

Rajiv runs amok

Just how many countries will Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi bully, threaten or invade to boost his declining political fortunes at home?

Already he has triggered a serious border incident with China, ordered warlike mobilizations against Pakistan and sent military jets over tiny Sri Lanka, the teardrop island off India's southern coast. No wonder Gandhi keeps on such good terms with the Soviets: He can't afford to offend his India's last remaining friendly neighbor.

By playing brinkmanship abroad, Gandhi hopes to distract attention from mounting problems and frustrations at home.

Like his erratic and dictatorial mother, Rajiv has found the chore of governing India's sprawling democracy more than he bargained for. Ethnic feuds have taken thousands of lives since he took office and destroyed public order in several large states. The corrupt patronage system that holds the ruling Congress Party together clashes with Gandhi's own ambitions for an efficient restructuring of the economy.

Everywhere he looks, Gandhi sees an ebbing of support: from Sikhs in the Punjab who deserted the Congress Party after his mother's assassination; from members of the untouchable caste, who have formed their own party; from many Hindus, who think he should better defend their interests against Moslems in the north; from Tamils in the south who think he should openly back Marxist Tamil guerrillas fighting for independence in Sri Lanka; and from critics of his cover-up of defense corruption.

Faced with the same problems that baf-

fled his mother, Rajiv has fallen back on the same demagogic solutions. He scapegoats the "forces of right reaction, multinationals, and vested interests" for undermining India. He blames the CIA and Pakistan for fomenting disaffection among the Sikhs, even as he sends planeloads of supplies to the Tamil terrorists in Sri Lanka in gross violation of that country's sovereignty.

Indian officials lamely admit what underlies these desperately irresponsible acts. "One may not be able to defend it in terms of morality or international law," one official said of the air drop in Sri Lanka, "but here's a democratically elected political leader doing what he feels he must do. That is the real world." Another official explained that "if we did not act positively," India's own pro-rebel Tamils might explode.

The invasion of Sri Lanka's air space last week has alarmed most of India's neighbors and deserves urgent attention by the United Nations. It was especially deplorable since Sri Lanka's prime minister, J. R. Jayewardene, has tried hard to compromise with his Tamil minority on the matter of autonomy. Yet extremist rebels, who recently massacred a busload of Buddhist priests, have vetoed any peaceful solution.

Rajiv Gandhi has the intellect and proven skills of accommodation to back down from the reckless course on which India is now embarked. War will not heal the ethnic and political conflicts that rend his country; only wise and determined statemanship at home facilitated by peace on its borders, can re India's social fabric.