

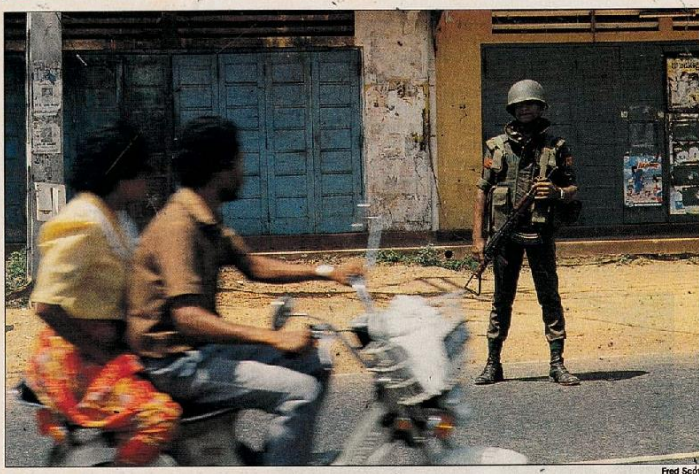
**AIDS IN ASIA:  
GRIM NEW  
EVIDENCE**

# ASIaweek

AUGUST 18, 1989

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On guard in Sri Lanka's capital: "India must realise we are at war"

SOUTH ASIA

## Waiting for Colombo

It was a week of hard talking. The dialogue began on July 29, the second anniversary of the posting of an Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) to Sri Lanka to oversee the granting of limited autonomy to the Tamil community in the island's northeast. Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa had demanded the IPKF leave by that date. Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi said it was impossible. A looming confrontation was only averted by a face-saving compromise initiated by a Sri Lankan cabinet minister, Saumyamoorthis Thondaman, under which India withdrew a token 620 troops. As this contingent left, a Sri Lankan delegation led by Foreign Minister Ranjan Wijeratne flew to New Delhi for talks. The make-or-break parley, expected to last a couple of days, went on all week and included two sessions lasting 4 1/2 hours with Gandhi. The Indian PM later gave an assurance that he did not want Indian troops to remain in Sri Lanka "for a minute longer than necessary."

But the negotiators struggled to resolve just how long was "necessary." With general elections in the offing this year, Gandhi could only compromise so far without antagonising India's substantial Tamil community. Still, aware that conferences of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Commonwealth were coming up, he wanted to circumscribe Premadasa's opportunity to berate what many Sri Lankans condemn as "Indian imperial-

ism." Thus New Delhi pulled out another 875 men on Aug. 6, and announced that a further 700 would leave on Aug. 8. As the three-part withdrawal of 2,195 men still left some 43,000 troops in northeast Sri Lanka, the talks in New Delhi sought to arrive at a mutually acceptable timetable for a total IPKF pullout.

Like Gandhi, Premadasa and his men had little room for manoeuvre. If they had compromised too much, it would have provoked a harsh backlash from the anti-Indian Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), or People's Liberation Front — a Marxist group that has wreaked devastation in its campaign to force the IPKF out. As an Indian participant to the talks told Asiaweek: "The Sri Lankans arrived with a tight brief and they stuck to it." The surprising thing was that progress appeared to be made. Asked about the week-long discussions, Wijeratne conceded: "It was satisfactory." His delegation took home three typed pages containing India's conditions for an IPKF pullout. Provided Colombo devolved power to the Tamil provincial government and guaranteed the security of all Tamils living there, New Delhi promised to pull out 1,800 troops every week — leading to a full disengagement by around the end of February 1990.

In particular, New Delhi wants an assurance that Colombo will restrain the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a separatist group antagonistic to the IPKF-backed

Tamil government in the northeast. The head of this government, Varatharaja Perumal, also flew to New Delhi to make his views known. To curtail inter-Tamil violence, India proposed that a broad-based peace committee of all Tamil groups should be set up in the northeast to monitor security as the IPKF withdraws.

In public, Premadasa has berated India's linking of an IPKF pullout with devolution of power to the Sri Lankan Tamils as "gross interference in the internal affairs of his country." This stance was supported by oppositionist Rukman Senanayake, who said: "India must realise we are at war. With its hard-line position, it could push Sri Lanka into a more serious situation where the entire country would become militant and anti-Indian." Still, Premadasa has agreed to put the Indian proposal before Parliament and his cabinet for consideration.

Perumal has even reported that New Delhi assured him Colombo had agreed to link devolution with an IPKF pullout. Perumal has repeatedly claimed that Colombo has still not devolved promised powers to his government.

The war, meanwhile, has come to Colombo. Although Sri Lanka has been racked by violence for the past six years, its capital has escaped relatively unscathed. Until now, the only occasions when Colombo witnessed the kind of turmoil endemic in the rest of the country were the anti-Tamil riots of July 1983 and the upheavals that followed the signing of the Indo-Lankan accord in 1987.

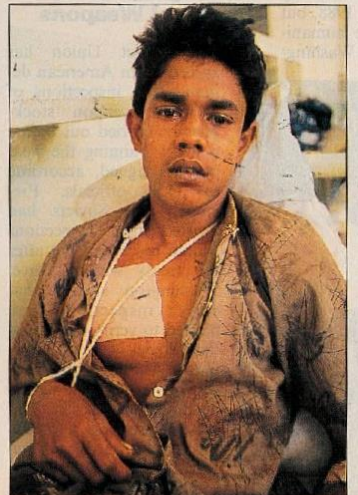
The most striking incident occurred at the Police Field Force headquarters in southern Colombo, adjacent to the high-security Keppetipola Mawatha enclave where ministers and military chiefs reside. At dusk, a group of men believed to be affiliated to the JVP stormed a sentry post and stole some weapons. Commented a senior police officer: "The attack was probably aimed at telling us that even high-security areas can be penetrated." The night before, the country's most popular radio personality, Premakirthi de Alwis, 42, had been abducted from his home and cold-bloodedly shot in a nearby alley. He had reportedly ignored a JVP call not to report to work.

Soon afterwards, one of the country's most revered Buddhist monks, Kotikawatte Saddhatissa, 72, was shot dead in his temple. A confidant of the president, Saddhatissa had hailed the Thondaman-inspired compromise of July 29 as a "victory for the president." The JVP,

which vehemently opposes any compromise regarding the demand for a total Indian withdrawal, was believed to be responsible for Saddhatissa's slaying. Days later, another chief monk, Pokuru Bandara Hemaloka, died at the hands of JVP gunmen. "People have got used to seeing corpses every morning," observes Abeysena Jayalath, a resident of the central city of Kandy. In tandem with these multiple atrocities, the JVP put up posters calling for further strikes. As usual, their call was heeded and services throughout the country — excluding the Tamil northeast — ground to a halt.

Premadasa reportedly held talks with the JVP during the height of last month's transport strike. A source close to the president told Asiaweek: "The discussions between the president and a high-ranking member of the JVP took place at the president's private residence." Once the strike had been settled, however, the talks broke down when the government resumed its ruthless offensive against the JVP. And the JVP likewise stepped up its violent anti-government campaign.

Oppositionist Senanayake, who claims to have helped broker the talks between Premadasa and the JVP, recently warned: "The country is at the brink of disaster. Anything can happen now." Yet he remains optimistic that Premadasa is "sincere in his efforts" and that a solution is possible. Any such solution will depend on Colombo's next move. The optimists are hoping for a mutually acceptable compromise that will allow both sides to extricate themselves from the morass. The pessimists need only point to the daily death count.



Kandy victim: Daily slayings

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