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The Shri Lanka Q

Sir,

Lt Gen E. A Vas has correctly pointed out in his article “Sri Lanka: the military dimension” (IE, May 4) that all wars are a display of national will to fulfil political objectives and protect vital interests, but he has not mentioned what our vital interests are in Sri Lanka. It is not only important for the soldier to know the cause for which he is fighting but it is also important for the nation as a whole to know the cause of its involvement in Sri Lanka. For, the will of the soldier is dependent on the will of the nation. Unfortunately, the Government is not taking the nation into confidence in this regard and this is likely to affect the will of the nation and its soldiers adversely.

Surprisingly, in spite of the tremendous drain on the exchequer and the huge losses that we have suffered in the form of casualties no one (not even the Opposition) seems to question the sagacity of our Sri Lankan involvement. Initially when India decided to send troops to Sri Lanka it was with the consent of the Sri Lankan Government and with the intention of securing for the Tamils their rightful due without they having to fight for it. It was indeed a noble cause and none could doubt the political wisdom of the Indian Government in accepting this moral responsibility. But can we justify our presence on the Island on those grounds today? We are today fighting the very Tamils in whose support we intervened and the Sri Lankan Government is throwing broad enough hints that we get out – the sooner the better.

What is probably keeping the nation quiet with regard to our Lankan policy is a general feeling that our intervention is somehow connected with our national security, to discuss which is considered taboo in our country. Many people seem to think that if we had not gone in some other country would have and we might have had to face a threat from an unfriendly naval base so close to our coast. Some even seem to flatter themselves by imagining that by moving into Sri Lanka India has in fact forestalled a likely American move in this direction and thus warded off chances of Superpower rivalry in the region. Both the United States as well as the Soviet Union had virtually given a no-objection certificate to India before IPKF moved into Sri Lanka. It is also doubtful if any of the regional powers has the capability of maintaining a hostile naval base against us in Sri Lanka. In any case the solution lies in strengthening our Navy rather than occupying all the islands around us. Only defence experts can say how much the Indian Navy could have been strengthened with an amount equal to what we have already spent in Sri Lanka.

It is not uncommon for governments to make a prestige issue of their military interventions that have failed. The United States and the Soviet Union are known to have prolonged their occupation of Vietnam and Afghanistan on this account. Let us hope that our Government is not suffering from any such complex and our continued presence in Sri Lanka is based on expert advice.

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