

Sri Lanka: a brutal echo of the past

Once-model Third World country has been bathed in blood by political rivalries

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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. Dissanayake, his campaign manager, and several other major figures in his United National Party were killed early yesterday morning 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.

Dissanayake will be given a state funeral on Saturday. Prime Minister Chandrika Kumaratunga, who took office 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 who is in New York as a member of Sri Lanka's delegation to the General Assembly, yesterday reflected the view of others familiar with the Sri Lankan situation when he said that while the news was "a deep shock" to those who knew 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 Gunasekera, the former head of Sri Lanka's oldest law school.

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

The assassination was originally reported to have occurred on Sunday night but the government broadcasting service later said that Dissanayake was killed a few min-

utes after midnight.

The circumstances were similar to those surrounding the assassination of India's former prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, in May 1991, as he was about to begin a political rally. After that explosion, the partial head of a woman whom police believe was the killer was found nearby on the grass. That case is now in court, where Indian officials are trying to prove that Gandhi was killed by ethnic minority Tamils associated with



Dissanayake
Dies in blast

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.

Kumaratunga had just begun a new round of talks with the Tigers, an organization once supported by India, where it was based through most of the 1980s. After training and helping to equip the Tigers in order to destabilize Sri Lanka, India had a change of heart under Gand-

hi, who sent an Indian force to Sri Lanka in 1987 to try to disarm them.

Sri Lankan officials said that 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 stronghold, 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 guerrillas, and that the present tragedy might play into the military's hands. Emergency laws and a curfew were imposed yesterday for the first time since being lifted in August, after Kumaratunga took office.

Dissanayake was also associated in the 1980s with the Mahaweli Project, an ambitious irrigation and agricultural development program in a formerly arid region of north-central Sri Lanka claimed by Tamils.

The Colombo government began resettling Sinhala-speaking people there from the more densely populated south.

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

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.

Beginning in 1983, when Tamil rebels demanding independence for the Sri Lankan northeast ambushed and killed a group of soldiers, setting off a retaliatory pogrom of arson and murder against Tamils in the capital, Colombo, Sri Lanka has lurched from assassination to insurgency to death-squad revenge and back to assassination.

On an island populated by fewer than 20 million people, both the Sinhalese and the Tamils, divided by language, culture, geography, and only incidentally religion - Buddhist Sinhalese and Hindu Tamils, with Christians in both groups - have been accused of extraordinary abuses by human-rights groups.