

Behind the assassinations in Sri Lanka: All is not what it seems

by Susan Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra

The bomb that went off at midnight on Oct. 23 in Colombo, Sri Lanka, blew to bits the latest efforts of the Sri Lankan government to bring about a negotiated peaceful settlement to the 11-year-old civil war between the two dominant ethnic groups, the Sinhalas and the Tamils. The bomb extinguished the life of United National Party presidential candidate Gamini Dissanayake, two other UNP parliamentarians, and at least 65 others attending a political rally on that fateful night. The Tamil separatist guerrilla organization, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), has been accused of being behind the bombing, but the group has issued a denial. In fact, there is no plausible reason that the LTTE would kill off a liberal young politician who is supportive of a peaceful settlement of the ethnic conflict.

The massacre was but the latest in a series of assassinations that have marked Sri Lankan politics, and made the end of the civil war impossible:

- In March 1991, the hard-nosed defense minister, Ranjan Wijeratne, was killed by a car-bomb in Colombo by the most powerful explosive ever used for assassination purposes in the region.

- In May 1991, at a campaign rally in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, along with a number of others, were murdered by a suicide bomber alleged to be a former member of the Tamil Tigers, the Tamil underground terrorist group seeking to carve out an independent Tamil nation of Sri Lanka.

- In April 1993, at a campaign rally, Lalith Athulathmudali, former minister of national security and part of the English-speaking upper caste elite (known as the *goigama* in Sinhala), was shot dead. Athulathmudali had recently left the UNP, along with his colleague Gamini Dissanayake, over policy differences with then-President Ranasinghe Premadasa, and had formed the Democratic United National Front (DUNF) with Dissanayake. Since Athulathmudali was not particularly tolerant of the Tamil militants, his death was summarily attributed to the Tigers, although a few observers hinted that President Premadasa could have been involved in it.

- In May 1993, less than two weeks later, during the May Day rally in Colombo, President Ranasinghe Premadasa was killed when a suicide bomber riding a bicycle collided

with the President's car and blew him to pieces. Investigation into that killing, prejudiced from the very outset, also led to allegations of the shadowy involvement of the Tamil Tigers. But no clear explanation was given as to why President Premadasa, who had a humble background and was not considered an enemy of the Tamils, should have been targeted by the Tigers. In fact, his ruthless annihilation of the Sinhala chauvinists within the underground Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) had earned him the bloody wrath of many racist Sinhala activists. The Tamil Tigers denied its involvement in the assassination, but few paid any attention to that.

Over the same time period, there were murders of at least a dozen other top political leaders and senior security personnel.

The latest macabre assassination, of Gamini Dissanayake, who had come back to the UNP following President Premadasa's death and was surely the most promising of the UNP politicians, has now also been attributed to the Tigers—not based on any evidence, but because of the *modus operandi*. And the Tigers' denial of its involvement has been projected as a routine denial from a terrorist organization.

The realities

If the situation in Sri Lanka is approached with the question "Who benefits?" possible suspects other than the Tamil Tigers come into view.

The reality at this time is that the new prime minister, Mrs. Chandrika Kumaratunga, whose husband was shot to death in the 1980s by JVP activists, had just concluded successfully the first round of talks with the Tamil Tigers. The second round of talks was scheduled for Oct. 24. The bomb that killed Dissanayake also killed the talks, enhanced suspicion about the Tigers' intent, and allowed President Wijetunga, head of the defense services, to impose an emergency throughout the country.

The emergence of Mrs. Kumaratunga as the new prime minister has added a new dimension to the Sri Lankan situation. A liberal with strong ties with India, she has made the implementation of peace on the island her prime agenda. To win the trust of the Tigers, and Tamils in general, she went hammer and tongs against the Army for its continuing provocation to disrupt all peace efforts. She accused the Army

brass of corruption associated with enhanced purchases of weapons caused by the 11-year war. She implied in no uncertain terms that the Army brass in particular would like to continue the status quo, because it helps them to line their pockets. Her tactic was to preempt any Army move to disrupt her peace initiative. What she did not mention, is that the Sri Lankan Army brass consists of avowed Sinhala chauvinists, and it is therefore difficult for the Army to accept any concession to the Tamil demands.

The situation was further inflamed by the fact that a number of mass graves were found in the southern part of the island recently. These graves contained the bodies of JVP activists killed off, ostensibly, by the security forces during the reign of President Ranasinghe Premadasa. Discovery of the mass graves, hinted at by many human rights groups and family members of the missing JVP activists, had created a great deal of tension in the country. It is apparent that Mrs. Kumaratunga, having full sympathy for the killed JVP activists, was also siding with those who seek a full-blown investigation of the past mayhem. It is not altogether unlikely that those who do not want this dark past, in which the Army's involvement is quite likely, revealed, would like to see her government go.

Behind the curtain

The list of killings and the modus operandi behind them prove one thing: There exists in the region a hard-core and extremely sophisticated terrorist capability, wired into the harsher methods of psychological warfare in the creation of suicide killers. That this capability belongs exclusively to the LTTE remains unproven. The killers have little regard for either pro-Sinhala or pro-Tamil politicians or for security personnel. While some of the earlier killings were actually claimed by the Tigers or the JVP, these major assassinations were summarily attributed to either of the groups.

In all likelihood, the truth is entirely different. The ethnic violence over the years has introduced into Sri Lanka all the major international gun- and drug-running networks which one associates with the Iran-Contra affair or the former anti-Soviet "Afghansi." It is acknowledged by both the Sri Lankan government and the Tamils that the Israeli Mossad has given them both arms and explosives training. In fact, there was a big fracas over the fact that the Mossad was based in Sri Lanka and teaching the Army the finer points of counterinsurgency. There are also volumes of available intelligence which suggest that both sides in the war are buying arms from international gun-runners and are running drugs. The Pakistani ISI, which is nothing but the extension of the Afghansi in the region, is also involved with the LTTE.

In addition, the British connection to the Sri Lankan elites is legendary. With the exception of former President Premadasa, the *goigama* class in Sri Lanka is closely connected to the British educational system and to British society in general. The public removal of the British High Commissioner to

Sri Lanka, David Gladstone, a few days after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, for his interference in the Sri Lankan electoral process and for meeting a known drug runner, as one Member of Parliament charged, was never fully explained. Gladstone, whose ancestor was a British prime minister, is not a lightweight.

But, in general, the Sri Lankan powers-that-be have been unwilling to carry out the investigation that would expose the outside manipulation of the country, with the exception of targeting India, believed to be the protector of the Tamil minority in northern Sri Lanka. During President Premadasa's reign, the anti-India pitch was high, orchestrated from the presidential palace. To an average Sri Lankan, it made sense. During Mrs. Indira Gandhi's reign as Indian prime minister, Indian intelligence had trained and armed the Tamil Tigers, while they were based in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi tried to reverse the process, but the stationing of the Indian Peacekeeping Forces, as part of the accord between Rajiv Gandhi and President Junius Jayewardene, and the failure of the Indian forces to accomplish their objective, drew untold wrath from the Sri Lankans. President Premadasa was harping on the same theme, and had to pay dearly with his own life for diverting attention and leading intelligence astray.

It is the same mind-set which prevailed in India in the aftermath of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination. Indian intelligence did precious little more than label the Tigers as the killers.

Fresh threats now posed

A similar situation, but more degenerated, will pose fresh threats to the newly elected People's Alliance Government of Mrs. Kumaratunga. As one Sri Lankan commentator put it, "Who was actually responsible for the blast is now a mere forensic and legal issue. What is important is the public perception, and that is, the LTTE has done it."

Reports from Sri Lanka now indicate that in the southern part of the country, exclusively inhabited by Sinhalese and where the Sinhalese JVP was strongest in the 1980s, posters are going up attacking Mrs. Kumaratunga as personally responsible for the bombing, and calling for a total halt to the negotiations with the LTTE. This, in turn, is feeding a reaction within the Tamil population, fearful of revenge killings against their community.

And according to other reports, the Army top command is preparing for a major crackdown on the LTTE. According to one Indian press source, the Army is asking for a blank check from the Kumaratunga government to tame the Tigers militarily. One Sri Lankan high-ranking military officer has been quoted in the press as saying: "Today, if we have to again take out the AK-47s, and resume patrolling, we would like an authorization to go all out and destroy the LTTE high command. I hope the Colombo government has realized that the LTTE is incorrigible."