

INTERVIEW - India lacked grit on Tamil Tigers -- envoy.By **Chaitanya Kalbag**

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NEW DELHI, Nov 19 (Reuters) - India's lack of "grit" in pursuing its costly military foray into northern Sri Lanka may have led to Rajiv Gandhi's 1991 murder by a suspected Tamil Tiger suicide bomber, New Delhi's former envoy to Colombo said on Wednesday.

"If you are a regional power, if you are determined to safeguard your unity and integrity, you have to take hard decisions," said Jyotindra Nath Dixit, who was India's High Commissioner (Ambassador) to Sri Lanka between 1985 and 1989.

He said New Delhi's policy was driven by the fear that Sri Lanka's Tamil separatist problem could spill over into India's southern state of Tamil Nadu.

"And if you take hard decisions then you must have the grit to follow them through till they are fully implemented...Had we succeeded...perhaps Rajiv Gandhi would not have been killed," Dixit told Reuters in an interview.

Dixit brokered an India-Sri Lanka accord that led to the landing of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in Jaffna, the northern Sri Lanka stronghold of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on July 30, 1987.

The Indian Army was ordered to enforce the accord, which promised autonomy to Tamil-dominated areas in the island's north and east. But the truce quickly fell to pieces.

Fierce fighting between Indian troops and the LTTE's guerrillas erupted on October 7, 1987. Between 1,000 and 1,200 Indian soldiers died and about 2,000 were wounded until the IPKF's abrupt withdrawal in March 1990.

"I think the policy adopted by us was right, valid in the country's interest. The only thing wrong was we didn't have the grit to follow it," said Dixit, whose just-published book "Assignment Colombo" promises an "insider's account".

India's political parties are in turmoil over an interim report on a probe into Gandhi's May 21, 1991 assassination.

Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral's government has promised to place the report, which newspaper leaks say indicts members of India's ruling coalition for poor security for Gandhi, before the federal parliament which convenes later on Wednesday.

Gandhi's Congress party has threatened to withdraw support to Gujral's coalition if it does not eject the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the regional group ruling the southern state of Tamil Nadu that the newspaper leaks say has been charged with sympathy and aid for Sri Lanka's LTTE.

"Are we going to punish every political leader who dealt with the LTTE?" Dixit said.

He said it was wrong to blame the DMK alone, and that Rajiv Gandhi, India's prime minister from 1984 to 1989, had maintained contact with the LTTE even after the peace process collapsed.

"Accusing (the DMK) alone is not correct. Rajiv Gandhi and (his mother) Indira Gandhi were involved. Gandhi kept meeting them (LTTE) until 1991," Dixit said.

"Once the LTTE did not keep to its commitment to India to join the peaceful process...when they started fighting us we should have broken off relations," he said.

"Instead of that, on the one hand we asked our army to fight them, and on the other hand our intelligence agencies and various political parties kept hobnobbing with them thinking that this two-track approach would succeed, which was not correct."



Dixit said he protested this policy.

"Of course I conveyed that this contradiction is not going to work, but I was told you take care of the Sri Lanka situation, the Indian side is not your responsibility."

Dixit, who retired in 1994 as India's Foreign Secretary, the most senior diplomat in the foreign ministry, said the LTTE had good cause to fear Rajiv Gandhi, who was killed by a suicide bomber as he campaigned for national elections his party won in June 1991.

New Delhi blamed the assassination on the LTTE. The rebels have denied responsibility.

"I only know that the LTTE certainly was instrumental in the assassination because the LTTE apprehended that if he (Gandhi) came back to power he would ensure full support to the Sri Lankan government to fight against (the LTTE) because they had repeatedly betrayed the commitments they had given to Rajiv Gandhi."

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