AWTW

# Guerrilla Struggle in Sri Lanka

**by Our Special Correspondent**

Sri Lanka used to be advertised in travel brochures as a bit of paradise. Today it is beginning to be known as a land of terror. As an increasing number of Tamil militants step up their armed guerrilla struggle for a separate state of Eelam, the government has increased its repression and sent its army to the north and east which are mainly inhabited by the Tamils. These indisciplined, trigger-happy soldiers are arresting, torturing, killing and generally terrorising the Tamil people. There has been a continuing state of emergency in the country for nearly two years while a dusk-to-dawn curfew has been imposed on the greater part of the north and east. Human rights violations and abuses have become generalised.

Sri Lanka is a neocolonial country with a population of 14 million. Of these, the Tamils constitute 18.2%, forming the biggest minority who claim to have lived in Sri Lanka as long as the Sinhalese who form 74%. Another minority, the Muslims, form 7.4%. When Sri Lanka was under British colonial rule, the bourgeois leadership of both the Sinhalese and the Tamils worked together to obtain reforms from their colonial master. But, when Britain gave more reforms, the leaderships of the two communities could not agree on how to share this power. Under colonial rule, communal representation kept the two communities more or less evenly balanced. But, in 1931 Sri Lanka was granted adult franchise and elections on a territorial basis. This was naturally bound to favour the majority. It is from this time that the intercommunal conflict began to worsen.

At first, the Tamil leadership asked for power-sharing at the centre. They called for a scheme of balanced representation by which all the minorities would be given equal representation in the legislative body with the majority. The Sinhala leadership not only rejected this but, in 1935, formed a pan-Sinhala Board of Ministers, without any representation of the minorities. This deepened the rift and led to an increase of communal tension on both sides.

After political independence and a parliamentary system of government with a cabinet in 1948, the Tamils realised that they had no hopes of sharing power at the centre. There now emerged the demand for a federal system of government so that the northern and eastern provinces could form one part of a federated Sri Lanka. But this proposal too was anathema to the Sinhala leadership. On the other hand, there was a resurgence of Sinhala chauvinism which was falsely interpreted as nationalism. In 1948, the Tamil plantation workers of Indian origin were deprived of their citizenship and consequently of their right to vote. In 1956, repudiating all earlier understandings that Sinhala and Tamil would replace English as the official languages, Sinhala alone was made the official language. This was the one act that created the greatest amount of resentment among the Tamils, contributing to the feeling that Tamils had been relegated to the status of second-class citizens.

Up to 1970, the Tamil leadership engaged in opportunistic bargaining after every general election. Since the Sinhala votes divided more or less evenly between the two major Sinhala parties, the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the Tamil leadership opportunistically negotiated to support whichever party gave up more concessions to the Tamils. On this basis, they even entered the government in 1965 on the basis of an agreement with the UNP. But it was short-lived. One feature of Sri Lankan politics has been that whenever either of two

parties—the SLFP or the UNP—came forward to "settle" the communal problem, the other party was sure to torpedo it by inflaming communal passions. That was what happened to the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayagam Pact in 1958 and to the Dudley Senayake-Chelvanayagam agreement in 1965.

But this kind of opportunistic bargaining became impossible after 1970 when the SLFP won a two-thirds majority in parliament, followed in 1977 by a five-sixths majority for the UNP. The Tamils were politically isolated. It is from this isolation that the cry arose for a separate state of Eelam. It was a cry borne out of frustration and despair.

Although the bourgeois leadership of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) proclaimed that it could win this demand through non-violence and *ahimsa*, the rank-and-file and the youth reacted differently. They had seen the bankruptcy of bourgeois parliamentary democracy before their eyes. They had also seen the impotence of non-violent forms of struggle. In 1956, when their leaders performed peaceful *satyagraha* [Gandhi-style "nonviolent resistance"—*AWTW*] against the Sinhala Only Act they were beaten up by Sinhala thugs. In 1961, when they organised a campaign of non-violent satyagraha in the north in support of their demands, the army was used to disperse them. In 1974, the police fired at a Tamil cultural conference and it resulted in the deaths of nine people. The message was quite clear. Violence could only be met with violence. Armed struggle was the only way out.

It must be pointed out here that one factor that pushed the Tamil youth towards the rejection of bourgeois parliamentary democracy and the adoption of armed struggle was the consistent campaign that had been conducted by the Marxist-Leninists on these twin objectives during the sixties. Although the youth had not rallied round these slogans at that time, it was quite clear that the seed had fallen on fertile soil.

Thus there came into existence several organisations pledged to win a separate state through armed struggle. The youth went abroad and obtained military training. To finance their activities, they carried out daring but well planned robberies of state-owned banks in the north and east. At Killinochi alone, in October 1981, they robbed a bank of Rs. 27.8 millions. They solved, in part, the problem of arms and ammunition by attacking police stations and robbing them of arms. The most spectacular of these was the recent attack on the Chavakacheri police station when they blasted the entire building, resulting in the death of 29 police officers and the theft of all arms and ammunition. In September 1978, a state-owned Avro airplane 748 was blown up at the Ratmalana airport at a cost of Rs. 35 millions. In January of this year, they blew up a train transporting over 200 troops. The majority of them are reported to have died. Their targets are armed soldiers and policemen, informers, state-owned institutions like the banks, the Transport Board buses, post offices, etc.

Their forms of struggle were the hit-and-run tactics associated with all guerrilla movements. They do not confront the army in face-to-face combat. They are engaged in a protracted guerrilla struggle in the course of which they hope to bleed the government and its economy, while, they hope, building support among the Sinhalese. There is no doubt that they enjoy the unstinted support of the Tamil people. This is their strongest asset.

Most of the groups of Tamil militants—there are about six of them—have declared that they are Marxist-Leninists, although what they popularise among their members is a mixture of the revolutionary teachings of Lenin and Mao (particularly his military writings), along with Che Guevara, Amilcar Cabral, etc. In most cases, they arrived at the decision to take up arms pragmatically. It was only afterwards that they went in search of an ideology that would justify their armed struggle. Whatever that may be, there is no doubt that the Tamil youth have been radicalised to a great extent and this bodes well for the future.

In retaliation for these activities of the youth, the government increased its repression of the north and east. The north and east of Sri Lanka today resembles an occupied territory. Harassment of ordinary people has reached gigantic proportions. In 1979, the government passed the infamous Prevention of Terrorism Act which has been condemned here and abroad as a piece of obnoxious legislation. Under this Act serious infringements of human rights became the order of the day. Hundreds of Tamil youth have been arrested and are languishing in jails or camps without trial. Torture has become routine. Israeli agents and British mercenaries have been imported to advise the army on how to fight the "terrorists," as the government calls the militants. On their advice, mass arrests now take place instead of the selective arrests of suspected people. Batches of 500 youth have been arrested and taken to camps in the deep south. Under the pretence of search-and-destroy operations, the Tamil people, particularly the women, have been subjected to the worst forms of humiliation. Several cases of rape have been reported. Looting of gold, jewelry, and articles like TVs, radios, watches and money has become commonplace. Stringent regulations ban travel by private transport. Even bicycles are taboo. People leaving the security zones have to obtain permission. The people live in a perpetual nightmare. The Army is detested. That is the main reason why it cannot get help or information from the people. There is a solid wall of silence.

The retaliation of the armed forces whenever they suffer any loss at the hands of the guerrillas is to shoot at random, killing innocent bystanders and setting fire to houses in the vicinity. Recently, in the northwestern area of Mannar, in a reprisal for the death of one soldier, the army went on a rampage, killing 150 people within a few hours. They went to the Murungan Post Office, lined up its eight employees and shot them down. Four of them died on the spot. The army has desecrated temples and churches. In the Mannar district it has killed a Roman Catholic priest and a Methodist minister. The country is now in the

grip of a mass anti-Tamil hysteria generated by the leaders of the government and fueled beyond all proportions by the mass media at its command. It is almost reminiscent of Hitler's campaign against the Jews. True, the concentration camps and the mass deportations are not yet here but the beginnings are already here and discernible. Even children are being encouraged to collect for the National Defence Fund which is nothing but asking the people to give money to buy arms and ammunition to kill the Tamils.

The worst form of anti-Tamil violence took place in July 1983 when nearly 2000 Tamils died in the worst pogrom that Sri Lanka has seen. Houses and business establishments of Tamils everywhere were systematically burned and looted. Even Hindu temples were not spared. During that week-long orgy of violence, the armed forces either looked the other way or joined in. It is commonly accepted that the people who were mainly responsible for this carnage were government supporters. It took nearly four days for the President to appear on TV. But his speech contained not a word of condemnation of the violence or any expression of sympathy for the Tamils. On the contrary, he justified the violence as a natural reaction by the Sinhalese to the demand for a separate state. He went on to placate the Sinhalese by promising to ban all parties advocating separatism.

By this time the number of Tamils forced into refugee camps rose to 100,000. Over 40,000 fled across the sea to the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, whose 53 million people speak the same language as the Sri Lankan Tamils. Thousands of other Tamils, particularly the more educated, have gone to countries all over the globe. In the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, where there is abundant support for the Sri Lanka Tamils, demonstrations, mass meetings and even a general strike were held throughout the state to protest the Sri Lanka massacres. The late Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was forced to intervene because a fair number of Tamils of Indian origin and Indian nationals had been the victims of the communal violence. She sent her foreign minister, followed by a special emissary, for discussions with the Sri Lankan government, which was ultimately persuaded to conduct discussions with all the Sri Lankan political parties, including the TULF.

When the Sri Lankan president visited New Delhi in November 1983 for a meeting of Commonwealth leaders, he had discussions with the Indian leaders where he agreed to certain proposals granting a measure of autonomy to the Tamils. But on his return to the island, he disowned those proposals and doomed all possibility of a settlement. The all-parties conference convened by the president in early 1984 laboured in vain and broke up without achieving any result.

There is now a perfect stalemate. Having stated that the government is no longer willing to negotiate with the TULF unless it renounces its demand for a separate state, the government is now actively trying to find a military solution rather than a political solution. As a corollary, a section of the government, headed by the prime minister, is advocating a violently anti-Indian line, accusing India of harbouring and encouraging Sri Lankan Tamil militants in South India. The president has visited many countries, including China, Japan, the United Kingdom and the USA proclaiming the need for military assistance, but with little success. The government was very hopeful for aid from the USA. But the latter is trying to woo the new Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, away from the Soviet orbit and is therefore not in a mood to antagonise India in any way.

The tragedy in the political situation in Sri Lanka today is that the just struggle for the right of self-determination of the Tamil people in the north and east has not yet generated basic support from among the potentially revolutionary forces among the Sinhalese. The left movement, which is still dominated by the reformists and revisionists, is so sunk in the mire of parliamentary opportunism that they are unable to take a firm, revolutionary stand in support of the right of self-determination for the Tamil people and against reactionary Sinhala chauvinism. Only the Marxist-Leninist Ceylon Communist Party (a participating party of the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement, with a long history of struggle against modern revisionism) and some small political groups have taken an uncompromising stand in support of the armed struggle of the Tamil people for their right of self-determination. They have also condemned Sinhala chauvinism as well as the massacres carried out in its name by the armed forces in the north and east.

The Ceylon Communist Party has advocated since 1958 that regional autonomy for the northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka would be the best form through which the Tamils could exercise their right of self-determination. It advanced regional autonomy in preference to a separate state because while the latter slogan tended to be divisive the former was conducive to building the unity of the revolutionary forces from among both the Sinhalese and Tamils so necessary for the overthrow of the reactionary central government which is the common enemy of both the Sinhala and Tamil people.

Under regional autonomy, it would be possible for the Sinhalese and the Tamils to co-exist inside a single state while permitting the Tamils to rule themselves in the north and the east in all matters except central functions such as defence, foreign affairs, finance, communications, etc. The Ceylon Communist Party has repeatedly called for the unity of the revolutionary forces opposed to the UNP on the basis of a common programme, one point of which shall be the solution of the Tamil problem on the basis explained above.

The increasingly successful guerrilla struggle of the Tamil militants has proved that peoples' war, along the lines preached by Mao, is possible even in a tiny island like Sri Lanka and even in areas like the north of Sri Lanka which boast no mountains, rivers or heavy forest cover. The basic prerequisite is a just cause and the support of the people. ■