

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

'Mothers front' in Sri Lanka

Terrorist sympathizers float a new human rights movement which is garnering the support of Western nations.

On Feb. 19, women from different parts of Sri Lanka held a meeting in Colombo, the nation's capital, in defiance of government orders not to mourn the death of their husbands, brothers, and sons during the government's alleged "dirty war" against the Maoist political party, Janatha Vimukti Permana (JVP), over the last three years. The meeting, which coincided with the first anniversary of the death of journalist and playwright Richard de Zoysa, saw the formation of the "Mothers Front." Sri Lankan opposition leaders have already indicated that the Mothers Front will be the rallying point in the coming days to launch a "Bangladesh-type stir" (which brought down President Ershad) in order to topple Sri Lanka's ruling United National Party.

Opposition leaders and human right activists claim that more than 100,000 people have disappeared in the Sinhalese majority areas during the last few years, while a European parliamentary team put the figure at over 60,000. Although the JVP has been involved in massacres, the human rights activists tend to blame the government for the disappearances.

The political stir centering around the Mothers Front is spearheaded by Sri Lanka Freedom Party leader and former prime minister, Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, against whose government in 1971, the JVP attempted an insurrection. Mrs. Bandaranaike's son-in-law, a political leader, was assassinated by the JVP hitmen.

The government's attempt to block the women's rally failed, partic-

ularly because of the active role of a number of Western nations pressuring the Sri Lankan government to improve its human rights record. Diplomats from Britain, the United States, Germany, the Netherlands, Australia, and Canada attended. The Mothers Front has allegedly received a message of support from the European Parliament.

The presence of representatives of major Western nations on hand to mourn the death of a journalist who has been dubbed by the Sri Lankan government as a terrorist, seems unusual. The JVP, which had put together a coalition of radical left-wing Maoists and the right-wing Sinhala chauvinists, has been the fount of terrorism in southern and central Sri Lanka for years. Such a coalition was built around the JVP's vitriolic anti-India and anti-Tamil campaigns.

The 1983 July riots against the Sri Lankan Tamils, which set the stage for the past near-decade of civil war, and which influenced the Tamils to pick up arms and seek an independent nation, was allegedly JVP handiwork.

As the Sri Lankan government became increasingly hard pressed to deal with the Tamil militants, the JVP seized the opportunity to unleash a terrorist movement whose chief targets were political leaders of all hues. The presence of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka, following the signing of the Indo-Sri Lankan Treaty to help root out the Tamil militants, gave the JVP a fillip to unleash its "anti-imperialist" campaign. It is reported that by August 1987, at least

6,000 people were killed by the JVP and its counterterrorist groups. Later, the JVP also became the arms conduit for the militant Tamils to bolster its secessionist movement.

By the spring of 1989, it seemed as if Colombo would be overrun by the JVP; at that point, President Ranasinghe Premadasa began to strike back. The ensuing period saw the Army and paramilitary-led government engaged in a campaign to eliminate top leaders of the JVP. At the same time, a thorough mopping-up operation was also launched.

There are indications that the United States and Britain, in particular, were "soft" on the JVP. H.R. Piyasiri, a ruling party parliamentarian, accused the U.S. Embassy in Colombo, during a debate in the Parliament, of funding the JVP. Piyasiri said the name of a second secretary in the American Embassy, "a Mr. Meiholt," had been mentioned in connection with the foreign funding of the group. He also said the diplomat had made reports "favorable" to the subversive movement and had paid human rights lawyers to file charges against police officers.

In early 1990, Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Ranjan Weijeratne alleged that the London-based Amnesty International was supporting the JVP and accused it of being "another terrorist movement" with terrorist sympathizers and members. The allegation came under attack from U.S. congressman and an asset of the London-based human rights organization, Rep. Stephen Solarz (D-N.Y.), who said that he had the "highest respect" for Amnesty and was disturbed by the foreign minister's "unsupported allegations."

While the Reagan administration had endorsed Indian involvement to help solve Sri Lanka's political problems, the failure of the Indian IPKF mission has left a political vacuum.