, wishes and buttering deep fissures with soothing diplomatic jargon is not Sri Lanka's need of the hour. We must ask all our well-wishers to help us in concrete terms to overcome this crisis. It is fairly obvious that what we need from our closest neighbour is a massive contribution in armaments. If that is not forthcoming we have to look elsewhere. Diplomatic gobbledegook will not do.”

By threatening to “look elsewhere,” sections of the Sri Lankan ruling class are clearly hoping to force the Indian government to more directly support the brutal

war against the Tamils in the north and east. Under the 1987 Indo-Lankan Accord, India dispatched thousands of troops as part of a so-called peacekeeping force to police the Tamil population in the north and east of the island. But the deal quickly broke down, leading to bitter fighting with the LTTE that resulted in hundreds of Indian casualties and eventually forced India's withdrawal. That experience is another reason why India is reluctant to get involved too quickly again.



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