

## From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

### Benchmark in Sri Lanka

*Swearing in the North East Provincial Council regains the momentum for a peaceful settlement to the ethnic crisis.*

**O**n Dec. 9, the newly elected chief minister of the North East Province, A.V. Perumal, and his cabinet were sworn in, establishing a crucial beachhead in the battle to defuse the ethnic crisis that has torn the island nation of Sri Lanka to shreds over the past five years.

The Tamil-majority Northern and Eastern provinces were merged, and a scheme for devolution of power to elected assemblies devised, as the political framework for settling the conflict between the majority Sinhala and minority Tamils, under the terms of the accord adopted by Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President Junius Jayewardene in July 1987.

Election of the North-East Assembly and establishment of the ministry are victories critical for the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord, as they establish a democratic alternative to the separatist terror of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). LTTE, the dominant Tamil group, reneged on its agreement to the process envisioned in the accord, and took up arms against the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) deployed to disarm the Tamil guerrillas.

President Jayewardene and the Indian authorities went against the tide of fear and withdrawal generated by the violence and threats of the LTTE and its counterpart among Sinhala chauvinists, the Maoist-fascist Janata Vimukhti Peramuna (JVP), to proceed with the North-East elections.

Unlike in the northern districts of the province, where in the midst of

open warfare between the LTTE and IPKF, candidates were elected with no contest in October, in the three eastern districts voter turnout was a high 60% on Nov. 19. Now, the leader of a militant Tamil group heads a major state government. A.V. Perumal's party, the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), won 41 of the 71 assembly seats, for an absolute majority. The Sri Lankan Muslim Congress came in second with 17, and the EPRLF's electoral ally, the Eelam National Democratic Liberation Front (ENDLF) won 12 seats.

Critical as it was, this victory does not mean that the war is won. The EPRLF, whose leaders acknowledge their total dependence on the IPKF, will now have to build up its own institutional strength as an effective instrument for reconstruction and reconciliation in the war-weary province.

The drama in the North East takes place in a broader national arena, which has itself been transformed into a political and military minefield by years of ethnic strife. Here, attention is focused on the Dec. 19 presidential elections, to be followed by dissolution of the Parliament Dec. 20 and new parliamentary elections Feb. 15.

In the Dec. 19 contest the ruling UNP's candidate, Prime Minister R. Premadasa, is pitted against the former prime minister and leader of the opposition Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike. In this fight, the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord has been made the central issue. The accord is the target for the chauvinist sentiments of the Sinhala

majority, which has found it opportune to mask its anti-Tamil bigotry in a patriotic defense of Sri Lankan sovereignty against Indian impositions.

Significantly, the Indian High Commissioner in Colombo, J.N. Dixit, issued a public warning on Dec. 1 to both presidential candidates, on the "unpredictable consequences" that would follow any unilateral abrogation of the accord.

Informed opinion here is that the presidential contest is a toss-up, with the result depending on the JVP, which has emerged as the controlling factor in the south and central regions. Other things being equal, Mrs. Bandaranaike should win, but if the JVP follows through on its boycott call, the 20% of the electorate in the south who are solidly behind her, will forfeit their votes.

Neither Mr. Premadasa nor Mrs. Bandaranaike have dared condemn the JVP, whose terror campaign against the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord (recently three Indian expatriates were murdered at an industrial project in southern Sri Lanka) and the present government continues unabated. In recent months, JVP terror has rivaled, if not exceeded, the toll exacted in LTTE-IPKF warfare.

It is evident that the JVP design goes beyond the elections. In mid-November the JVP collapsed talks among the eight opposition parties to unite around Mrs. Bandaranaike's candidacy, and issued notes to all SLFP office-holders to quit or face execution. JVP supremo, the Moscow-educated Rohan Wijeweera, stated that he would not contest the elections. JVP's priority, he said, was to "chase out the Indian troops, repeal the act of betrayal [the accord], dissolve the provincial councils, and chase out the Jayewardene-Thondaman government." Wijeweera later told the local *Sunday Times* that he was building a "patriotic army" to do the job.