

Suicide bombing fits familiar pattern. (1994, October 25). *The Globe and Mail*.

SRI LANKA / *The killing of a top opposition candidate for president illustrates the depth of ethnic and political strife*

Suicide bombing fits familiar pattern

New York Times Service

UNITED NATIONS — Little more than a decade ago, Sri Lanka was a model of civic development in the Third World, with a literate voting public and an impressive crop of potential political leaders drawn from a range of parties.

Now most of those leaders are dead, victims of ethnic militancy or intense political rivalries that turned lethal in unsettled times.

The latest politician to die, in an explosion so powerful that it took the lives of at least 52 people, was Gamini Dissanayake, leader of the parliamentary opposition and a presidential candidate in an election scheduled for Nov. 9.

Mr. Dissanayake, his campaign manager and several other major figures in his United National Party were killed shortly after midnight yesterday as the candidate began to walk away from the stage where he had addressed a political rally. More than 200 people were injured in the blast.

Mr. Dissanayake will be given a state funeral on Saturday. Prime Minister Chandrika Kumaratunga, who took of-

fice in August, said yesterday that the death of her political rival was particularly regrettable since her government was committed to "wiping out all forms of political violence and introducing democracy and decency to Sri Lankan politics."

Raja Gunasekera, a human-rights lawyer on Sri Lanka's delegation to the United Nations General Assembly, reflected the view of others familiar with the Sri Lankan situation when he said yesterday that, while the news was "a deep shock" to those who knew Mr. Dissanayake, the killing also raised the troubling thought that "this type of political assassination doesn't come as a complete surprise."

"The important questions would be, 'Why now?' and 'What next?'" said Mr. Gunasekera, the former head of Sri Lanka's oldest law school.

The Sri Lankan police said later yesterday they thought that Mr. Dissanayake's assassin may have been a woman using a bomb packed with metal pellets strapped to her body. They found a woman's head on a nearby rooftop.

The assassination originally was reported to have occurred on Sunday night but the government broadcasting service later said that Mr. Dissanayake was killed a few minutes after midnight.

The circumstances were similar to those surrounding the assassination of Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 as he was about to begin a political rally. After that explosion, the partial head of a woman, thought by the police to be the killer, was found on grass nearby. That case is in court, where Indian officials are trying to prove that Mr. Gandhi was killed by ethnic minority Tamils associated with or working for a ruthless Sri Lankan guerrilla army, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, which has been at war with the Sri Lankan government since the late 1970s.

Mrs. Kumaratunga had just begun a new round of talks with the Tigers.

Sri Lankan officials said that Mr. Dissanayake, who opposed the new talks with the Tigers, had been warned that he was under a Tiger death threat. Discussions were to have resumed yesterday in the northern town of Jaffna, the Tiger strong-

hold, but these talks have now been postponed. The Tigers have denied that they killed him.

Sri Lankan human-rights organizations say the army — dominated by the Sinhalese ethnic majority — was also strongly opposed to negotiating with the rebels and that the tragedy may play into the military's hands. Emergency laws and a curfew were imposed yesterday for the first time since being lifted in August after Mrs. Kumaratunga took office.

Sri Lanka's election commission said yesterday that presidential elections should take place as planned, although the cabinet of Mrs. Kumaratunga, who was also a candidate for president, has asked for a postponement.

Mrs. Kumaratunga, the daughter and widow of two other assassinated politicians, led the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and the larger electoral coalition, the Peoples Alliance, to victory in legislative elections in the summer.

Last year, president Ranasinghe Premadasa was killed at a public gathering by a man the police called a suicide bomber on a bicycle, possibly also a Tamil militant.