

SUBJECT: Sri Lanka: Slim Chances for a Military Solution

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3 January 1986

Sri Lanka: Slim Chances for a Military Solution [redacted]

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Summary

The Sri Lankan security forces are incapable of waging a successful counterinsurgency campaign against Tamil separatists despite a military buildup during the second half of 1985. Their basic shortcomings--poor organization, training, leadership, and intelligence--remain unaddressed, and they continue to suffer from the lack of a cohesive counterinsurgency strategy. Moreover, the insurgents have grown in strength and capabilities and are prepared to begin attacks against important economic targets in the Sinhalese south if new fighting breaks out. A renewed government offensive probably would not result in major gains against the insurgents, although the government's extensive stockpiles promise a longer and probably bloodier round of fighting. [redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] Office of Near East and South Asian Affairs. Information available as of 3 January 1986 was used in its preparation. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Subcontinent, South Asia, NESA, [redacted]

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The Current Situation

At the close of 1985, Tamil insurgent factions had solidified their hold over Sri Lanka's Northern Province and strengthened their position in the Eastern Province. Over the last months of the year, Colombo stepped up its patrolling operations and clashes with the insurgents increased. Government strategy was aimed largely at keeping the insurgents from gaining a stronger position, especially in the east, rather than towards recouping lost ground. Most clashes were confined to the fringes of rebel-held territory. [REDACTED]

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Beginning in November 1985, senior Sri Lankan officials started raising the possibility--both publicly and privately--of calling off the Indian-sponsored negotiations and ceasefire and of initiating new military operations to erode, if not destroy, the insurgency. While these threats may have been designed largely to press New Delhi to use more leverage on the Tamil negotiators, steady military preparations since the June ceasefire strongly suggest that Colombo believes it may now have the capability to undertake a successful counterinsurgency campaign. [REDACTED]

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The Military Solution's Slim Chance of Success

In our judgment, the Sri Lankan security forces are incapable of pursuing effective counterinsurgency operations. A successful campaign would require an aggressively led, well trained, dedicated, mobile force supported by a flexible logistics network and timely, accurate intelligence. This force must pursue a strategy of cutting enemy supply lines, locating guerrilla concentrations, gaining and maintaining contact with them, and running them to ground. Colombo's military preparations over the last six months have augmented some of the security forces' resources, such as ammunition stockpiles and fast patrol boats, but do not address their fundamental weaknesses--lack of discipline, poor training, and mediocre leadership. [REDACTED]

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The government continues to have no cohesive strategy for containing, much less defeating, the insurgency. [REDACTED]

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The government's major defense initiative, a weapons modernization program, has no coherent focus or supervision, and remains at the caprice of corrupt government spending practices. The Navy ordered three types of patrol boats last year, [REDACTED]

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[redacted] Recent news film shows an Army squad equipped with four types of rifles of two different calibres. [redacted]

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Many of Sri Lanka's newly acquired weapons do not meet the requirements of a counterinsurgency arsenal. The Army is buying anti-aircraft guns and anti-tank missiles, which have little if any utility in a low-intensity guerrilla war. The Air Force has been buying light attack aircraft, which because of their need of landing strips will be difficult to deploy and support in the field, and only recently began acquiring armed helicopters, which can operate out of unprepared forward areas and maintain a longer time-over-target. Too few transport aircraft have been purchased to support a mobile campaign.

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Colombo has added to the confusion among the security forces regarding their roles and missions by forming several new paramilitary organizations. The Army and Police are currently augmented by the Special Task Force (STF), raised by National Security Minister Athulathmudali as an elite counterinsurgency unit, the Home Guard, an official paramilitary force, and a National Auxiliary Force (NAF). The government has also currently proposed creating a National Armed Reserve (NAR), although it is likely to remain mostly on paper for the foreseeable future because of serious problems in training and equipment. Colombo has begun arming Sinhalese settlers in Tamil areas as a grass roots level counterinsurgency force. [redacted]

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<u>Unit</u>	<u>Strength</u>	<u>Unit</u>	<u>Strength</u>
ARMY	16,000 (active)	AIR FORCE	3,400 (active)
	12,000 (Volunteer Force)		1,500 (reserve)
	2,000 (reserve)		
NAVY	2,900 (active)	POLICE	17,000
	500 (reserve)	STF	3,500

All security forces are expanding at a rapid pace, so the listed strengths are estimates only. About one third of the Army Volunteer Force is on active duty at any given time. The NAF is only now forming and is probably not even at cadre strength for its proposed complement of 10,000. [redacted]

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The proliferation of security forces has had an increasingly deleterious effect on the shaky ceasefire--armed Sinhalese settlers and Home Guardsmen are being increasingly fingered, even by the government, in recent episodes of Tamil shootings. [redacted]

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[REDACTED]

Military training has received less emphasis than arms acquisitions in Colombo's recent build-up--equipment purchases have commanded an estimated 96% of a recently approved defense budget supplement. Also, training--both in Sri Lanka and in other countries--has been sporadic and diffused. [REDACTED]

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Colombo's intelligence capabilities, while improving, are still incapable of supporting an effective counterinsurgency campaign, in our view. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] The reactive nature of government military operations indicates that accurate and timely intelligence on the insurgency either is not reaching the security forces or that they are not capitalizing on it. [REDACTED]

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Longstanding problems in the Sri Lankan security forces, such as poor leadership and dedication to mission, remain unattended. The military suffers from the entrenchment of Sinhalese senior officers chosen more for their political reliability than for their military expertise. The junior officer corps, composed largely of young Sinhalese with hardline views toward the communal conflict, is among those groups pressing hardest for a military solution. The rank and file are mostly Sinhalese peasants who often see the conflict in racial rather than political terms. This poor leadership and ethnic parochialism fuels the severe discipline problem in Colombo's forces. [REDACTED]

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A Stronger Insurgency

While the Army remained mostly in garrison last year until the fall, the insurgents gained time to ready themselves for renewed fighting. Because New Delhi has cracked down on insurgent activities in and from India, many insurgent factions have moved their training and command operations into Sri Lanka and established new bases in the Northern and Eastern provinces. Despite the Indian crackdown, press reports [] indicate small arms, ammunition, and explosives continue to reach Sri Lanka from India. We believe the insurgents have sufficient resources to support a guerrilla war for a considerable period even if the Indians or, even less likely, Colombo's naval patrols succeed in shutting down the Palk Straits supply line. []

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Increasing ties between the Tamil militant groups and radical Sinhalese leftist elements in the south as well as reports of Tamil cells in Sinhalese areas suggest the insurgency could take on broader proportions, which would further complicate the government's military strategy. []

[] According to press reports, at least ten members of a splinter group of an extreme left wing party are under detention in Colombo and are expected to be charged with planning a joint attack with Tamil separatists on key installations in the south. []

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Outlook

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If Colombo initiates a major offensive, the security forces' improved arsenal probably will allow them to achieve initial limited success, but the lack of proper planning, preparation, and training, combined with improvements in insurgent capabilities, likely will prevent them from achieving a lasting solution. Colombo's forces are capable of accomplishing little more than changing the borders of rebel-held territory slightly in the government's favor and attaining a temporarily heightened presence in the north and east. []

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Should the government offensive falter quickly, which is likely, the rebels probably will stand by their current strategy and try to keep the security forces from making any gains in the Northern or even the Eastern provinces. If government forces make headway in the field and guerrilla resources become scarce, the more militant Tamil groups would likely turn to terror attacks against the security forces and Sinhalese civilians. Sinhalese villagers recently settled under a government program in eastern and northern Tamil areas are the most likely targets, although spreading violence to Colombo and other areas in the south previously untouched by the insurgency would, in our view, be relatively easy for the guerrillas to accomplish. We believe the security forces are unprepared for such a turn of events. []

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