Sri Lanka on the brink

The terror attacks that killed nearly 300 civilians this past week are grim proof that Sri Lanka's four-year-old civil war is intensifying. Since last Friday, 142 Sinhalese from the island nation's Buddhist majority have been massacred in the north by Tamil secessionist rebels who are seeking an independent, Hindu ethnic state.

On Tuesday a powerful bomb killed some 150 Sinhalese in the nation's shabby capital, Colombo.

These outrages were most likely the work of the largest and most radical Tamil rebel group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The attacks were clearly aimed at provoking a violent response from the Sinhalese government which, the LTTE hopes, will abort any further chances of a peaceful settlement between the two warring communities. The government obliged yesterday by sending the air force to bomb two Tamil "strongholds," killing 80 people.

Mounting violence may well fulfil the LTTE plan by bringing the Sinhalese and Tamil communities into full-scale civil war. This, the LTTE anticipates, will finally force neighboring India to intervene militarily and result in creation of an independent state of Tamil Eelam.

Just a short boat ride across the narrow Palk Strait is the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu with 50 million Hindu Tamils. Among India's Tamils in particular, and Hindus in general, there is powerful emotional support for Sri Lanka's Hindu minority. Here, the LTTE has its headquarters and training camps. Much as Delhi denies it, Indian arms and money are fueling the Tamil rebellion.

Sri Lanka's Sinhalese majority has always looked northward toward India with apprehension, fearful that their giant neighbor might one day covet their rich island.

India, for its part, is caught in a painful



"May I join you for a couple of hours? I need to establish an alibi for this evening."

dilemma. Rajiv Gandhi's Congress(I) Party needs Tamil Nadu's important political support, particularly after recent electoral losses in south India. But it is also trying to play the role of honest broker between the two Sri Lankan factions in forging some sort of peace settlement. So far, India's efforts to bring an end to the struggle have proved futile.

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In its dealings with Sri Lanka, India has run into the same problems encountered by the U.S. in its Mideast relations. Washington purports to be an honest broker between Israel and the Arabs but, at the same time, is under intense domestic political pressure from American Jews to back Israel to the hilt. Similarly, India's militant Hindu nationalists and Tamils are pressuring Delhi into taking decisive action to create a Tamil state in Sri Lanka.

Doing so would offer a dangerous precedent. The central government in Delhi is already battling powerful separatist ethnic movements among the Sikhs of Punjab, among the Gurkhas near the Nepal border and among the upland tribal peoples of India's northeast frontier. If Delhi imposes a separate ethnic state on Sri Lanka, as it did in East Pakistan, why should India's Sikhs, Gurkhas, Nagas or Mizos not have theirs?

At the same time, Delhi is increasingly vexed by what it sees as the intrusion of outside powers into Sri Lanka, a region that India calls its own exclusive preserve. According to what is called "the Indira doctrine," India will not tolerate any outside power meddling in the affairs of its smaller neighbors. To date, India has done little more than grumble at the rising flow of arms and advisers from the U.S., Israel, China, Pakistan and Britain that are helping to sharpen the teeth of the Sri Lankan Sinhalese government.

The Indians are claiming darkly that the U.S. is even after a military base at Sri Lanka's excellent port of Tricomalee.

So India does not want to intervene in Sri Lanka but, equally, it does not want to see the island's festering civil war draw in outside powers. Delhi must placate its Tamil voters without adding legitimacy to its other ethnic separatists. And Delhi must somehow try to get the two warring Sri Lankan communities to continue their desultory peace talks in the face of horrible outrages like this week's killings that were designed to destroy any hope of a settlement.

It's a painful and spreading headache for Rajiv Gandhi, who is already beset by ethnic and political problems across his vast, disparate nation.

And there's now a new worry: Might flaring Tamil nationalism one day produce demands for an independent, united Tamil state carved out of Sri Lanka and India?