



SRI LANKA

Ominous Portents



SRI LANKA'S ethnic crisis is rapidly starting to resemble a rugby scrum with the ball being passed from hand to hand with the objective of not letting the opposition know

which player has possession. The trouble now is trying to decipher who the players really are. In the Jaffna peninsula, the two main militant Tamil groups have suddenly been pitched into a bloody fratricidal war, destroying each other's camps, killing key leaders and generally doing the job of the Sri Lankan army.

In New Delhi, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi has introduced a new player into the protracted poker game between New Delhi and Colombo. P. Chidambaram, minister of state for personnel, who headed the latest Indian negotiating team to Sri Lanka in the hitherto-futile search for a mutually acceptable solution. And in Colombo, the political posture hardened considerably following a series of extremist bomb attacks in the capital that left 26 people dead, including 15 tourists.

With the situation starting to acquire the contours of a Shakespearean tragedy, the prospect of a solution has once again receded into a bleak background. The introduction of Chidambaram, 40, an MBA from Harvard, was a calculated gamble. Re-introducing a Tamil as head of the Indian negotiating team was New Delhi's way of semaphoring that it was determined to adopt a tougher stand in its dealings with Colombo. The original chief Indian negotiator, G. Parthasarathy, had been hastily removed from the firing line following objections by Sri Lanka to his Tamil antecedents.

Chidambaram, who replaced former foreign secretary Romesh Bhandari as delegation head, is a highly intelligent man not given to the kind of infectious optimism that forms part of Bhandari's extroverted character. In the event, he had little to be optimistic about. High-level sources say that "limited progress" was achieved in the Indian objective of pinning down the Sri Lankans to specifics on the key issues contained in the main demands of the Tamils, namely devolution of power, the law and order problem and the land settlement issue.

There were adequate indications that Colombo is still in no mood to make major

concessions, thus giving the Chidambaram delegation little room for manoeuvre. Unlike previous parleys, this time there was no joint statement issued at the end of the talks. Further, the Indian side is still talking of "formulations" given

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Chidambaram (top); and slain militant leader Srisabaratanam

by Colombo, and not "proposals", which implies that Colombo has still left its options wide open.

Unfortunately for the Indian negotiators, the focus of the ethnic problem in Sri Lanka has suddenly, and dramatically, shifted—to the gleeful advantage of Colombo. Till now, it has largely been a guerrilla war between an indisciplined Sri Lankan army and the Tamil militants who had largely unified under the banner of the Eelam National Liberation Front (ENLF). But even that wafer-thin veneer of unity was brutally stripped off last fortnight as the cadres of the two main groups in the ENLF, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO) flung themselves at each others' throats in the Jaffna area.

What triggered off the fratricidal war is difficult to establish, but the LTTE, after a three-day offensive, claimed that it had wiped out TELO forces and destroyed their camps. TELO leader Srisabaratanam was among those killed in the encounters that wiped out an estimated 105 militants, a majority from TELO. Said A.S. Balasingham of the LTTE: "We are very sorry that Srisabaratanam had to die but then he wouldn't have been killed if he and his boys had surrendered instead of resisting our attack. When we take on a strong military force like TELO we cannot stop at anything short of a total offensive." Balasingham claims that the provocation for the battle between the two was the kidnapping of three senior LTTE commanders in Jaffna by TELO forces.

Spokesmen for TELO, however, deny charges that they started the conflict but whatever the truth, it has put India in an embarrassing position and given a moral advantage to Colombo. Sri Lanka can now afford to sit back and allow the two rival groups to wipe each other out without having to risk the lives of its own security personnel. Colombo has also used the opportunity to lay the blame on the bomb blasts in Colombo at the doorstep of the Tamil militants and claim that they are no longer interested in a peaceful settlement of the problem. Observes Charles Antonydas of TELO: "Our military struggle for Tamil Eelam is now in jeopardy." Added V. Balakumar of the Eelam Revolutionary Organisers: "Unless we can resolve our differences through discussions, there is no future for our struggle."

More important, the fratricidal fracas has put a serious spoke in the wheel of the Indian initiative. Any dialogue initiated from the Indian side is doomed without the active participation or association of the Tamil militant groups, specially LTTE and TELO, being the most powerful. Sri Lanka's National Security Minister Lalith Athulathmudali has already sounded the ominous warning that if the current negotiations failed, Colombo would "have to take the other path". Colombo has also resurrected the bogey of official Indian aid to the Tamil separatists, as evidenced by Sri Lankan President J.R. Jayewardene's May Day tirade against the Eelam lobby's "Indian links". All this suggests that Sri Lanka's ethnic tragedy is rapidly and inexorably slipping out of the hands of those who could have controlled its imperus. It is now in the hands of an unknown fate. The consequences of that could be a prelude to disaster.

—DILIP BOBB with S.H. VENKATARAMANI