

MANCHESTER GUARDIAN WEEKLY, December 4, 1988

Death and despair in Sri Lanka

Derek Brown in Hambantota on a country tearing itself apart

FOR more than a year, Sri Lanka has drifted from calamity to crisis. Here, on its southern extremity, it is perilously close to anarchy and despair.

This year, about 700 government officials, ruling party supporters and others have been killed in a surge of violent protest by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna. Now, in the deep south, the JVP tell people when to work, how to behave, and what to believe. Those who do not obey are killed.

The initials JVP are everywhere in the south. They stand for Sinhalese pride, anti-Indian xenophobia, crude Marxist-Leninism, intimidation and cruelty.

The security forces are everywhere too. They guard the few buses which run. They escort the few government officials who work. They make a pretence of restoring normality and, like the JVP, they kill people.

The latest official figures record 439 violent deaths throughout Sri Lanka in the 30 days to November 15. The real figure may be 439, or it may be closer to the aggregate, running to many thousands, of all the rumours.

What is indisputable is that this beautiful, agonised, little country is tearing itself to bits. The last expatriates are pulling out. Two Indian nationals, working on a sugar plantation in Moneragala district, were among the latest victims of the butchery. The small Indian community of about 500 people is now on the verge of exodus.

Airlines have all but sold out of outward-bound tickets from mid-December to mid-January. The hotels around the country's only international airport are said to be booked solid from December 18, the day before the presidential elections.

Many Sri Lankans fear that the election is at best a cruel farce, and that at worst it will mark the final collapse of their country. Nowhere is that fear closer to realisation than here, at the island's southern extremity.

Food is in short supply and petrol desperately scarce. The tourist hotels are closed, the shops have little to sell and nobody to buy. Upcountry, the tea estates are deserted and the managers fleeing to Colombo. Administration is paralysed. Buses can ply only with heavily armed soldiers on board. The only commodity in abundant supply is lies.

The government says the banks are working, that power lines destroyed by the JVP are being restored and that fuel and food are once again on sale. The fact is that banks, even under heavy guard, are opening at most for half an hour at a time. There is little rural credit, and little way of cashing wage cheques or dipping into savings. People are hungry, even starving.

Vast swathes of the south are without electricity or telephones; the lines hacked and blasted by the side of every road. Government offices are open but only because the people in them have been literally driven to work by the army.

Colonel Vipul Botejo, coordinating officer for the security forces in Hambantota, said: "The thing is that people want to work but they are afraid of being killed. So we take them into custody, so they

have no other option but to work, because we have told them it is an essential service."

Being part of an essential service can be a death sentence, even if the JVP does not carry it out. The government has just introduced legislation empowering emergency courts to try as capital cases anyone who fails to turn up for work as, for example, a bus driver or a tea estate worker. So far they have failed to persuade a single lawyer or even a single soldier to preside over these kangaroo courts. But if the public hangman cannot oblige, the JVP will.

The civil servants, the shopkeepers, the bus drivers and countless others are caught in a vicious dilemma. The JVP issues regular orders to strike, to demonstrate, to show solidarity against the government which has sold out to India and to international cap-

italism. The penalty for disobedience is death.

Voters in the recent provincial council elections were shot. Supporters of the ruling United National Party are shot. Bus drivers who work are shot.

Sometimes the death sentences are ghoulishly compounded. A police officer's widow and family disobeyed the order that the body should not be buried for five days. They interred their man decently. A few days later the putrefying body was dug up and dumped on the family doorstep.

Inevitably in a sordid, savage civil war, the nastiness is not one-sided. The JVP bullied a large crowd into demonstrating against the presidential elections at Tissamaharama, a few miles from here, on November 10. The army said it was fired on from the crowd; JVP sympathisers say the brutality was unprovoked.

Whatever the cause, the soldiers opened fire and, according to official sources, six people were killed. Col Botejo says the toll was 12. Residents put it at 30 or 40 or, in the most extreme case, 200.

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Fear spurs exodus