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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

17 May 1985

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India-Sri Lanka: Rajiv Gandhi and the Tamil Insurgency [Redacted]

Summary

Rajiv Gandhi has softened the tone of India's policy toward Sri Lanka, in part to stabilize Indian foreign policy while he focuses on domestic political and economic matters, but also because Indian officials probably perceive few real options for solving the Sri Lankan communal conflict. New Delhi probably hopes that Sri Lankan President Jayewardene will respond to the new tone of Indian relations by re-engaging the Tamils in negotiations, but we doubt that the Indians have high expectations.

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Gandhi will look to Washington to continue its present course toward the problem, including acknowledging that India has the key role. New Delhi would be most unlikely to ask or expect the United States or any other outside power to take the lead in resolving the conflict.

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This paper was prepared by [Redacted] Subcontinent Branch of the Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief, South Asia Division, NESAs, [Redacted]

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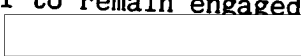
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India's Involvement

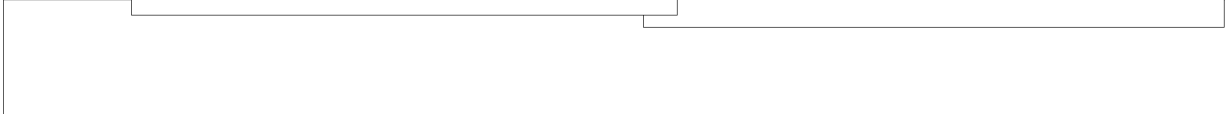
Because of proximity and ethnic and cultural connections, India has been deeply involved in Sri Lanka's political development. At Colombo's invitation Indian military forces went into Sri Lanka in 1971 to assist in quelling a leftist student attempt to overthrow the government. As the political fabric between Tamils and Sinhalese frayed in the late 1970's, New Delhi watched worriedly. The more than 40 million Tamils in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu pressure New Delhi to remain engaged in Sri Lankan affairs to protect their co-ethnics. 

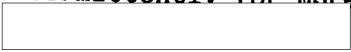
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The Gandhi government pursued a two-prong policy after communal rioting in summer 1983 left more than 400 Tamils dead and thousands fleeing to India. 

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New Delhi at the same time sought to bring the Tamils and ruling Sinhalese together. During late 1983 and 1984, India repeatedly offered Colombo its good offices to initiate discussions with Tamil leaders. This effort culminated with the creation of the All Party Conference, a series of roundtable discussions with representatives of the major Sri Lankan communities, which met in Colombo intermittently for more than 10 months before deadlocking last December. 


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Since the failure of the talks and the departure of most moderate Sri Lankan Tamil spokesmen to south India, Colombo has concentrated on building up its military while the insurgents have sought to drive government forces from the Jaffna Peninsula. The intensity of the violence in the north has steadily increased. The Tamils are becoming more daring and better organized in attacks on government facilities. 

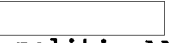

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India's Goals

New Delhi's overall goal, in our view, is to avoid a bloodbath on the island between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority which would prompt a massive refugee influx and a political hue and cry in south India. The Indian government favors a negotiated settlement that would guarantee limited autonomy for Tamils; it does not support the creation of a separate Tamil state and has stated this view repeatedly. 

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 New Delhi fears that a small Tamil state would be economically and politically impotent and would look to India for support. The creation of a separate state along ethnic lines in Sri Lanka also would send the wrong signals to India's numerous tribal and ethnic groups currently pressuring New Delhi for greater autonomy. 

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India also wants, in our view, to prevent involvement by either superpower in Indian Ocean affairs and to extend India's image as the prime player in the region. It wants to prevent potentially destabilizing forces such as the Libyans, the PLO, or other international extremist groups from trying to aid Tamil dissidents. [REDACTED]

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### Rajiv Takes Over

During the first few months after Indira Gandhi was assassinated in late October 1984, Rajiv paid little attention to Sri Lanka because of the urging of domestic issues. The visit by Sri Lankan Security Minister Athulathmudali to New Delhi in March and the reciprocal visit by Indian Foreign Secretary Bhandari to Colombo in April mark the Prime Minister's first clear involvement. [REDACTED]

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Bhandari took a new, more detached tone toward Colombo. He appeared to agree with Jayewardene that violence had to be brought under control before the opening of new negotiations--a longstanding Sri Lankan position that Indira's government had opposed. According to diplomatic reporting, Bhandari was authorized by Rajiv to tell Jayewardene that India would make a concerted effort to restrict the activities of Tamil insurgents. The Indians have interdicted several shipments of foreign weapons destined for the guerrillas, reduced the number of training camps in Tamil Nadu, and stopped insurgent boats crossing to Sri Lanka. [REDACTED]

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### Indian Prospects

Indian public statements, including those of Rajiv, continue to have a moderate, muted tone, but we see little to suggest that New Delhi believes Jayewardene will make any bow in the direction of the Tamils soon. The Indians undoubtedly are aware that Colombo has interpreted Bhandari's visit as a signal that Sri Lanka can proceed with its strategy for military victory over the insurgents. If Rajiv and his advisers have concluded--as we think they have--that in the near term there is little hope for a political settlement, they also may calculate that New Delhi's interests are best served by trying to keep a low profile. Bringing the insurgents under firmer control is one step toward reducing the impact of the conflict on volatile south Indian politics; increasing central government support for Tamil refugees, which they also have done recently, is another. [REDACTED]

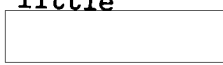
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Rajiv's restrained policy on Sri Lanka, in our view, reflects his cautious and conciliatory style of leadership. As a new leader he also has more pressing problems in front of him. He probably senses that little would be gained from active personal involvement at this point. 

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Potential "Monkey Wrenches" for New Delhi

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Some potential developments could lead to or force a major change in Indian policy toward Sri Lanka:

- Rajiv himself appears to have become an important voice for moderation. If he dies or is removed from office, it is unclear whether his successor would be equally committed to his policy.
- Similarly, Jayewardene's removal from office would create uncertainties, although few of his potential successors appear any more conciliatory toward the Tamils or more likely to try to force the chauvinistic Sinhalese majority to accept a negotiated settlement.
- A massive influx of refugees into Tamil Nadu would strain south Indian resources and place new domestic political demands on New Delhi.
- If a third country provided large amounts of sophisticated military support to the Jayewardene government, Rajiv would come under domestic pressure to increase Indian aid to the insurgents.
- The final and perhaps most important factor that could drastically affect New Delhi's ability to manage policy toward Sri Lanka is the status of the nearly half million Tamil estate workers, most of whom retain close political and family ties to south India. Although they have remained largely uninvolved in the communal conflict, if they become drawn into the crisis, New Delhi would be pressured both by opposition parties and the government of Tamil Nadu to intervene to protect their lives or repatriate them to India. 

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Implications for the United States

We believe New Delhi wants the United States to defer to India's lead in resolving the conflict, to treat the insurgency as a regional issue, and to continue to urge Colombo to accept the need for a negotiated solution. Should the Sri Lankan communal conflict deteriorate to the point where New Delhi becomes convinced of the need to intervene militarily to restore order, the Indians will look to Washington for political support or, at the least, for diplomatic acquiescence. New Delhi would characterize Indian military intervention as aimed solely at restoring public order, not as an expression of Indian expansionism within the region. The Indians will assume that Jayewardene would turn to the United States for military support, but they will urge Washington to turn down such requests. [REDACTED]

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In our assessment, New Delhi would not call for or even welcome a greater role for the United States in resolving the Sri Lankan communal conflict. We believe Gandhi's overarching concern is to preserve and extend India's role as the primary regional leader in South Asian affairs. Preventing foreign--particularly superpower--involvement in regional issues remains the key element in this policy. [REDACTED]

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SRI LANKA: Population by Ethnic Group and Religion, 1981

Ethnic Group			%	Religion			%
Sinhalese	10,986,000	74		Buddhist	10,293,000	69.3	
Ceylon Tamil	1,872,000	12.6		Hindu	2,296,000	15.5	
Indian Tamil	825,000	5.6		Muslim	1,135,000	7.6	
Ceylon Moor	1,057,000	7.1		Catholic	1,010,000	6.8	
Other	111,000	0.7		Other			
				Christian	102,000	0.7	
				Other	15,000	0.1	
Total	14,851,000	100		Total	14,851,000	100	

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- 1 - C/PPS
- 1 - D/OGI
- 1 - C/ISID
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