

# Indo Sri Lanka talks closer to reality. (1989, August 31). *India Today*.

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Photographs by PRASHANT PANJABI

INDO-SRI LANKA TALKS

## Closer to Reality

Despite differences a solution is emerging

**I**N no other diplomatic situation would failure indicate success, however elusive it may prove. But the Sri Lankan imbroglio is unique enough to produce its own paradoxes. The week-long dialogue between India and Sri Lanka last fortnight on the prickly issue of withdrawal of the 45,000-strong Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) was officially logged as a failure. Yet, it did succeed in nudging the differences between the two countries over the withdrawal issue onto a more realistic framework.

Though the gap between what India wants and what Colombo is willing to give is still a yawning one, the fact that both sides have climbed down from their earlier obdurate stand is clear indication that pragmatism is slowly replacing the hysteria and hype. As one member of the Indian delegation remarked: "At least now both countries understand the compulsions on each side much better."

For that, major credit must go to Colombo. In a situation where saving diplomatic and domestic face was of prime importance, the decision to send a team of negotiators led by hard-nosed Foreign Minister Ranjan Wijeratne was not just timely but courageous. Moreover, when the sixth day of the talks hit a serious logjam, it was Premadasa's telephone call to Wijeratne that extended the negotiations and eased the tension.

The major sticking point was the conditions demanded by New Delhi for agreeing to pull out the IPKF from Sri Lanka. New Delhi is willing to effect a withdrawal of the IPKF at around 1,500 or 1,600 a week which gives it around seven months to pull out all its troops. The withdrawal, however, is conditional on other demands which include:

▶ A speedier and more substantial devolution of power to the provincial councils.

▶ The LTTE to effect a cease-fire that will be closely monitored. The IPKF will stop operations for 15 days which will be extended if the LTTE does not violate it.

▶ The setting up of a peace committee.

**The positive fall-out of the talks between the two countries is that the communication gap has been bridged.**

comprising the chief minister of the north-eastern province, the commander of the Sri Lankan Army, the general officer commanding of the IPKF and the Sri Lankan inspector general of police to ensure security for the Tamils.

Colombo's final response will only be communicated after the current debate on the proposals in the Sri Lankan Parliament. But the official stand at the Delhi talks clearly outlined the differences. Colombo wants Delhi to withdraw its troops by mid-September. If this is delayed for logistic reasons by India, the IPKF should be confined to their

Indian and Lankan delegations at the talks

barracks. The Sri Lankan side also wants an immediate cease-fire by the IPKF and is staunchly opposed to linking the withdrawal

issue with the devolution process.

Colombo has, however, agreed to grant more powers to the provincial councils and is also agreeable to the setting up of a peace committee. Not surprisingly, considering the recent rapprochement between Colombo and the LTTE, the Sri Lankans insisted that a Tiger representative be included in the committee. It has also suggested that the governor of the province rather than the chief minister be a member. In the north-eastern context, this is significant. The governor is Colombo's man while the chief minister, Varadaraja Perumal, is largely dependant on New Delhi.

Obviously, there is a potential minefield to traverse before a final compromise can be hammered out. New Delhi's stand has been taken with a nervous eye on the approaching general elections. For Sri Lanka, the compulsions are even stronger. The daily death roll in the JVP-inspired violence has reached dangerous levels and undermined Premadasa's Government where he can no longer act without taking the opposition parties into account.

Despite that, there is a light now faintly visible at the end of the tunnel. "It's no longer a case of who blinks first. It's now a question of cutting losses. With mutual adjustments, it should be possible to work out a compromise," says a member of the Indian delegation.

But considering Sri Lanka's volatile domestic brew, the chances of unravelling the diplomatic tangle still rest on a

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razor's edge. Colombo has so far been tardy about devolving power to the provincial councils (see interview). Another major hurdle is Premadasa's recent peace talks with the LTTE. According to sources, Premadasa has provisionally offered the Tigers a devolution package that gives them autonomy close to what the Canadian Government has given the French-speaking province of Quebec. Implicit in that is the understanding that the LTTE will head the

provincial council, something New Delhi will not allow as long as the IPKF and Perumal are around.

Colombo is also likely to insist on its demand that the IPKF remain confined to the barracks. If all else fails, Sri Lanka also still has the option of calling for international support or going to the United Nations. But that seems unlikely now that the two sides have met and made their respective positions clear. In an informal chat with visitors last week,

Rajiv admitted that: "We got an understanding of the serious problems that Sri Lanka faces."

Till now, much of the hyper-hostility between Delhi and Colombo has largely been because of the serious communication gap. With both sides having agreed to maintain closer contacts from now on, at least one vital bridge has been built. Considering Sri Lanka's volatile condition, that alone represents a giant step forward.

—DILIP BOBB

