

# Sri Lanka's Widening War

Holiday massacres and a death in India further threaten hopes for peace

For a while last month it seemed as though Christmas might at last bring a spell of peace to Batticaloa, a predominantly Tamil and Roman Catholic city in Sri Lanka's strife-scarred Eastern Province. The Indian peacekeeping force, the Sri Lankan police and the Tamil guerrillas of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were all holding to an informal 48-hour cease-fire. Townspeople packed the cathedral on Christmas Eve, carolers sang in the streets, Santa Clauses passed out presents in the local hospital and fireworks were allowed for the first time since the country's civil war erupted in 1983.

But the festive spirit was short-lived. Two days after the holiday, gunmen thought to be from the LTTE ambushed three Sri Lankan Sinhalese policemen in the city's main market, killing one of the officers. Terrified shoppers and merchants jumped for cover. But the dozen or more Sri Lankan police reinforcements who arrived at the scene minutes later were bent on revenge. According to eyewitnesses, they indiscriminately grabbed and shot people they found hiding in shops and stalls. They then tossed grenades and firebombs into nearby shops, turning the bazaar into a smoking inferno. At least 25 civilians—many of them Tamils—died in the bloodletting, and some 35 shops were looted and destroyed.

**Ethnic violence:** Five months after Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President Junius R. Jayewardene signed the Indo-Sri Lankan peace accord, the ethnic violence continues to flare and India's worst fear—that its peacekeeping troops would become locked in a quagmire—is being confirmed. If anything, the war is widening. Even as the fighting continues in the north and east, Sinhalese extremists opposed to the peace pact have opened an antigovernment front in the south, assassinating scores of officials and treaty supporters.

Despite India's best efforts, the LTTE is keeping up its ruthless separatist cam-

paign and still refuses to disarm. Moreover, the Tigers appear to be extending their campaign of intimidation to the country's Muslim minority. Late last week LTTE rebels killed some 35 Muslim civilians in Kathankudi in the Eastern Province, holding the town virtually captive for 36 hours before Indian troops arrived.

(UNP). Since the agreement was signed, at least 76 government officials and UNP cadres have been killed. In their boldest attack, just before Christmas, two gunmen murdered the UNP's chairman and key Jayewardene aide, Harsha Abeywardene, in Colombo. And on New Year's Eve, in what appeared to be another JVP attack, four people were killed and 50 wounded when a bomb exploded during a Buddhist religious procession in the town of Kandy.

**Political vacuum:** But the biggest battle to save and implement the shaky accord may not be fought in Sri Lanka at all, but in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, across the narrow Palk Strait. The peace prospects suffered yet another serious setback two weeks ago with the death—by natural causes—of M. G. Ramachandran, the powerful and popular chief minister of India's Tamil Nadu state, who was a key architect of the accord and a vital Gandhi ally.

As chief minister, Ramachandran made the accord possible by using his political prestige and powers of persuasion to convince India's 50 million Tamils that the accord would protect and promote the rights and interests of Sri Lankan Tamils—despite the hard reality that Indian soldiers were killing scores of Tamils in the Indian offensive against the LTTE. His death not only creates a political vacuum in Tam-

il Nadu, but may also threaten Gandhi's ability to maintain support for the agreement at home. There is no guarantee that the state's new boss will be able to keep his emotional people in line behind Gandhi and the accord. "M.G.R.'s death creates a degree of political vacuum in Tamil Nadu," says a well-placed Indian official in New Delhi. "In such a situation, opponents of the accord might try to stir up trouble." There's little doubt that some will indeed try, but at this point there's reason to wonder how much more they or anyone could do to undermine the peace.

RON MOREAU with WILLIAM MCGOWAN in Batticaloa and SUDIP MAZUMDAR in New Delhi



No peace at Christmas: Mourning a husband in Batticaloa

The accord is faring no better in the Sinhalese-dominated southern heartland. There, nationalistic students, along with disaffected and unemployed youths, have joined an outlawed, ultranationalist and violence-prone Sinhalese group, the People's Liberation Front (JVP), which bitterly opposes the Indian military presence. They oppose the treaty as well, saying that it compromises Sri Lanka's national sovereignty by giving away too much to the Tamils. To torpedo the accord, the student-JVP alliance has launched a brutally effective assassination campaign aimed at eliminating officials and supporters of the president's ruling United National Party