

# U.S. Army advisers train Sri Lankans

## Both nations deny links to anti-rebel effort

By Tom Carter  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Last month, as Tamil Tiger guerrillas readied for this week's siege in northern Sri Lanka, a contingent of U.S. "special operations forces" was teaching Sri Lankan army officers the art of pinpoint helicopter landings, first aid and logistics.

Critics, citing early U.S. involvement in Vietnam, suggest the presence of U.S. military advisers in Sri Lanka represents a change and perhaps an escalation of U.S. support for the Sri Lankan government.

U.S. and Sri Lankan officials say that fear is unwarranted.

"Operation: Balance Style 96-1," which ran from June 1-30, was described this week by Sri Lankan Embassy personnel and State Department and Pentagon officials as part of the routine "ongoing program of consultation, advisers and field training" between the U.S. and Sri Lankan militaries.

It brought to Sri Lanka about 15 U.S. military specialists from Fort Lewis, Wash., Okinawa, Japan, and Hawaii for "joint combined exchange training," said a Pentagon spokesman.

"It was Army special operations forces," said Lt. Col. Pat Sivigny at the Pentagon. "I don't know if they were Green Berets, Rangers, psychological operations or civil affairs. They might have been Green Berets, but not necessarily."

Green Beret advisers were active in Vietnam.

The Sri Lanka Embassy adamantly denied any suggestion that the United States is involved in training Sri Lankan military personnel for its 13-year civil war with Tamil Tigers.

"It has nothing to do with the Tamil Tigers," said Prasad Kariyawasam, minister at the embassy in Washington. "There is no training at all regarding the Tamil Tigers or linked to the conflict in Sri Lanka."

"The United States and Sri Lanka have an ongoing military program such as exists between any two friendly countries. We are very embarrassed by these reports of Green Berets."

Mr. Kariyawasam noted that the United States is barred by U.S. law from selling Sri Lanka "lethal assistance." He said the U.S. advisers only were in the south of the country, far from the fighting up north.

The State Department echoed that assessment.

"They were low-level joint military exercises," said a State Department official on the condition of anonymity. "This does not represent an escalation for us, and we

### NEARLY FIVE DECADES OF ETHNIC VIOLENCE

Recent U.S. involvement in training Sri Lankan military personnel to combat Tamil Tigers comes after years of civil war in the country.

**1948:** More than a million Plantation Tamils are rendered stateless by the Citizenship Act passed by the predominantly Sinhalese United National Party, which was in power after Britain granted Ceylon independence.

**1950:** The Sinhalese government develops river basins in the traditional Tamil homeland in the northeast and colonizes it with Sinhalese.

**1956:** Sinhala is proclaimed the official language of Ceylon. Tamils protest, and Sinhalese nationalists violently attack them, killing more than 100 Tamils.

**1959:** Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike is assassinated by a Buddhist monk.

**1971:** Ceylon declares a six-year state of emergency after a leftist Sinhalese youth movement rebellion.

**1972:** Ceylon becomes the Republic of Sri Lanka and its constitution removes rights accorded to national minorities. Tamil groups rise up as a means of combatting continued oppression and discrimination.

**1983:** Tamils in the south flee to their homeland in the north, more than 3,000 are killed and 150,000 become refugees. More flee to India and the West, and the government speaks out in support of them. However, the parliament passes an amendment to the constitution requiring an oath of allegiance to Sri Lanka and renouncing separatism.

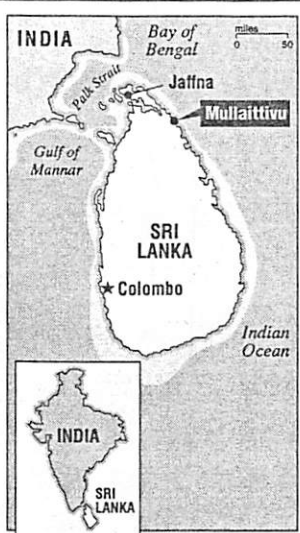
**1986:** Violence between the Tamils and Sri Lanka intensifies. Thousands of Tamils die or become refugees as a result.

**1987:** Sri Lanka launches an economic blockade in the north. Tamils refuse to give up the struggle for statehood and reject India's argument that an accord between India and Sri Lanka represents a final redressal of Tamil grievances.

**1989:** R. Premadasa becomes president of Sri Lanka, and thousands of Sinhalese youths are massacred or "disappear" in the Sinhalese areas as the government cracks down on left-wing groups.

**1993:** Mr. Premadasa and opposition politician Lalith Athulathmudali are assassinated. Tamils gain control in the east and call for unconditional talks with the government. The call is rejected and the new president says the war is a terrorist problem and that no ethnic or national issues exist. He also rejects merging the northern and eastern provinces, saying the solution to the problem is military.

**1995:** Tamils resume suicide attacks early in the year and full conflict resumes.



The Washington Times

haven't changed our policy."

After considerable local opposition, the Voice of America radio is building a giant station there, but U.S. military sources say that Sri Lanka is of little strategic importance to the United States.

Since independence from Britain in 1948, Sri Lanka's Hindu Tamils, about 13 percent of the population, have chafed under the discriminatory language and employment policies of the majority Buddhist Sinhalese.

In 1972, Ceylon was renamed Sri Lanka and Sinhalese extremists, in celebration, beat and killed ethnic Tamils throughout the island country.

In the 1980s, Tamil youths in the north responded by organizing into a ferocious guerrilla group called the Liberation Tigers of

Tamil Eelam. Different sources say the group now numbers between 2,000 and 10,000 rebels.

On July 22, 1983, 13 Sinhalese troops were massacred and mutilated near Jaffna by Tigers bent on wrenching an independent state of Eelam out of Sri Lanka. That provoked islandwide retaliation by Sinhalese. Since then, the tit-for-tat violence on both sides has claimed about 50,000 lives.

By 1987, the Sri Lankan army had pushed the well-funded Tigers back to Jaffna. India, sympathetic to the rebels, tried peacekeeping for several years but lost 1,500 of its own troops before retreating in 1990.

The presence of Indian troops on Sri Lankan soil incited Sinhalese nationalist riots in the south, which the government also sup-

pressed.

A violent and bloody stalemate ensued between the right-wing government and the Tamil rebels, in which then-Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa and a host of other important Sri Lankan politicians were assassinated by rebel forces.

The State Department defined the Tamils as terrorists in its report on global terrorism. It also praised the new government for its work toward eliminating human rights violations, no small development for a government often accused of using death squads to deal with Tamil sympathizers.

After 17 years in power, the ruling right-wing government was ousted in general elections by a left-wing coalition in August 1994. In October, the new government mounted what it hoped would be a death knell attack on the rebels in their Jaffna stronghold, and by April the rebels appeared routed.

But the Tamil organization was not decapitated. Instead, it simply moved into the jungles, where last week it initiated its violent response to the government.

The rebel group, widely thought to have been severely weakened by the government's recapture of their Jaffa Peninsula stronghold earlier this year, claimed a major victory in a devastating attack on a northeastern army base.

News agencies in Sri Lanka reported yesterday that government forces gave up trying to recapture the key army base in the island's northeast, the Mullaitivu garrison, and withdrew troops. They had been fighting for a week.

A senior military official told United Press International that troops were finding rebel resistance at Mullaitivu too strong to retake the camp. Troops retreated under heavy mortar fire.

About 40 special forces commandos who secured the beachhead for the withdrawal were killed by guerrillas, he said.

The Tamil forces launched a pre-dawn attack on the Mullaitivu garrison — 175 miles northeast of the capital of Colombo — overrunning it in a matter of hours.

All communication was cut off with a few pockets of government troops who continued to resist guerrilla attacks from within the base's perimeter. Officials believe nearly all of the garrison's 1,200 defenders were killed in the fighting or executed later by the rebels.

The retreat from Mullaitivu came as Sri Lankan troops yesterday began a drive south from government strongholds in the island's northern Elephant Pass toward the town of Kilinochchi, where separatist rebels are believed to be headquartered.

In Colombo on Wednesday, bombs blamed on the Tamils killed 70 persons and wounded 350 aboard a commuter train at a suburban station in Colombo.

The rebels denied responsibility.