

Sri Lanka's president-elect sees vote for peace process. (1994, November 11). *The Gazette*.

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THE GAZETTE, MONTREAL, FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 1994

WORLD

Sri Lanka's president-elect sees vote for peace process

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LOS ANGELES TIMES

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka — Buoyed by a landslide majority of nearly 2 million votes, President-elect Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga yesterday claimed a "clear and massive mandate" to press on with her quest for a peaceful end to Sri Lanka's 11-year-old civil war.

In a ballot-box rout that political observers said is without precedent in this Indian Ocean island's history, Kumaratunga, the prime minister from the left-leaning People's Alliance, emerged victorious in a six-way race, beating her closest rival from the main opposition United National Party, or UNP, by a 2-1 margin, official results showed.

Her successful bid for the powerful executive presidency was the crescendo of an electoral career that began in earnest only in May of last year, when the 49-year-old daughter of two Sri Lankan prime ministers scored an upset victory in a provincial council election.

This August, the widowed mother of two led the People's Alliance to a narrow victory in national parlia-

mentary elections, ending a 17-year chokehold on power by the UNP, which had used murder and mob violence to safeguard its rule.

"We, I think, have come to the end of the dark tunnel and we are marching toward a new era of freedom and light," said an emotional Kumaratunga, clad in a blue and white sari, after Wednesday's election results were announced.

But the president-elect warned her supporters that even if they had suffered when the UNP held power, she would not brook any revenge-seeking. "It is true that for 17 long years you have bottled up the anger of much political victimization and harassment," Kumaratunga said. "But the answer to that is not to repeat the same barbaric style of acting."

After a violence-marred campaign, an island-wide curfew starting at 2 p.m. was imposed yesterday for the second straight day to prevent political feuds from sparking further disorder, and the rain-lashed streets of this seaside capital were practically devoid of cars and pedestrians.

After the Oct. 24 assassination of her principal opponent, Gamini Dis-

sanayake, the pivotal issue of the presidential campaign became the policy of Kumaratunga's 2½-month-old government toward the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, who control enclaves in the east and the northern Jaffna peninsula. They are widely suspected of carrying out Dis-

sanayake's murder. In an overt bid for the sympathy vote of members of the island's Buddhist Sinhalese majority, the United National Party put up the slain parliament member's widow, lawyer Srimala Disanayake, as its candidate. It also told Sri Lankans that a vote for Kumaratunga would be a vote

for the Liberation Tigers.

Last month, Kumaratunga sent emissaries to Jaffna to begin the Sri Lankan government's first contacts in more than four years with the Liberation Tigers. After Disanayake's death, she broke off the preliminary talks until possible rebel responsibility could be probed.

Kumaratunga did not say yesterday whether she intended to resume the talks. But she said she was as determined as ever to forge ahead with the "peace process" to end the ethnic war that has claimed more than 30,000 lives since 1983.