

## From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

### Extremists on rampage in Sri Lanka

*Unceasing violence has demoralized the population, and food shortages are reported in the interior.*

A spate of killings by both Tamil and Sinhalese extremists has thrown Sri Lanka into a new spiral of despair. President Jayawardene, who is stepping down from his presidential office in December following elections, has indicated that he has very few options left to stop the increasing mayhem.

Over the last five years, violence has become a part of life in Sri Lanka. Yet, beginning in October, the level of violence escalated to the point that signs of wear and tear have begun to show in the body politic. At stake are the Northeast Provincial Council elections on Nov. 19 and the presidential election in December.

The Northeast Provincial Council elections, which will assemble a regional governing body for the newly combined Tamil-majority northern and eastern provinces, is the last of the provincial elections to be held under a scheme for devolution of power worked out between India and Sri Lanka.

For more than a year now, the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) has been trying to put pressure on the most militant of the Tamil guerrillas—the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)—to accept the proposal. In spite of other Tamil groups' accepting it, the LTTE continues to hold out and at the same time terrorize the population in order to sabotage the elections.

On Nov. 14, as the election date drew nearer, Tamil militants ambushed a bus carrying 34 passengers in the Eastern Province. Twenty-seven Sinhala passengers died in the ambush. This is the largest single massacre by Tamils since Oct. 10, the last day for submitting nomination papers

for the council elections, when 45 Sinhalese were shot dead.

Meanwhile, in the southern and central provinces where no ethnic problem exists, the Janata Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) is becoming increasingly powerful, as the political leadership in Colombo falters. On Nov. 1, nine people were killed and large amounts of arms and ammunition taken by JVP militants in a pre-dawn attack on an army camp. Subsequently, 153 JVP activists, arrested and held for trial in a military detention camp in southern Sri Lanka, escaped—probably with the help of some army men.

On Oct. 25, facing the growing strength of the JVP, which is viciously anti-India, blaming it for Sri Lanka's ethnic crisis, President Jayawardene said his government was ready to comply with the JVP demands and dissolve Parliament, paving the way for the presidential and general elections, provided the JVP ceased all violence.

But the President's hopes were quickly dashed when the JVP issued a statement the next day calling for a "total change beginning from the very top." The statement was served up with a dose of terror: JVP activists set ablaze six homes belonging to ruling United National Party (UNP) and opposition United Socialist Alliance (USA) candidates.

As the situation grew grim, President Jayawardene met with his longtime political adversary and leader of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, on Nov. 5. But during the meeting, it became evident that, even if they work together,

these politicians alone no longer call the shots. It was the JVP that had demanded the historic, yet inconclusive meeting of the two old political leaders.

Significantly, the JVP later thumbed its erstwhile coalition partner, the SLFP, and has summarily rejected other entreaties for opposition alliance.

On Nov. 7, the JVP called a general strike that continued for a week, pressing for a charter of demands which include the dissolution of Parliament. On Nov. 10, the day set for submitting nomination papers for the presidential election in Colombo, JVP called for a mob action. The government responded with shoot-on-sight orders to the security forces.

As the leading candidates were whisked through the empty streets of Colombo in heavily guarded motorcades to submit their nomination papers, Sri Lanka broke out in new violence. In Hambantota, soldiers confronted by a crowd of some 2,000 JVP activists and supporters opened fire, killing six. Nine more were killed in two different towns, when JVP-led mobs attacked police.

Meanwhile, rumors are flying that the President has requested that India rescue him and his cabinet members should the situation further deteriorate. There were rumors that Indian commandos had landed in Sri Lanka on their way back from the Maldives, rumors which both India and Sri Lanka have denied.

But there is no question that the week-long strike and associated violence have taken a heavy toll, greatly disrupting the lives of the common people. There are reports of food shortages in the interior because of the transport strike, and of foodgrain piling up in the ports which can't be distributed inland because of the JVP-imposed strike.