

NEIGHBOURS

SRI LANKA

The Sidelining of India



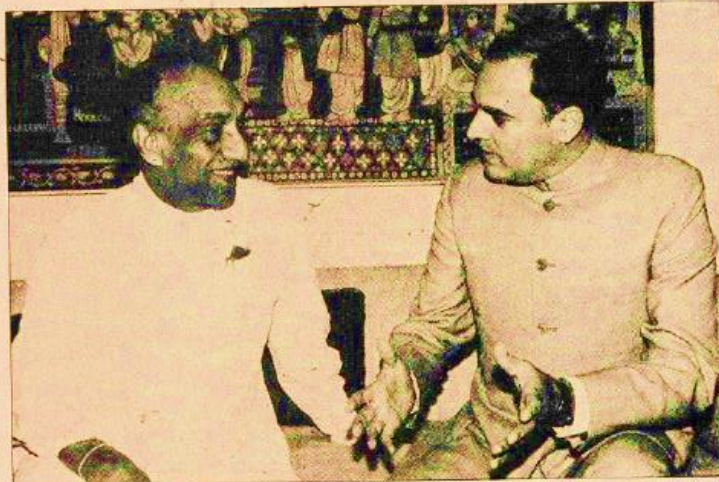
IN his latest press conference, Rajiv admitted that Sri Lankan President J.R. Jayewardene had consistently gone back on his word in order to frustrate India's mediation efforts to bring an end to the ethnic strife in the island. But behind the admission lay the belated awareness that New Delhi, despite its jet set diplomacy on the issue, is being increasingly sidelined by Colombo as well as by the militants. Last fortnight, even as key Indian negotiator P. Chidambaram was urging Colombo to stop its military offensive and resume negotiations with the Tamils, Sri Lankan security forces were engaged in their most forceful battle with the militants in recent times which included bombing raids on the ordnance factories run by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Jaffna. This clearly indicated that Colombo viewed India's role in the affair seriously only when convenient.

The process of sidelining India started becoming visible towards the close of last year when a four-member peace delegation from Colombo visited Jaffna and had a historic meeting with important LTTE leaders in the northern province. Colombo's strategy was clearly to build up the LTTE as the most important Tamil group and thereby eliminate the problem of having to deal with a multiplicity of groups in its parleys with the militants. The fact that the militant groups eventually began battling each other in a bid for supremacy—with the LTTE emerging victorious—was an added bonus for Colombo.

Last month Colombo continued to keep in touch with LTTE's Jaffna command and also tried, quite desperately, to establish contact with LTTE leader and military commander Velupillai Pirabakaran. Confirmed Athulathmudali: "I have stated repeatedly that we are prepared to talk to the Tigers to solve the problem." According to him, one of their worries seem to be that some of the key LTTE leaders will have nothing to personally gain from a peaceful settlement. "We are prepared to look into that also," said Athulathmudali. "We are keeping in touch with LTTE."

Jayewardene also implied that India

was only of peripheral importance when he observed: "Basically we expect the militants to accept the fact that there is no military solution. A political solution is the only way." He expects the Eelamist groups to abandon their objective of the creation of a dictatorship through violence. They are, however, free to place their views before the people, both of the northern and eastern provinces and of the country at large. "I am willing to consider a general amnesty for all the militants if they are willing to lay down



lutionary Front and the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam, K. Padmanabha and K. Uma Maheswaran, also vanished underground. Out of the 800 LTTE cadres who were earlier stationed in India, 600 have returned.

If this was not enough, Jayewardene staged yet another volte face on the proposals that emerged from his discussions with Chidambaram and Natwar Singh, on December 19 last year. The proposals offered to constitute the whole of eastern Sri Lanka, barring a couple of Amparai electorates, into another Tamil province, in addition to the north. Jayewardene had specifically agreed to these proposals, but before the Indian ministers could get the reactions of the militants, the Sri Lankan president let it

arms and accept the unitary status of the country," added Jayewardene.

It also wasn't entirely coincidental that after the Sri Lankan military forces took control of the telecommunications centre in Jaffna last month, one telephone they always ensured to be in working condition was that of the LTTE office in Jaffna. New Delhi too let its hold slip on the LTTE last month. In spite of all the state and Central intelligence agencies who were supposed to be keeping tabs on the militants, Pirabhakaran and 400 other LTTE cadres managed to sail across from Tamil Nadu to Jaffna in a flotilla of several boats. Suddenly, therefore, important LTTE leaders ceased to be available to New Delhi for consultations or for diplomatic arm-twisting.

In like fashion, V. Balakumar, the convenor of the Eelam Revolutionary Organisers also slipped away to Jaffna. The leaders of the Eelam People's Revo-

Rajiv with Jayewardene: gamesmanship

be known that the proposals were not on. The reason: five Muslim members of parliament from the east, all belonging to the ruling United National Party, had reacted strongly to the scheme.

But India has only itself to blame if it has discovered that it has been left in the lurch after four years of tortuous mediation on the ethnic problem. It has never been clear on who is advising the prime minister on Sri Lanka. And the bewildering succession of mediators has not helped either. New Delhi has also not been clear on what should be the broad contours of a settlement. If Rajiv is now expressing his disenchantment with Jayewardene for not coming forward with concrete proposals, it is bit late in the day for that. After all, he has only himself—and his advisers—to blame.

—S.H. VENKATRAMANI