

NEIGHBOURS

SRI LANKA

Big Breakthrough

Wijeweera eliminated, but JVP attacks continue



THIS is the kind of breakthrough counter-insurgency forces often dream of but rarely achieve. Last month, the Sri Lankan security forces accomplished the near-impossible: the elimination of the top leadership of the Sinhalese extremist group, Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (jvp). In the most successful offensive since the security forces launched "Operation Liberation" against the Tamil militants in the Vadamarachchi area of the northern Jaffna peninsula in 1987, the jvp has been left nearly leaderless and anchorless.

The charismatic founder-chairman of the rebel group, Rohana Wijeweera, 46, was shaving in the morning when commandos of the crack Rapid Deployment Force burst into his new bungalow at Ulapane in central Kandy district. A nervous colonel leading the troops placed a revolver on his head and asked: "Oyaa Rohana Wijeweeraadha? (Are you Rohana Wijeweera?)" The jvp leader, who went underground in 1983, admitted his identity before he was bundled into a vehicle and rushed to army headquarters in Colombo.

More than 24 hours later, Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Defence Ranjan Wijeratne announced the 'arrest and subsequent death' of the jvp leader. With the possible exception of Wijeratne, none in the Government, including President R. Premadasa, was aware of Wijeweera's arrest until long after his cremation. According to insiders, the President was "furious" when he was informed that Wijeweera had been killed, and ordered a high-level inquiry into his death. At a public function, he later said that the jvp leaders had dug their graves with their own hands by not heeding his repeated appeals to surrender. Incidentally, information extracted from Wijeweera led the army to his deputy, Upatissa Gamanayeke, who too was killed.

While the two killings in less than 24 hours were received with relief by the general public—some even bursting fire-crackers to celebrate—many refused to believe the Government's story.

Yet, it seems that the team assigned to carry out the operation was a highly

professional one—they made sure that the jvp leader's pregnant wife and five children remained unharmed. In fact, when the raiding officers were leaving with their prize catch, they advised Wijeweera's wife Chitrani to leave the bungalow since the house was no longer safe. Fortunately, she left hurriedly—for as soon as the news of Wijeweera's arrest spread, anti-jvp killer squads reached the bungalow looking for his family. Later, she made a highly-publicised sur-

Wijeweera: dangerous legacy



Though few believed the official version of Wijeweera's death, most received the news with relief.

render to the army commander. The President promised her and the children full protection.

According to army officials, Wijeweera 'sang like a canary' after his arrest. Besides betraying the whereabouts of Gamanayeke, he also issued an appeal to the country's youth to give up violence. The video recording of the appeal was shown by the state-controlled television, Rupavahini. Whether it was issued voluntarily or under duress, the appeal was perhaps the last act of the rebel who had led thousands of Sinhalese youth to their death since he launched his abortive insurrection.

Meanwhile, the state media fully exploited the fact that the rebel leader was living in style in his newly acquired bungalow under a false name. For example, it said that Wijeweera who had asked the people to boycott Indian goods and medicines had a stock of Indian drugs and a Sumeet mixer in his kitchen.

Soon, there was concern about the jvp's future. With the death of Wijeweera and Gamanayeke, seven of its nine politburo members had either been captured or killed. One member, Somanwangsa Amarasekara, was still at large. The mantle has reportedly fallen on Suman Piyasiri Fernando, alias Keerthi Wijebahu, till now commander of the Deshapremi Janat Viyapraya—the military wing of the jvp.

It was to display his control over the military wing that he ensured that killings continued despite the set-backs to the jvp leadership. The key question, however, is if he can keep the momentum and reorganise his demoralised cadres. As Food and Agriculture Minister Lalith Athulathmudali said: "As far as the jvp goes, the worst is over."

But for the hapless nation, if there was some relief on the jvp front, bad news came in from elsewhere. Ampara district in the east, recently vacated by the IPKF, was rocked by disturbances. Bloody clashes broke out between the Sri Lankan Army and the Tamil paramilitary forces, raised and trained with Indian help but paid for by the Sri Lankan Government. And as the Sri Lankan Government accused India of interference, and India retaliated with strident denials, it was evident that things were far from getting normal in the north-east despite the IPKF's gradual withdrawal.

In Colombo, however, the attention is now focused on New Delhi. It is widely believed that the new government in India will follow a much softer policy on Sri Lanka and help bail out Premadasa from his continuing discomfiture.

—P. JAYARAM in Colombo