

Turnout for Sri Lankan president's funeral below expectations (1993, May 07). *The Globe and Mail*.



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Turnout for Sri Lankan president's funeral below expectations

BY JOHN STACKHOUSE
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COLOMBO — The widow of assassinated president Ramasinghe Premadasa hinted at her husband's funeral yesterday that she may enter politics to preserve his legacy.

Fighting back tears, Hema Premadasa told a crowd of about 10,000 at Independence Square in Sri Lanka's capital: "Don't think you are leaderless. I will do to the best of my ability, with your strength, to lead you all."

Political workers at the funeral distributed colour pictures of Mr. Premadasa crowning his wife with a golden ornament, and the slogan "May you be blessed to serve the country for a long, long time."

Sri Lanka's parliament is scheduled to meet today to begin the selection process for a new president. Prime Minister D. B. Wijetunga became acting President after Saturday's assassination and had been expected to be confirmed in the position. Some political observers think he may appoint Mrs. Premadasa as prime minister, provided a member of parliament resigns to create a vacancy for her.

If Mrs. Premadasa is to enter politics, she would almost certainly reap her late husband's popularity among Sri Lanka's poor. In a reference to his policy to ensure adequate housing for all Sri Lankans by the year 2000, she said: "I have determination to give all of you shelter."

But she would be plagued, too, by the popular belief that her husband's security forces killed scores of opponents and further subsumed the country in a culture of political violence.

While Mr. Premadasa considered himself a man of the people, the turnout at his funeral was surprisingly low. Estimates of the size of the procession through central Colombo, where Mr. Premadasa grew up in a slum, ranged from 30,000 to 50,000, well below the 250,000 to 500,000 expected by his ruling United National Party.

UNP officials, who could not hide hundreds of empty chairs in the VIP section, attributed the low turnout to

an 8 p.m. curfew and fears of anti-Tamil communal violence. Colombo police have accused Tamil Tiger guerrillas of carrying out the assassination.

As thousands of soldiers and police moved through the city and the curfew was imposed, no communal attacks were reported. Almost every shop and business in the city was closed, and the government placed crack military troops in Tamil neighbourhoods.

But in a Buddhist society that places great importance on funerals, the crowd clearly was an embarrassment for UNP organizers. Many in attendance said it was perhaps one-fifth the size of the funeral last week

for Mr. Premadasa's political opponent, Lalith Athulathmudali.

Marching behind the flatbed truck carrying Mr. Premadasa's coffin, O. A. D. Bandara, a union organizer, struggled to explain the low turnout. "I guess all the poor people have gone to the temples," he said, referring to yesterday's Buddhist festival, Vesak Poya.

As general secretary of the National Health Workers Union, which traditionally supported Mr. Premadasa's UNP, Mr. Bandara could persuade only 200 of his 10,000 members to attend the funeral. He said some were afraid of violence.

The procession, which began at the ornate presidential palace and passed through streets of white

mourning ribbons, was dominated by government employees and social groups loyal to the UNP. One banner, however, expressed condolences in Sinhala from Colombo's coconut street vendors.

The procession snaked for six hours through the seaside capital in 35-degree heat. By the time it reached Independence Square, where religious rites were performed, only about 10,000 mourners gathered on a football field to watch the heavily guarded ceremony through a high fence.

Several dignitaries did not attend the ceremonies.

Canada was represented by former cabinet minister Flora MacDonald.