

ERIC
MARGOLIS



Fragrant tea, bitter battles

Sri Lanka, formerly Ceylon, is generally noted for three things: Superb tea, one of the world's more dangerous airports at the capital, Colombo — and rather violent fighting between its two ethnic groups. Otherwise, Sri Lanka has been generally ignored by the rest of the world.

The 15 million Sri Lankans lead a very relaxed existence: Even the frequent political convulsions between socialists and conservatives or the 24% unemployment rate do not seem to have much effect on most of the island's usually placid inhabitants. But, over the past four decades, occasional explosions, such as we are seeing today, rend apart the tropical tranquility of Sri Lanka.

The majority of Sri Lanka's inhabitants are Sinhalese-speaking Buddhists; a sizeable minority, about 30%, are Tamil-speaking Hindus who are concentrated in the north of the island. These two groups have been fighting with each other for decades over issues of language, political power and patronage, religion and local issues. In contrast to the normally tranquil behavior of most Sri Lankans, the Tamil-Sinhalese clashes have often been extremely violent and bloody.

In the latest round of communal fighting, sparked by an attack upon the army by Tamil separatists, about 250 people have been killed. The army has been hard pressed to put down the rioting and arson that has spread to urban and rural areas. This time, however, a new element has crept into the ethnic conflict that reportedly has the Colombo government worried.

'Liberation' of cousins

The Sinhalese are native to Ceylon. But the Tamil minority are linguistically and ethnically the same as their 50 million cousins in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, located just a short boat ride north of the coast of Sri Lanka. Lately, some politicians in Tamil Nadu have been calling for the "liberation" of their cousins in Sri Lanka and there is reportedly a steady flow of arms southward from India to the rebels.

This situation is apparently making the government of President Jayewardene nervous because of the internal political dynamics of India's politics. Indira Gandhi's government in Delhi has always had troubled political relations with south India, an area that is different racially, culturally and linguistically from northern India. The southern Dravidian peoples have long resented the domination of the Indian federal government by the light-skinned, Hindi-speaking Indians from the north.

Faced with growing opposition to her Congress party, Indira Gandhi may seek to regain popularity in southern India by offering some form of active support to the Tamil rebels in Sri Lanka. So far, Delhi has turned a blind eye to the modest flow of arms going from Tamil Nadu to Sri Lanka; but it is possible that India could move in a more effective manner to "rescue" its beleaguered Tamil cousins.

India has never been completely comfortable with an independent Sri Lanka; though Delhi has never advanced any overt claims to the island, some of its leaders have long maintained that Sri Lanka should be part of the Indian Union. Nor has India, in spite of being a vocal champion of non-violence, refrained from occupying some of its weaker neighboring states.

Indian troops seized the Portuguese enclave of Goa and moved quickly to invade East Pakistan, thereby creating the new state of Bangladesh, a nation which Delhi had hoped would turn into a co-operative client but which, after a few coups, ended up as a rather hostile neighbor.

Colony of India

Perhaps most significantly, India sent its army into Bhutan, a small, isolated Himalayan kingdom whose independence had never been recognized by the Delhi government even though it was considered by much of the world as a sovereign nation. Today, Bhutan is a virtual colony of India.

India's demonstrable willingness to absorb neighboring areas considered by Delhi to be part of Greater India consequently causes some disquiet in strife-wracked Sri Lanka, not to mention Pakistan. The land, air and naval forces of India have grown so powerful that Delhi can do pretty much as she please, and this fact is not lost on the weak nations in the region.

If civil strife continues to spread in Sri Lanka, there is some possibility that India may intervene militarily with the ostensible objective of restoring order. Of course, once Indian troops land on the island, it may be a long while before they are withdrawn. Should such an event occur, it is unlikely that any other nation would take any action whatsoever; neutral Sri Lanka is of little strategic importance — save perhaps its airport at Colombo.

Russia is closely allied to India and might even encourage such a move; China, the obvious opponent to Indian intervention, has its hands full with Russia, Taiwan and Vietnam. The United States is too busy with a legion of other international problems to pause even for a moment over the fate of Sri Lanka.

Perhaps Sri Lanka's only recourse would be to put an embargo on the export of its tea. Ceylon tea enthusiasts the world 'round would suddenly take notice, but even here there is a problem: Since Ceylon changed its name to Sri Lanka, nobody seems to know where the country is anymore.

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