

Operation Pawan

On 11 October 1987, the first major battle under Operation Pawan started with the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) attacking Jaffna University. This article chronologically covers the background behind the civil war in Sri Lanka, the response of Indian Government to help the Sri Lankan Tamils, the peace accord signed between Sri Lankan Government and Indian Government, and the ensuing battle between LTTE and IPKF.

Aspirants would find this article very helpful while preparing for the IAS Exam.

Operation Pawan Details

This was the code name assigned to the IPKF's operation to wrest control of Jaffna from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). This military intervention of the Indian Army in Sri Lanka has been described by some as India's Vietnam. Even though Jaffna was taken over by the IPKF from the LTTE, it was at a huge cost. More than 200 Indian soldiers lost their lives in this operation. Apart from that, there were severe criticisms and allegations of human rights violation on the part of the IPKF by both the Sri Lankan government, the Tamil Tigers as well as some human rights organizations.

Civil War in Sri Lanka

The civil war in Sri Lanka started in 1983 when the LTTE started its armed insurgency in the country with the intention of creating a separate independent country for Tamils (called Tamil Eelam) in the Northern and Eastern parts of Sri Lanka. The origins of the separatist movement can be traced back to the discriminatory practices followed by the Sinhalese government against the Sri Lankan Tamils. Preference was given to ethnic Sinhalese and the Tamils were actively discriminated against taking up jobs in the civil service and the government. There was violence also targeted at the Tamils. This prompted the Tamils to take up arms and the most important rebel group was the LTTE led by V Prabhakaran.

India's Response - Initial Support to LTTE, Peace Accord with Sri Lankan Government and Military Response by India

1. India initially supported the rebels and the RAW even provided arms, monetary support and training to the LTTE on warfare. The reason for India's interference can be attributed to the human rights concerns in Sri Lanka. The state of Tamil Nadu was particularly interested in the affairs because of strong kinship feeling with the Sri Lankan Tamils. In the late 1980s, when Jaffna was under siege by the Sri Lankan army, the Indian government airdropped food parcels to the people there. Earlier appeals by the Indian government to Sri Lanka to supply humanitarian aid had been ignored. In a bid to win the civil war, the Sri Lankan government had cut off even food supplies to the strife-torn regions.

2. Convinced of India's determination after the food-drop incident, the Sri Lankan government and the Indian government signed the Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord on July 29, 1987. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President J R Jayewardene signed the accord in which Sri Lanka agreed to give more autonomy to the provinces, to merge the northern and eastern provinces into a single province, and grant official status to the Tamil language.
3. India was to send the IPKF to Jaffna to maintain law and order and also agreed to stop its assistance to the Tamil rebels. The LTTE agreed albeit reluctantly to surrender their arms.
4. However, the LTTE did not disarm completely and there ensued a full-blown conflict between the LTTE and the IPKF who wanted to ensure the Accord's success by using force against the rebels.
5. Operation Pawan was the codename given to the mission to overtake Jaffna. On 9 and 10 October 1987, the IPKF had successfully destroyed LTTE's radio and TV stations and their printing presses. On 11 October the Jaffna University was attacked by the IPKF in a heliborne assault. It was intended to be a quick raid to capture the Tamil rebel leaders who were believed to be hiding in the university. This was the real beginning of Operation Pawan. This operation was a disaster as the LTTE had set up an ambush after receiving intelligence about the IPKF assault. The heli dropped IPKF soldiers were attacked by the LTTE and 31 Indians lost their lives in this battle.
6. The IPKF was in Sri Lanka for three years combating the rebels. There were allegations of a human rights violation by the IPKF. But the IPKF had an extremely tough job on the island. It was impossible to figure out who was a rebel and who was a civilian as the LTTE employed women and children as well in its conflict. As per reports of the Indian soldiers, there were young girls who would take out guns from their frocks, and the soldiers were clueless as to how to fight them. The Indian soldiers had also underestimated the strength and resources of the LTTE, not to mention their determination.
7. Increasingly the Sinhalese also started resenting the presence of Indian soldiers on their soil and the government of Sri Lanka asked them to quit Lanka. Rajiv Gandhi refused to withdraw the IPKF and only when he was defeated in the 1989 parliamentary elections and V P Singh became the new Indian Prime Minister, the IPKF was withdrawn in March 1990.
8. In total 1200 Indian soldiers lost their lives in the war.
9. Rajiv Gandhi's assassination by Tamil rebels is also attributed to his decision to send the IPKF to the island.