

Indian Forces could be unifier. (1988, December 23). *The Ottawa Citizen*.

SRI LANKA

Indian forces could be unifier

Sri Lanka's recent election campaign suffered from a paucity of suggestions to solve the country's violent ethnic problems.

Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa narrowly won the presidential race with vague promises of peace and social justice. Fulfilling these pledges will be difficult.

Premadasa has little room to manoeuvre. The violent People's Liberation Front (JVP), drawn from Sri Lanka's Sinhalese majority, began killing other Sinhalese after an agreement 18 months ago promised the country's Tamil minority regional autonomy in the north and east.

Indian soldiers, introduced in an attempt to disarm Tamil rebels, were denounced by the JVP as a sellout of the country's sovereignty and a sop to the Tamils. And the Indian forces in Sri Lanka swelled to 50,000 in a continuing attempt to get Tamil rebels to lay down their arms.

Both Premadasa and opposition leader Sirimavo Bandara-

naiké promised to rid Sri Lanka of the Indian forces. Confronted with post-election reality, however, Premadasa is likely to ask for only a limited reduction in Indian troop numbers in a move to allay the Sinhalese nationalists. A complete withdrawal would mean replacing the Indian forces fighting the Tamil guerrillas with Sri Lankan soldiers.

Premadasa's other immediate problem is his limited mandate. He scraped by the statutory minimum of 50 per cent of the votes cast to defeat Bandaranaike, who took about 45 per cent. Such close results — and the need for a solution to Sri Lanka's pressing problems — cry out for reconciliation between the two parties, perhaps on the basis of their shared opposition to the Indian troop presence.

Whether reconciliation is possible in Sri Lanka's winner-take-all political system is an open question. In its absence, however, peace and social justice seem as remote as ever.