

Unhappy plight of peacekeepers. (1988, December 30). *India Abroad.*

Unhappy Plight of Peacekeepers

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JAFFNA

This is the lost army!" exclaims the poker-faced Indian Army major in the office of the town commandant in Jaffna, the theater of action in the five-year conflict in Sri Lanka.

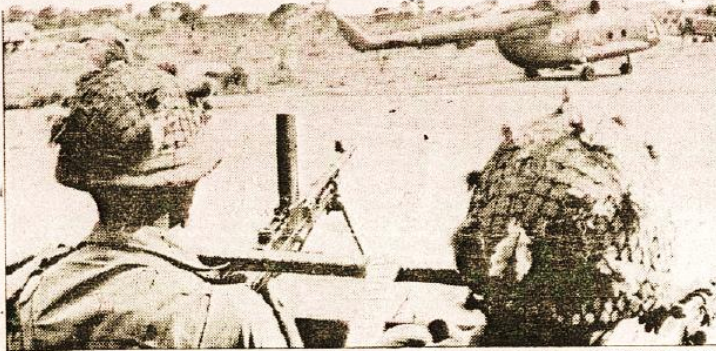
His allusion is to Allied troops in Burma during the Second World War who, despite heroic deeds, were virtually forgotten as the action on the Western Front hogged all the attention.

Nearly 17 months after Indian troops were airlifted here to keep peace between the warring Sinhala and Tamil communities under terms of an accord signed between Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President Junius Jayewardene, there is little indication when the troops will go back home.

'Occupation Army'

While they came here as an army of salvation, their willy-nilly involvement in local politics and their role in taming the intransigent Tamil guerrillas, for which they were least prepared, have earned them the sobriquet of an army of occupation.

"They came here for peace-keeping but turned out to do something else," says a Tamil Catholic bishop in Jaffna. "Nobody wants to remain under foreign army occupation."



"That is the irony of the situation," says an Indian officer bitterly, "especially when you think that our only motive for coming here was to help them sort out their domestic problems."

The initial contingent that arrived on Aug. 1, 1987 was no more than 10,000. Their present strength is now over 50,000, and like the Soviets in Afghanistan, the Vietnamese in Cambodia or the Americans in Vietnam earlier, there is constant speculation in the local and international press about the continued influx of troops.

"Why don't you people take back your troops and leave us alone," a Taxi driver

complains to his Indian passenger in Colombo.

Rumors and jokes about the Indian troops are rampant. Many people believe that the soldiers themselves would not want to leave, as, like the Americans in Vietnam, they had married local women and preferred to settle down here than in India.

The IPKF headquarters says there has not been a single case of Indian soldiers' marrying local women. Some politicians have gone so far as to describe the IPKF as the "scum of the earth" and to accuse the soldiers of rape, molestation and other abuses.

What makes the troops here more bitter is that thanks to poor handling by their own public relations, little is written in the local press or even in the Indian press of the kind of "dirty war" they are fighting and the largely noncombat role they are undertaking with virtually no previous experience.

Over 700 Casualties

Since they took on the largest Tamil militant group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, after initially coming only to help them in their losing battle against the Sri Lankan Army, they have lost over 700 men, including 30 officers.

Indian officials and generals dismiss this casualty figure as insignificant in more than a year of guerrilla fighting. "We lose this many soldiers in live exercises back home," they rationalize.

The once-fierce fighting with the com-

mitted LTTE cadres has tapered off considerably, as a weakened LTTE leadership has taken refuge in the northern jungles of Vavuniya. Still India loses a few soldiers almost daily in land-mine explosions, ambushes or sniper fire.

Except perhaps for a period in 1987, there has been little face-to-face fighting with the adversary. Indian troops were also initially told not to go all out, leading to complaints from them that they had to fight with one hand tied.

Most were also not trained in the kind of urban guerrilla fighting that the lungiclad LTTE dragged them into. The LTTE's ingenuity in assembling weapons, bombs and booby traps also caught Indian soldiers often unprepared.

"They had explosives filled with rusted iron or pens, which turned out to be guns," says an Indian private. "They also shot us from inside respectable homes and shops."

But the IPKF faced its greatest challenge when asked to run the administration in the Tamil-dominated north and prepare it for eventual transition to local officials after greater power and autonomy were devolved to them under the accord.

"Nobody in the Indian Army was ever trained for this job," an officer says. "The U.S. Army has a civil affairs branch to deal with such contingencies but there is no such department in the Indian Army." Another officer adds, "And now they are running to us with all kinds of prob-



KEEPING PEACE: IPKF men guard Indian helicopters in Jaffna, and top, oversee surrender of arms by Tamil militants. (File Photos)

lems, even personal ones."

Examples given are restoring lost cows to owners, settling land disputes and even marital problems. "There was this woman who came to the town commandant's office complaining about a man who had promised to marry her and would not do so," a colonel recalls. "Or another who demanded IPKF intervention because her husband had beaten her up, and proceeded to take off her clothes to show the welts."

In most such cases, the IPKF gives a sympathetic hearing, but beyond that there is little it can do. However, with the virtual absence of a civil administration in the North and East provinces for years, there is nobody for the harried locals to turn to except the IPKF. The militant groups, who ruled in those areas, did deliver some kind of arbitrary justice, but their verdicts favored those who supported their ways.

With the installation of an India-backed government run by the former militant group, Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front, in the North-east after Provincial Council elections last month, there is hope for an Indian departure. But the Front, unsure of itself and heavily dependent on India against attacks from the LTTE, has asked the IPKF to remain. Otherwise, it warns, there will be renewed bloodshed.

"The boys are fed up with fighting a battle in which they have no stake," says an officer. "In other battles, you can inspire the men to fight for your flag, but on an alien soil, where you are fighting a proxy war, you cannot even raise that."

