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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D. C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

10 March 1986

SRI LANKA'S TAMIL INSURGENCY: The Impact of Marxism [Redacted]

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Summary

Sri Lanka hopes to win US military and diplomatic support by claiming the Tamil insurgency has become increasingly dominated by Marxism. Although all major insurgent organizations claim allegiance to Marxism, the most active groups are motivated principally by ethnic rivalry with the majority Sinhalese. These groups have little in the way of a political agenda other than gaining Colombo's recognition of a traditional Tamil homeland and a Tamil right to self-determination. Moreover, they are divided by leadership rivalries and caste distinctions. [Redacted]

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Over the longer term, however, the Marxist threat to Sri Lanka is likely to

This memorandum was prepared by [Redacted] the Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis, with a contribution from [Redacted] Office of Central Reference. Information as of 10 March 1986 was used in its preparation. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief, South Asia Division, NESAs, [Redacted]

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Copy 32 of 40

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grow. The People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE)--the largest and best-financed of the insurgent groups but currently not one of the most active--wants to provoke an island-wide revolution in Sri Lanka as well as establish a Marxist Tamil state. Unlike the predominantly nationalist groups which pose the most immediate threat to the government, PLOTE has refrained from anti-government attacks. Instead, it is conserving its resources for a prolonged struggle and is working to establish ideological and military links to radical Sinhalese Marxists. [redacted]

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PLOTE is likely to pursue its goals whether or not there is a negotiated settlement offering Tamils limited autonomy in the near term. It will further strengthen ties with Sinhalese Marxists in southern Sri Lanka and will continue to husband its resources to gain dominance over the other insurgent groups. [redacted]

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Background

There are five major Tamil insurgent groups--The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO), the Eelam Revolutionary Organization of Students (EROS), the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) and the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE). Strong personal rivalries are routine among the main insurgent groups. The leaders of the LTTE and PLOTE, [Redacted] [Redacted] were allies in the late 1970s but later became bitter personal rivals, ending coordinated military operations in 1980. [Redacted] [Redacted]

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Caste and regional differences have also exacerbated tensions among the insurgents. [Redacted] [Redacted] TELO members are drawn predominantly from a subcaste specializing in smuggling, preventing them from coordinating fully with insurgent groups of other castes. [Redacted]

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The rivalries have prevented the insurgents from developing an effective alliance against the government. Although the LTTE, TELO, EPRLF and EROS formed, in May 1985, the Eelam National Liberation Front (ENLF)--an umbrella organization based in Madras--leaders of these four member groups have used the alliance only to give the appearance of political unity. They have so far been unwilling or unable to coordinate military operations. [Redacted]

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Marxism Versus Nationalism

Ethnic nationalism, in our view, remains the driving force of the insurgency. Deep-seated anti-Sinhalese sentiment is common to all Tamil insurgent groups, easily transferable to new recruits and more useful to insurgent leaders as a motivating force than Marxist ideology. The insurgents argue the establishment of an independent Tamil state is the only way to remove the political, economic and cultural dominance of the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. During two rounds of Indian-brokered talks with the government last summer, insurgent leaders of the ENLF and PLOTE were able to agree only on extreme Tamil nationalist demands including Tamil self-determination and recognition of traditional Tamil homelands. Insurgent pamphlets and books repeat slogans of Tamil nationalism and anti-Sinhalese rhetoric and insurgent radio broadcasts in Sri Lanka usually highlight alleged atrocities by Sinhalese soldiers against Tamil civilians. They frequently accuse the Sinhalese government of oppression against the "Tamil Nation". [Redacted]

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The leaders of the major Tamil groups, other than PLOTE , have had little formal training in Marxist ideology. Small communist parties have played a sometimes important role in Sri Lankan politics for decades, but most leaders of the Tamil insurgency have not been influenced by this Sinhalese-dominated traditional Left. Instead, the insurgent leaders' contacts with other radical nationalist groups including the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the South West African People's Organization have provided most of the fragmentary Marxist ideology used in insurgent propaganda. The leader of PLOTE, however, may have received formal Marxist training in the Soviet Union. [redacted]

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Those Marxists in the predominantly nationalist insurgent groups have little power. The LTTE has a Marxist theoretician--A.S. Balasingam--but [redacted] he has no influence in LTTE decisionmaking. TELO propaganda uses Marxist and anti-American rhetoric but the lack of any coherent TELO political program suggests Marxists play a minimal role in TELO strategy and decisionmaking. [redacted]

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PLOTE's Marxist Agenda

PLOTE is attempting to lay the groundwork for Marxist revolution in Sri Lanka. Unlike the other insurgent groups which prey upon Tamil civilians for resources but are otherwise isolated from the civilian population, PLOTE emphasizes building a mass political base and educating Tamil and Sinhalese peasants in Marxist revolutionary doctrine. By not joining other insurgent groups in anti-government operations PLOTE has avoided growing protest from Tamil civilians caught in the middle and may be gaining some good will. [redacted]

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The US Embassy in Colombo reports senior Sri Lankan security officials consider PLOTE's political organizing to pose the most serious longterm security threat to the government. We agree with this assessment and believe PLOTE may be husbanding its resources, hoping the government and Tamil nationalist groups will exhaust each other. PLOTE meanwhile is biding its time and building its base of support. [redacted]

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PLOTE commands the most resources of any single insurgent group. PLOTE maintains a combat force of more than 2,500, the largest of any single insurgent group, and operates the most training camps in Tamil Nadu. [redacted]

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[redacted] PLOTE has developed extensive ties to Sinhalese radicals.

[redacted] PLOTE has trained Sinhalese communists in Tamil Nadu, and radical Sinhalese leftists of the proscribed Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front-JVP) and PLOTE have established joint sabotage squads in Sri Lanka targeted at key Sinhalese military and economic installations. [redacted]

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[redacted] PLOTE is the principal Tamil insurgent group in the Sinhalese south because it has JVP support. [redacted]

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PLOTE has also brokered contacts between the Marxist JVP and the major Tamil nationalist groups, in our view, to further PLOTE's position among the insurgent groups and to expose these groups to the JVP's Marxist revolutionary goals. [redacted]

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[redacted] Contacts with the JVP would be useful to the nationalists because they need better access to Sinhalese areas where the JVP operates. [redacted]

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Some of the major insurgent groups may be assisting PLOTE in providing radical Sinhalese with arms and in establishing terrorist cells in the Sinhalese south, but we do not believe this type of collaboration represents a shift in the predominantly nationalist orientation of these insurgent groups. In our view, the nationalist groups will collaborate with the Marxists only to pursue their goal of an independent Tamil state. [redacted]

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Are the Soviets Involved?

In our judgement, the Soviet Union has played only a minor role in the Tamil insurgency thus far. [redacted] the Soviet Embassy in Colombo helped the Tamil United Liberation Front--an early proponent of separatism and now close to PLOTE--to establish Soviet, Cuban and East German friendship societies in Tamil areas of Sri Lanka, beginning in 1977. The Soviets also have printed Tamil-language propaganda for TULF in the past. [redacted]

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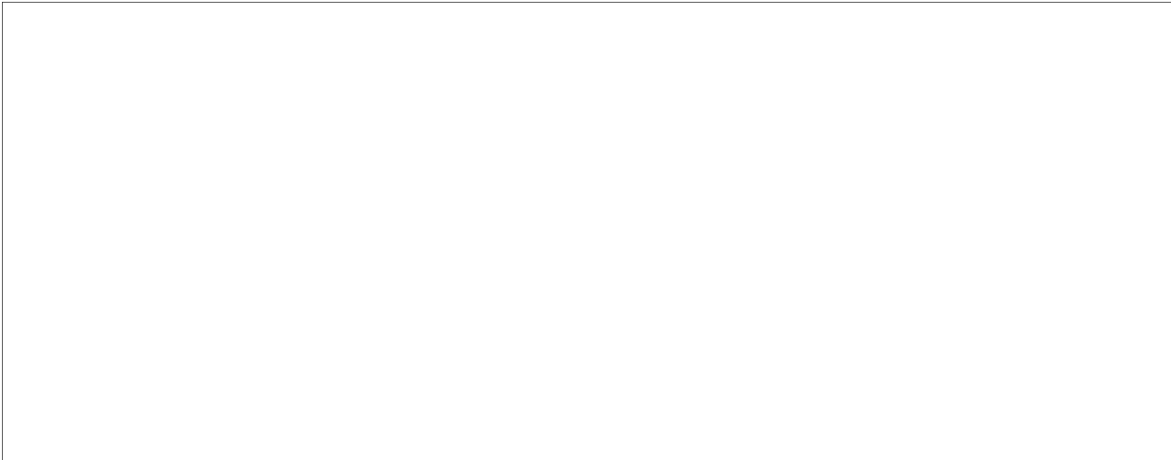
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The Long-Term Threat to the Government

We believe the PLOTE/Marxist threat to Sri Lanka will grow unless the government and nationalist insurgent groups can reach a negotiated settlement. Without an agreement, PLOTE's organization and financing should enable it to play an increasingly dominant role in the insurgency. Prolonged fighting would probably prompt PLOTE to activate its combat forces--a move that would make PLOTE the preeminent insurgent force. We believe the chances are good PLOTE would eventually be able to build a strong popular base in Tamil areas and effectively spread Marxist revolutionary doctrine. [redacted]

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A negotiated settlement between the government and some insurgent groups would exacerbate internal rivalries and hurt PLOTE's chances of forming a united Tamil insurgency. Moreover, the government would have widespread support from many, if not most, Tamil civilians now eager for a settlement. [redacted]

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We believe PLOTE will continue to develop ties to Sinhalese radicals, if a Sinhalese-Tamil settlement is reached calling for limited autonomy. Diplomatic reporting suggests PLOTE would go along with an agreement and attempt to gain a dominant political role in any future Tamil provincial government. A settlement, however, would still provide PLOTE a safe-haven for its forces in Tamil territory and time to build a Tamil-Marxist political party. [redacted]

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Implications for US

Colombo can be expected to continue to try to use the Marxist threat--as well as attempts to brand the insurgents as terrorists--as leverage in gaining US and other international support for its war

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against Tamil separatism. Jayewardene is also likely to wield the threat of Marxist insurgency to justify his own hard line on Tamil nationalist demands. [redacted]

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The longer Colombo remains intransigent on even moderate Tamil demands for limited autonomy, the more motivated and radicalized nationalist insurgent groups are likely to become. Moreover, the inability of government security forces to wage an effective counterinsurgency will lead to gains by PLOTE and its Marxist Sinhalese allies over the longterm. Unless Colombo reaches a settlement soon, its claims that the insurgency is predominantly Marxist could, over time, become a self-fulfilling prophecy, adding new pressures on the US to lend support to Colombo. [redacted]

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A growing government propaganda campaign against Marxism will probably fuel Indian fears of outside intervention in Sri Lanka. Diplomatic reporting suggests some Indian diplomats already believe the US has increased its direct military aid to Colombo and is also indirectly contributing arms and ammunition through Pakistan. [redacted]

Appendix A

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The Insurgents

The insurgents are young, low caste Sri Lankan Tamils from the economically backward Northern and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka. They are divided into 5 major groups and several splinter groups. We estimate total insurgent combat strength for most of last year was over 7,000. We estimate that current insurgent strength in Sri Lanka may now be as high as 4,500 as some groups have begun recruiting boys as young as 14 and have transferred their personnel from base camps in India. Insurgent leaders and approximately half of the combat force are based in India with the remainder operating from camps in the Northern, North Central and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka. [redacted]

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Despite internal rivalries and no political program, the insurgents remain highly motivated. Defense attache and press reports indicate the insurgents willingly endure long periods of isolation in their jungle hideouts, retrieve their dead and wounded from government security forces and frequently swallow cyanide when confronted with capture. Increasing attacks against Sinhalese troops and civilians have probably helped maintain insurgent morale amid weapons shortages and stepped-up government operations. [redacted]

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Appendix B

The Key Tamil Leaders

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APPAPILLAI AMIRTHALINGAM

General Secretary of the Tamil United Liberation Front since 1972, Amirthalingam represents moderate Tamil political interests. He does, however, echo the Marxist rhetoric of some separatists, saying publicly that he favors a socialist state based on Marxist principles. He adds that the main purpose for a Tamil state is to "maintain the safety of (the) people and their property as well as a separate cultural and linguistic identity." Amirthalingam, 56, was a key leader of Sri Lanka's Parliamentary opposition during 1977-1983 but lost his seat after protesting a constitutional ammendment against separatism. He travels extensively as a Tamil spokesman. [Redacted]

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UMA MAHESWARAN

Part of the PLOTE core reportedly trained by the PLO, Maheswaran is a classic Marxist. A former associate of LTTE leader Prabhakaran, Maheswaran, about 40, helped found the LTTE and trained in Lebanon in 1978. Maheswaran claims to have been educated in the Soviet Union, although we cannot confirm this. [Redacted]

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ANTON BALASINGAM

Balasingam, the ideologue responsible for LTTE Marxist rhetoric [Redacted] says the Tigers want a socialist Tamil state to protect individual liberties. He claims the roots of Sri Lanka's insurgency stem not from political differences but from Sinhalese colonization of traditional Tamil areas beginning in the late 1940s. A well-educated economist, Balasingam, 48, disputed the TULF's right to represent Tamils at negotiations last summer in Bhutan. [Redacted]

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