

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Sinhala terrorist group decapitated

The good news from Sri Lanka doesn't bring much relief to its civil war conditions and economic paralysis.

The news Nov. 13 from Sri Lanka that the chief of the terrorist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Rohana Wijeweera, and his second-in-command Upatissa Gamanayake, had been shot dead, was the first significant break in the months-long offensive by Sri Lankan security forces against the Sinhala terrorist group.

More recent dispatches from the Sri Lankan capital Colombo, citing the capture of a JVP radio station and all but one member of the group's central committee, indicates that the Maoist group has been decapitated.

Riding the wave of discontent over the Jayewardene government's 1987 decision to seek Indian military assistance to quash the Tamil secessionist movement in northeastern Sri Lanka, the JVP mounted a terror drive that nearly brought the now ten-month-old government of Jayewardene's successor, R. Premadasa, to its knees. A civil war was unleashed as security forces and their kin took vigilante action against the terrorists. In recent weeks the JVP's target had shifted to the economy, and creeping economic paralysis has accompanied the daily death toll of 30 to 100.

The successful strike against the JVP will end the outfit's political thrust, though the terror and killing will no doubt continue. Though important, it is no longer as decisive as it might have been, say, two years ago—before this tortured island slid into the anarchy and civil war that has now almost hopelessly clouded the way out of the ethnic conflict between the majority Sinhala Buddhist and minority Tamil Hindu communities.

President Premadasa may be pleased, but hardly relieved. His desperate gambit to emerge master of the fast deteriorating situation by striking a deal with the Tamil terrorist army, the LTTE, and forcing the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) to withdraw is blowing up in his face.

On Nov. 5, within a week of the IPKF's withdrawal from Amparai district, the LTTE ripped up its paper-thin ceasefire agreement with Premadasa's government, and launched a pre-dawn armed attack on two rival Tamil groups. The LTTE men came by boat and used rocket-propelled grenades and machine guns in the attack, causing an unknown number of casualties (one estimate put the toll at 50, with some 150 Tamil youth taken prisoner by the LTTE). The government was forced to deploy the Sri Lankan army.

The North-East Provincial Council, headed by one of the LTTE's rivals, the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), charged Nov. 9 that the LTTE attack was undertaken with the "active connivance" of the Sri Lankan army's special task force. The LTTE, for its part, justified abandoning the ceasefire with charges that India is sending fresh troops to Sri Lanka in violation of the withdrawal agreement, and complained that rival Tamil groups were raising a "Tamil National Army" through forced conscription.

If the performance of Sri Lanka's defense secretary, Gen. Sepalle Attygalle, at a Nov. 9 press briefing is any indication, the government may attempt to bury this new crisis by pick-

ing another fight with India. General Sepalle all but accused New Delhi of illegally arming Tamil groups in the northeast in announcing that the government had received reports that an Indian Air Force plane had unloaded several crates at a base near Thincumalee and subsequently transported them south to Nilaveli.

To add to his woes, Premadasa faces a no-confidence motion in parliament brought by an opposition headed by the Sri Lankan Freedom Party of former Prime Minister Mrs. Sirmavo Bandaranaike. Though the government, with 125 of the 225 seats in the parliament, can be expected to survive such a test, the breakdown of its recent efforts to organize an all-party conference on the national crisis underscores its limited political capital.

A less spectacular but potentially decisive factor in this tragic crisis is the International Monetary Fund, whose insistent demands for "major structural adjustment" have again been put to the government recently. The IMF still refuses to release the 67 million Special Drawing Rights second installment of a Structural Adjustment Facility loan negotiated in March 1988, charging Sri Lanka with failure to meet IMF targets set after the first installment was released.

These targets include a virtual free-fall of the Sri Lankan rupee and drastic reduction of subsidies for essential commodities such as flour, rice, sugar, milk, and fuel. The government's efforts to comply have already lit the fires of inflation, now running at 20% or more.

The IMF's demand that Sri Lanka torch its economy might well have come from the terrorist JVP or LTTE. Sri Lanka is heavily dependent on imports to meet requirements of even the basic items, so devaluation of the rupee is devastating.