

INDIAN COMMUNITY

Panic and Resentment

PANIC. Anger. Resentment. These were the dominant emotions within the Indian community in Sri Lanka in the wake of the jvp's anti-Indian campaign. Never has the island's Indian community felt so insecure. The influx of Indians into two heavily-guarded hotels a day before the June 14 deadline set by the jvp for launch of its anti-Indian campaign, included almost the entire high commission staff and their families.

But late last week, with no major incidents involving Indians having taken place, the Indians straggled back to their homes blaming the high commission for the inconvenience. Fumed Pradcep Cheruwari, a Colombo-based businessman who had refused to move out of his home: "It was stupid of the high commission. Instead of instilling confidence into the Indian community, it pressed the panic button." There are an estimated 1,000 Indian nationals in Colombo though only about 600 are registered with the high commission.

High commission officials, however, insist they had no option. "We just could not take risks with the lives of the people, especially in view of the indulgent attitude of the authorities to the jvp campaign. By moving into the hotels we were sending a message that we knew their game-plan," explained a diplomat in Colombo.

Other officials say the move was an over-reaction. The decision to move the staff and their families, they say, was taken by High Commissioner Lakhman Lal Mehrotra against the advice of his colleagues. Unlike his predecessor, Mehrotra has projected an image of aloofness to Sri Lankans and Indians alike. If his predecessors kept communication channels open, it was because they realised that in a hot diplomatic seat like Colombo, timely information is vital to the country's interests.

In any case, the high commission's action in asking its personnel and their families to move into hotels turned out to be a psychological victory for the extremists and helped project a larger-than-real image of their potential.

True, the jvp threat was alarming. But the fact that the only stray incident reported was of a Tamil shopkeeper wounded slightly by unknown gunmen in a Colombo suburb raised the question of whether the jvp was actually behind the threat.

"I am not certain whether it was the jvp that issued the boycott call. But whoever did it is playing with fire," said an Indian businessman. His view reflects the widespread feeling in Colombo that influential sections of the Government



were orchestrating the anti-India campaign with a view to pressuring India into withdrawing its troops from Sri Lanka.

The campaign itself is serious enough. Shops put up boards announcing a halt in trading in Indian goods to fall in line with a jvp demand for boycott of all Indian merchandise. Video parlours have removed popular Hindi and Tamil film cassettes from their racks and theatres have suspended the screening of Tamil films. Customers at Indian banks have closed their accounts.

Last year, Sri Lanka imported ap-

proximately Rs 130-crore worth of Indian goods (4.1 per cent of total imports), mainly vehicles, pharmaceuticals and traditional items like onions and chillies. Now, importers of Indian goods have stopped opening letters of credit for fresh imports. Even Indian pharmaceutical products, which account for nearly 70 per cent of the island's total drug imports, have disappeared from the market. "We have been told by the Government not to sell Indian medicines," admitted the owner of a medical store. He said the orders were given by officials over the phone.

Whatever its origin, the boycott campaign has hurt the Sinhalese too, particularly the common man, whom the jvp claims to serve. As Sri Lanka's Textiles and Rural Industries Development Minister S. Thondaman points out: "Are the Sri Lankans prepared to forgo masoor dal and Bombay onions? What are we going to do with all the Bajaj scooters and trishaws around? Are we to burn all the Tata buses? Can all the women give up wearing the Indian saree?"

But the threat has certainly succeeded in causing panic among the ranks of the Indian community which includes a large proportion of businessmen. A majority of those from the Indian business community—

Tamils, Bohras, Sindhis and Gujaratis—have lived in the island for generations. "Our family came from Gujarat 120 years ago. This is our country now. Where are we supposed to go?" asks a member of the economically powerful and influential Bohra community.

Says R.V.M. Keshavchandra Rau, general manager of the Indian-managed Pugoda Textile Mills: "It is not the jvp threat that is frightening but the apparent reluctance of New Delhi to withdraw

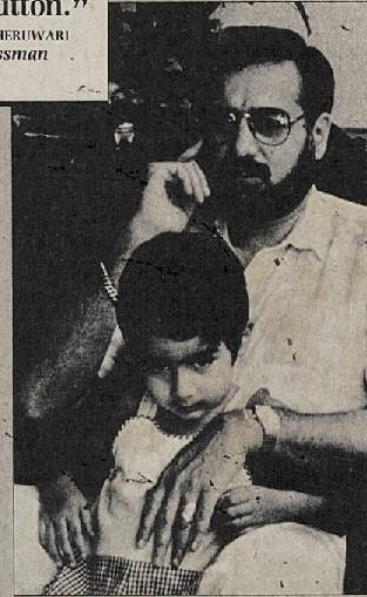
the IPKF and the possible reaction of the Sri Lankans." Both Rau and wife Choti feel the IPKF should leave. Argues Rau: "About a thousand of our soldiers have died. For what? Ultimately if we are

going to set their (the Sri Lankans') home right and go back, why not now?" Not everyone is of that opinion. Says Mala Selliah, a Gujarati married to a Sri Lankan: "So long as the IPKF is here, I am confident nothing worse will happen to us."

Umesh Gautam, resident executive of Ashok Leyland, says his company is seriously considering winding up operations. The factory had been burnt down at the time of the signing of the Indo-Sri Lanka accord. The chairman of Lanka Leyland, a joint venture, has resigned and workers

"The high commission instead of instilling confidence in the Indians pressed the panic button."

PRADDEEP CHERUWARI
businessman



have struck work. Most customers, barring the Government, have cancelled their orders.

But there is a positive element too. Despite the new strains in Indo-Sri Lanka relations, a majority of Sinhalese have been sympathetic to the plight of the Indians and embarrassed over the boycott campaign. R.G. Rajadhyaksha, general manager of a joint venture firm, Indian Hume Pipes (Colombo), says his Sinhalese friends went out of their way to ensure the welfare of his family.

Despite that vague foreboding is the subliminal feeling that now pervades the Indian community in Sri Lanka. The worst threats of the jvp have not materialised. But that is not to say it does not exist.

—P. JAYARAM in Colombo

"What appears most frightening is the possible reaction of the Lankans to the IPKF's not leaving."

KESHAVCHANDRA RAU
executive