

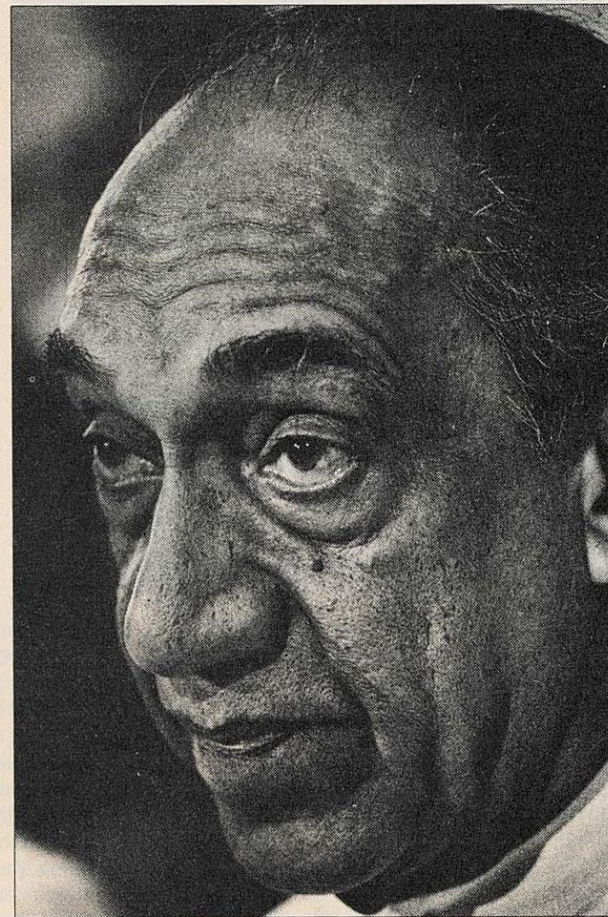
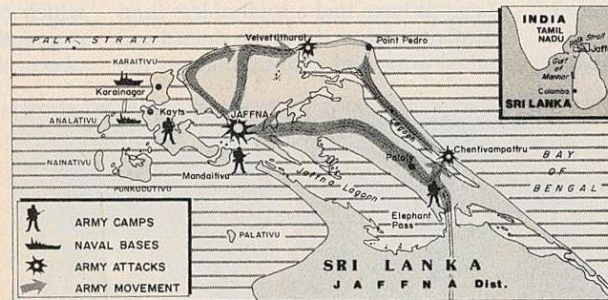
BARELY a week earlier, Sri Lankan President Junius Jayewardene, in an interview to a British newspaper, had warned that if Tamil militants refused to accept his latest formulations aimed at ending the island's bloody ethnic strife, his Government would "unleash its troops" on them. Last fortnight, he did precisely that. In what threatened to be a last-ditch battle, the Sri Lankan security forces launched what is the largest and most concentrated offensive so far on the Jaffna peninsula, the stronghold of the Tamil rebel groups battling for Eelam, a separate homeland.

Abandoning their rebel-imposed restriction behind the sandbags and barbed wires of their security camps, the security forces launched a three-pronged attack reinforced with troops moved up from the south with aircraft and helicopters providing support and bombing and strafing runs. The offensive began with 1,000 Sri Lankan soldiers marching 90 miles north from Anuradhapura all the way to the Elephant Pass which connects the Jaffna peninsula to the rest of the island.

The timing was well-chosen. The rebel groups were still licking their wounds from a bloody fratricidal war raging between the two main militarily-powerful rebel groups, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO), which left 200 militants dead, including TELO leader Sri Sabaratnam. Confessed a TELO leader: "This time we were all busy guarding our own camps from attacks by other militant groups that none of us were free to take on the army." The result was the army met little resistance in their push to Elephant Pass and were able to take strategic control by blocking food and fuel supplies and transport to the peninsula.

The next phase of the offensive was to consolidate the army's hold over the

SRI LANKA The Siege Within



President Jayewardene: dangerous game

western Jaffna coast with the help of the Sri Lankan navy. Additional troops moved in to strengthen the strategic Karainagar naval base and set up a camp on Kayts Island (see map). The Palaly army camp and airfield were then se-

cured by taking over nearby buildings from where rebels had earlier launched attacks on aircraft. This done, the army established another bridgehead at Mandaitivu island. But here they met with fierce resistance and were driven back at several places. But, by sealing off the western coast of Jaffna, the army succeeded in stopping the militants from using the Palk Strait for ferrying men and material. And at the end of the three-day offensive, the army had succeeded in laying siege to the entire peninsula, from Elephant Pass in the south to Velvettithurai in the north and Point Pedro in the north-east.

But the success was short-lived. Faced with a common enemy—and the spectre of defeat in their protracted armed struggle—the militants combined forces to not just stop the army in its tracks, but eventually force the Government to call off the offensive after the fourth day of fighting. The militants made full use of the area's swampy terrain and their intimate knowledge of it to ambush army convoys and pin down enemy troops with rocket, mortar and automatic weapon fire. The militants also succeeded in destroying a strategic bridge near the town of Palai, thus stopping the major offensive from the launching pad of Elephant Pass. Two other offensives, on a smaller scale, from the Velvettithurai base as well as from Kayts Island, advanced a meagre 10 km before they were forced into making a halt by concentrated rebel counter-offensives. The operation, described euphemistically by

National Security Minister Lalith Athulathmudali as a "turn-around of troops" only, in fact, ironically resulted in an embarrassing retreat, with the army returning to its camps.

Sri Lankan Government spokesmen admitted that the army had suffered a "temporary setback". But the next day, the troops attacked again while aircraft

bombed and strafed coastal villages near Jaffna and naval patrol boats shelled suspected guerrilla strongholds. Still, the rebels succeeded in having the final word when they switched their attacks to the east coast in a strategic bid to divert the army from its northern offensive. They blew up Sri Lanka's second biggest cement factory at Trincomalee.

Finally, the Government announced that it was calling off the offensive and declared that it succeeded in its objective. What the actual objective was is not quite clear. Major-General Nalin Seneviratne, the army chief, claimed that they had achieved their "two objectives, which were to secure the naval base and the airfield (at Palaly) and keep them free of possible attacks. The third (the Jaffna siege) was a diversionary move". But later, Athulathmudali informed Parliament that the main objective had been to "push the rebels to the negotiating table. I hope they (the rebels) have learnt one thing. That they cannot run Jaffna the way they want. I hope they realise this and come to the negotiating table".

But that intention could also be construed as a face-saving gesture. New Delhi reacted to the offensive with uncharacteristic anger, understandable since it was launched within days of the latest Indian peace mission to Colombo as part of India's concerted efforts to broker a mutually acceptable solution to the ethnic crisis. In a sharp reaction to the army offensive, Indian High Commissioner to Colombo 'Mani' Dixit was asked by the Indian Government to inform President Jayewardene that India would "withdraw its good offices" if the Sri Lankan Government continued with its military offensive. Jayewardene reportedly insisted that the offensive was only aimed at "clearing the roads" for a "turn-around of troops".

But that claim was clearly negated by the fact that the offensive, involving an estimated 2,000 Sri Lankan troops, was a massive display of military muscle and included the large-scale bombing of Jaffna city and its surrounding areas, which resulted in a number of civilian casualties. It is equally obvious that the

objective was to launch a "final offensive" at a time when the rebel groups were the most vulnerable. The fact that it ended in a military misadventure is an indication that Sri Lanka's search for a military solution is exceedingly ill-advised. The rebels were estimated to have had a total of less than 1,000 men when the battle started and limited arms and ammunition. At the



Tamil guerrillas in Jaffna: tactical victory

height of the offensive, rebel sources in Madras had admitted that they would find it difficult to hold out for more than two weeks of sustained fighting since their supply routes had been cut off.

The fact that the operation was called off well short of that deadline is an indication that the rebels showed better tactical skill in employing their limited firepower and manpower against a better-equipped and larger force. They also have the advantage of the support of the local population. The rebels have taken advantage of their tactical victory to launch their own offensive—against Sinhalese settlements in the eastern province, causing additional problems for the security forces, and, more impor-

tant, for the ethnic problem as a whole.

The fall-out from the military fiasco points to two possible scenarios. One is that having realised that a military solution is not within the realms of possibility, the Sri Lankan Government would be faced with a political stalemate which could force them to return to negotiation using India as the go-between. Already, Jayewardene has signalled New Delhi via Dixit of his approval of India's efforts to barter a mutually-acceptable peaceful political agreement. And Colombo, last week, indicated that they would be open to direct negotiations with the Tamil militants vis a vis the Afghan-Pakistan talks in Geneva.

Conversely, even if the Sri Lankan Government is genuinely interested in a political settlement, their latest offensive has put an additional spoke in that particular wheel. By their tactical—and moral—victory, the rebels have been given a major psychological boost, perhaps making them more determined than ever to continue their armed struggle for Eelam. In that mood, they would be far less vulnerable to arm-twisting by the Indian Government to drag them back to the negotiation grind. "I don't think we can call them 'the boys' any longer. It will now be that much more difficult to influence them in any way," admits a senior

official in South Block.

There is, of course, a third, and more apocalyptic scenario. The Indian Government has already shown that it is fast running out of patience with Colombo. The recent rash of India-baiting in Colombo has once again raised the diplomatic temperature—and lowered the chances of diplomatic manoeuvring. In Jaffna, the militants are stepping up their attacks on Sinhalese settlements which could provoke the majority community into retaliation. And in Colombo, Jayewardene has re-issued his plaintive plea for western (read American) arms to stop his country from being split "like Cyprus". To many observers, it seemed that the fall-out from last fortnight's offensive could actually mark a new and dangerous turning point: civil war.

—DILIP BOBB with bureau reports