

The IPKF may have fought valiantly, but it was the cutting edge of a new, activist foreign policy which has been let down by Indian diplomacy. (1989, July 31). India Today.



IPKF soldiers clearing the road in Southern Sri Lanka: time to leave

If Rajiv's letter was indignant Premadasa's reply to it reflected stoic defiance. Terming IPKF operations "unnecessary and prejudicial to a settlement by discussion," he repeated his demand for the Indian troops' withdrawal. His foreign minister Ranjan Wijeratne held out veiled threats of "forcible eviction" of the IPKF. The stage seemed set for an entirely new, intense phase in the confrontation.

This came after a fortnight of behind-the-scenes diplomacy which peaked with the New Delhi visit of S. Thondaman, Sri Lankan minister for textiles and rural industrial development and a representative of plantation Tamils. During his meeting with Rajiv and at a briefing of the leading lights of the capital's press corps, Thondaman stressed the need for negotiations and, if necessary, yet another accord to break the deadlock and work out a mutually acceptable schedule for the IPKF withdrawal. But similar signals were not being sent out from higher quarters in Colombo.

**I**N a way Thondaman's suggestion makes sense. It would help both governments save face while allowing the IPKF to return according to a more relaxed schedule. But Indian policy-makers are wary of appearing overly interested unless endorsement comes from Premadasa himself. "The problem mainly is that you don't know what is on their minds," said

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an official in South Block.

South Block analysts say that behind Premadasa's "self-righteous indignation" against the continuing IPKF presence, lies the hard reality of the "hopelessness of his own government and party"—both of which have been held to ransom by the rebellious Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). "By raking up the IPKF issue he wanted to assuage the Sinhala chauvinistic feeling. In the bargain he has pushed himself in a corner from which it is difficult to escape," said an MEA official. Sri Lankan diplomats, however, have a different version. According to them the sole factor that makes the JVP such a potent force is the presence of the IPKF. "No sovereign nation likes foreign troops on its soil. And when the troops that came on our request, refuse to leave when asked to, people get worried and angry," explained a Sri Lankan diplomat. But he too did not deny that Premadasa's Government is today under siege.

Nowhere is this more visible than on the once bustling streets of Colombo, now paralysed by fear and the transport strike.

Traffic intersections that were crammed with vehicles are now eerily empty, particularly in the evenings. While fear of the JVP keeps people indoors after dusk, during the day their movement has been severely curtailed by the transport strike called by an unknown trade union, the Satan Peramuna (Action Front), backed by the JVP.

Schools and universities are closed while attendance in offices is extremely thin. Expectedly, private taxi operators have jacked up their rates and it is not uncommon for taxi-drivers to drive with all the doors locked and the windows rolled up to avoid forced entry by thousands of commuters who walk miles to and from work.

Popular disenchantment with the present regime's inability to contain the situation has emboldened the Opposition, dominated by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, which is trying to bring a motion of no-confidence against the Premadasa Government. Opposition leader Sirimavo Bandaranaike's constant refrain is the "supreme unconcern" shown by the Government in tackling the bus strike. Last fortnight she also ridiculed Premadasa for spending most of his time in Mahiyangana supervising an exhibition on rural awakening while the island reeled under strife.

The killing of human rights activist Charitha Lankapura by the security forces in Colombo also created problems for the Premadasa Government as the students took to the streets. The police broke Lankapura's funeral procession by snatching the body away from the students. Yet the forces could do little to curb the students' fury.

"The problem with the Premadasa regime is that it has resorted to too many draconian measures too early, leaving nothing in reserve," argued an MEA official, pointing out that the emergency, censorship, shoot-at-sight orders and the arrest of strikers have all failed to improve the situation. The Premadasa Government does indeed appear to have exhausted all the measures available to it without any success. The result is that many Sinhalese, particularly in the rural areas, have actually begun to follow orders issued by the Puncti Aanduwa (parallel government) run by the JVP. By a combination of terror tactics—exterminating government sympathisers, killing soldiers escorting buses—and psychological warfare, the JVP has brought about