

Questions surround assassination of Sri Lanka's President Premadasa

by Ramtanu Maitra

The ghastly assassination of Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa at the May Day rally in the heart of central Colombo suggests that at least one of the terrorist groups in South Asia, with extensive tentacles abroad, may now be operating in a strictly mercenary capacity.

It will soon be firmly established that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), whose decade-long secessionist movement is smattered with political assassinations, including the 1991 murder of India's Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, were the "hands" that pulled the lever to trigger the "human bomb" that killed President Premadasa and at least 24 others.

Like the Rajiv Gandhi assassination, the Premadasa killing bears the "pawprints" of the LTTE, and like the Rajiv case, a clear and convincing motive is missing. According to Sri Lankan experts and Pittsburgh professor Marshall Singer, the LTTE has aggressively entered the mercenary business, selling their training and expertise to the highest bidder.

With the LTTE's international links, cultivated over the decade through drug- and gun-running, one may wonder who is the "brain" behind the Premadasa murder. A review of Sri Lanka's political scene and its British roots may supply the key clues.

President Premadasa was a grassroots politician from humble lineage in a country where the elite, educated and trained by former British institutions, has always called the shots. As such, he stuck out like a sore thumb, speaking openly against the elites, the international human rights activists, and the Israeli intelligence service, the Mossad. Premadasa's 1991 expulsion of British ambassador David Gladstone was a unique event in the annals of Sri Lanka and a heinous crime in the eyes of the anglophile Sri Lankan nobility. All these acts of President Premadasa, along with his ruthless military operations against the Sinhala chauvinists and the LTTE, had practically sealed his fate.

Opposition leader killed

Only a week before President Premadasa's murder, the former national security minister and leading elite opposition leader to Premadasa, Lalith Athulathmudali, was killed by an assassin's bullet while he was campaigning for provincial

elections. Athulathmudali's funeral resulted in riots against the Premadasa government, and the residence of Buddhist poet-monk Ellie Gunawangsa, a close friend of Premadasa's, was attacked. Athulathmudali's party, the Democratic United National Front, is led by the Sri Lankan nobility which enjoys extensive connections to Britain.

The double murder has now hurled Sri Lanka into political chaos, with the likely result that Sri Lanka's national sovereignty will become the next target.

On April 28, officials of the United Nations unilaterally announced that they would begin discussions with the LTTE and the government, although there had been no such invitation from the government's side.

In late March, the British Broadcasting Corporation queried Premadasa on the need for the United Nations to come into Sri Lanka, on the necessity for Sri Lanka to reduce its expenditures for the military, and on Amnesty International reports of human rights violations.

The British, of course, take a keen interest in Sri Lanka. On Jan. 23, 1991, Sri Lanka was the subject of debate in the House of Lords. With support from most of those present, Lord Avebury declared that a U.N. administration for Sri Lanka might be appropriate, which would involve a "short-term transfer of sovereignty." "The only chance that the people will have," said the British noble, "is if an impartial outside body comes to restore law and order and to supervise elections. . . . Perhaps the Commonwealth Secretariat might have a similar role."

Premadasa's murder may well be a major step in the lords' achieving their goal.

The worst of times

Since former President Junius Jayewardene's surprising decision to name his prime minister, Premadasa, as his successor in the ruling United National Party (UNP), Premadasa has run headlong into difficulties with the elites of the country. Contemptuous of Premadasa's roots, the elites were deeply upset over losing supreme authority in the island. At the time of his inauguration in 1989, Premadasa's task was to counter the vicious Sinhala group, the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP), which was rampaging through southern and central Sri Lanka killing politicians by the hundreds. The

JVP, with ties to North Korea, the former Soviet Union, and the People's Republic of China, was preaching hatred against the government, India, and almost anyone else. Having infiltrated the lower ranks of the Army and the secretive Buddhist Sangha, and having forged close ties with the racist anti-Tamil Sinhala nobility, the JVP had grown into a monster organization between 1983 and 1989. The presence of the Indian Peacekeeping Force on the island, a result of the Rajiv Gandhi-Jayewardene accord, and the failure of the Indian Army to attain its objective of disarming the LTTE guerrillas, provided the JVP an opportunity to mix their anti-government venom with an anti-India tirade.

Meanwhile, the LTTE, in the north and east, having been trained by the Mossad and now a partner in the multibillion-dollar gun-and-drug network which allowed it to set up assets in India, Singapore, Pakistan, London, Paris, and Canada, was pursuing its secessionist goal with equal ruthlessness. It was in these difficult circumstances that Premadasa, with an unshakable political base in rural Sri Lanka, took over the job to restore peace to Sri Lanka.

A two-track policy

Premadasa adopted a two-track policy. While he went hammer and tong after the southern insurgents, the JVP, he sent out signals to the LTTE in the north indicating that his government was willing to listen and work out a solution in the line of allowing autonomy to the Tamils. However, the suppression of the JVP, which was practically eradicated following the death of its leader Rohana Wijeweera, drew international attention. The disappearance of a journalist, whom the government considered pro-JVP, prompted an international human rights campaign against Sri Lanka.

With the help of *Washington Post* correspondent Steve Coll, the Mothers' Forum was launched, consisting of mothers of alleged JVP activists who had disappeared or been found dead. Although Premadasa considered this an interference in Sri Lanka's internal affairs and declared that the Mothers' Forum inauguration rally in Colombo would be considered illegal, the presence of a number of diplomats from major western countries prevented the government from stopping the crusade.

In March 1991, two months after the British House of Lords debate on Sri Lanka, London's Amnesty International paid a quiet visit to Colombo and met with senior bureaucrats, all belonging to the British-influenced upper echelon of Sri Lankan society. Amnesty International had been accused of being a "terrorist organization" by Sri Lankan Minister of State for Defense Ranjan Wijeratne, a very close associate of President Premadasa. Wijeratne was assassinated by a car bomb prior to Amnesty International's secret visit, and the LTTE was finally blamed for that killing.

In May 1991, Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was killed by a "human bomb" and the LTTE was accused of the murder. Less than a week later, Premadasa charged British

ambassador David Gladstone with interfering in Sri Lanka's internal affairs and declared him *persona non grata*. Gladstone, who traces his lineage to the 19th-century British prime minister of that name, was not only meeting politicians belonging to Premadasa's enemy camp, but was accused of meeting a known drug trafficker. Gladstone's unceremonious expulsion pitted Premadasa squarely against the former colonial rulers.

The pressure mounts

In the summer of 1991, pressure against Premadasa began to mount. Two top elites within the ruling UNP, Lalith Athulathmudali and Gamini Dissanayake, formally revolted against the President and sought an impeachment bill, citing his "dictatorial style of functioning." Both Dissanayake and Athulathmudali were presidential aspirants and had been disappointed when Premadasa was "allowed" to be President. Dissanayake promptly went to Cambridge University for a year's sabbatical.

Although Premadasa defeated the impeachment motion, he was barking up the wrong tree when he said that the plot to unseat him was hatched in India. He would probably have been closer to the mark if he had probed what Dissanayake had been up to during his stay in England.

Further, while it has already been established, including from two reports from former Mossad agents, that the LTTE was trained with explosives from Israel, the connection between the Dissanayake-Athulathmudali duo and the Mossad was kept mostly under wraps. But on Sept. 24, 1991, Premadasa told Parliament: "People had gone to universities in Israel [referring to Lalith Athulathmudali's tenure] to teach and they had helped bring Israelis to the Mahaweli Development Project [a pet project of Dissanayake] and now they are acting as agents of Mossad." It was during Lalith Athulathmudali's tenure as minister of national security that the Mossad came to help the Sri Lankan government develop its counterinsurgency capabilities.

Developing international ties

In the last year, President Premadasa began to realize the futility of being an exclusively domestic politician, especially given the breadth and power of the international forces against him. His offensive against the Tamil Tigers, after the murder of Rajiv Gandhi, indicates that he began to see that the LTTE was more than a local power. He also comprehended that regional cooperation would be necessary to prevent the breaking up of Sri Lanka. Since he became President, Premadasa had not visited a single country before 1992. During the last year, he visited India three times and visited both Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Although Premadasa's 1990 ordering of the withdrawal of the Indian Peacekeeping Forces from Sri Lanka caused irritation in New Delhi, the Indian government shut down in mourning for three days after his death.