

The Tamils Tigers' Threat, (1985, April 22). *Time*

World

SRI LANKA

The Tamil Tigers' Threat

Separatist guerrillas and the army gird for a showdown battle

The buildup began in February. In the dead of night, 200 men in camouflage uniforms, each carrying a new AK-47 rifle and two grenades, left their secret training camps in India and gathered by the edge of the sea. At a quiet command, they slipped into plastic, wide-bottomed boats and set off, guided by fishermen who steered by the stars. In less than two hours, the fighters had crossed 26 miles of the Palk Strait and were wading ashore, ready to wage war in Sri Lanka.

Virtually every night since then, small groups of guerrillas have stolen across the waters to prepare for a showdown battle with the Sri Lankan army. Last week the war all but broke out. First the rebels, who

garrisoned by nearly half the 12,000-man-strong Sri Lankan army. Since the collapse of negotiations between the government of President J.R. Jayawardene and leading Tamil politicians last December, more than 700 people, mostly civilians, have been killed. Says Lalith Athulathmudali, Jayawardene's Minister of National Security: "This is the most dangerous time Sri Lanka has ever known."

The danger has been building ever since Sri Lanka won independence from Britain 37 years ago. As the Tamils see it, discrimination by the Sinhalese majority has gradually eroded their political rights. "The Tamils," says a U.S. official, "have been on the losing end of Sri Lankan de-

army, face to face, in conventional infantry warfare," says Athulathmudali. "How I wish they would. I am ready. The army is ready." That sentiment is not echoed by all Sri Lankan officers. "We do not have enough troops," says Brigadier Hamilton Wanasinghe, the military commander for the Jaffna peninsula. "We are building our strength, but it will take time."

A military problem even more serious than lack of manpower is absence of discipline: bloody transgressions by government forces have sorely aggravated tensions. The International Commission of Jurists reported early this year that in response to Tiger attacks, the army often "went berserk and resorted to arbitrary shootings and killings of Tamils." Last December, for example, after a soldier was killed in the northern Mannar district, his comrades went on a rampage, shooting anyone in sight and leaving more than 100 Tamil civilians dead. Tamil women have been raped. Hindu temples put to the torch. In all, the commission cited 74 instances over a period of five months of soldiers indiscriminately firing on civilians. The government's policy of offering a \$200 prize for each Tiger killed has served only to incite further army abuses. "What is the government trying to achieve here in Jaffna?" a local newspaper asked. "Drive all the people into the arms of the militants?"

The military's excesses have not only radicalized Tamils, they have also alarmed Sri Lanka's friends. The U.S., mindful of the island's strategic location, continues to back Jayawardene's pro-Western government but is not holding out the prospect of U.S. military aid. India, home to almost 50 million Tamils of its own, insists that it does not favor the creation of a separate Eelam but turns a blind eye to at least 20 training camps in India run by the Tigers.

Most experts in the region expect that the insurgents will eventually prevail in an all-out confrontation with the army. Should the guerrillas effectively seize control of the north of the island, Jayawardene might be forced to step down in favor of a government more sympathetic to Tamil grievances. "The initiative now lies with the forces of violence," says a Sri Lankan colonel. "We would be stupid not to admit that they have the strength to do what they want." But Western analysts also suspect that if the Tigers, whose politics range from Marxism to Tamil nationalism, do manage to triumph, they may find themselves unable to remain united, let alone administer their newly won territory. For the moment, however, such long-term considerations do not keep the guerrillas from pursuing more immediate goals. "When we begin the major assault," warns K. Umamaheswaran, a Tiger leader, "there will be no turning back. We want to see Sinhalese soldiers dead on the ground." —By Pico Iyer. Reported by Dean

Brelis/Colombo



Sinhalese soldiers stand guard over a train blasted by Tamil insurgents

"This is the most dangerous time Sri Lanka has ever known."

represent the island's 2.6 million mostly Hindu Tamils in a separatist struggle against 11 million mainly Buddhist Sinhalese, killed three civilians whom they suspected of being government informers. Then they planted a bomb that ripped apart sections of a train in the capital, Colombo. Finally, hundreds of the so-called Tamil Tigers cut off electricity in the northern city of Jaffna, blasted the town hall and municipal offices with explosives and attacked the heavily fortified police station. After the biggest battle of the year, said a government spokesman, 21 Tamils and five policemen were dead.

Over the past two years, the guerrillas' increasingly intensive struggle to win an independent homeland (known in Tamil as Eelam) within the northern and south-eastern parts of the island has brought Sri Lanka perilously close to full-scale civil war. Today much of Sri Lanka's northern region, which is heavily populated by Tamils, is under de facto military rule,

mocracy for decades." Simmering unrest finally came to a boil in July 1983. After the Tigers killed 13 soldiers in an ambush, Sinhalese mobs ran wild through Colombo, killing at least 412 Tamils and leaving 100,000 others homeless.

Since then, despite a government-imposed shoot-on-sight nightly curfew in the north, the Tigers have steadily increased the pressure, assaulting government strongholds, ambushing army convoys and derauling trains. By now the insurgents, grouped in six separate organizations, claim to have 1,000 guerrillas deployed in Sri Lanka and an additional 7,000 at the ready in India. They are assisted by 200 advisers from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

The government, which has received advice on antiguerrilla operations from Israeli intelligence experts, claims not to be intimidated by the Tigers' growing strength. "These terrorists say that their ultimate goal is to take on the Sri Lankan