

Bomber kills Sri Lankan leader

President,
10 others die
in explosion

BY EDWARD GARGAN
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NEW DELHI, India — The president of Sri Lanka, a country that has been swept by violence for more than a decade, was killed Saturday by a man who detonated explosives strapped to his body during a May Day political rally.

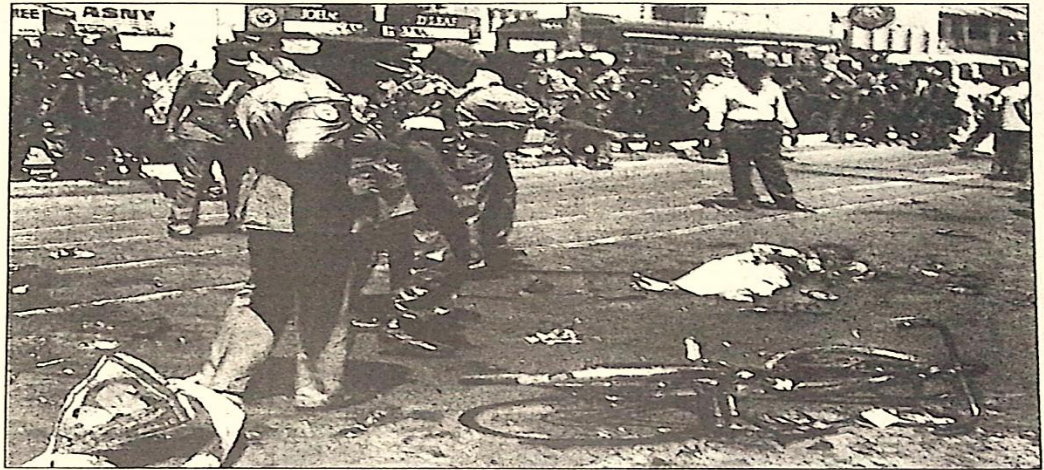
At least 10 other people were believed killed in the explosion, including most of the president's bodyguards and several close aides. Dozens were wounded. The assassination of President Anandapala Kumaranatunga came just a week after the country's leading opposition politician, Lalith Athapaththu, was gunned down.

Although no one claimed responsibility for the assassination of the president, the government named a rebel group that has waged a 10-year war of secession in the country's north and east and has used suicide bombers in the past. But the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, denied involvement, Reuters reported. The Indian government has accused the group of killing Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi of India in a suicide bombing in 1991.

Sri Lanka, an island of white beaches, palm trees and a newly buoyant economy off the southern coast of India, has been torn by violence for more than a decade. The civil war waged by the minority Tamils for a separate state has cost more than 17,000 lives.

Another revolt, by right-wing Sinhalese, the ethnic majority, was violently crushed by the army, police and death squads. Sinhalese's annual May Day parade, organized by the governing party, was shown on Sri Lankan television. It appeared to be a lighthearted affair, with President Anandapala Kumaranatunga and other officials in the crowd.

Witnesses said a youth, thought to be about 14, drove his bicycle through the throng toward



Sri Lankan police officers examine the scene of Saturday's suicide bomb attack

where the 68-year-old president was walking and set off explosives strapped to his body.

"The president is no more," said Evans Cooray, the president's spokesman. "It was like a battlefield. We ran in all directions."

Prime Minister Dingiri Banda Wijetunga was sworn in as president and a national curfew declared.

Born in the slums of central Colombo in 1924 to a Buddhist family, Premadasa overcame Sri Lanka's deeply rooted caste and class system, working first as a labor union organizer before being elected deputy mayor of Colombo in 1955.

He joined the United National



Premadasa
Overcame caste

Party in 1956. Four years later he won a seat in Parliament and when his party formed the next government was made a minister.

As prime minister, starting in 1978 and after becoming president in 1989, Premadasa worked to ease poverty in Sri Lanka, a nation of 16 million people.

He encouraged the building of model villages with clean water, decent roads, schools and health facilities. But coupled with this concern for the poor was a political ruthlessness that saw potential challengers exiled from his party. This ruthlessness also served him when he was challenged by a violent revolt by Sinhalese militants of the People's Liberation Front.

The front, which opposed any accommodation with the Tamil separatists and promoted an extremist Buddhism that stressed the supremacy of the majority Sinhalese population, began killing members of the governing

party in 1983 and soon more than 1,000 party members were dead, including two of the top leaders.

Premadasa began a counteroffensive, unleashing the army and an array of shadowy death squads that swept through front strongholds in the south, pulling suspected members from their homes and killing them.

By January 1990, the liberation front had been wiped out and all but one of its leaders killed.

Toward the Tamil rebels, Premadasa moved between policies of confrontation and negotiation. In the last year, as the military strength of the Tigers deteriorated, the president sought to bring about a constitutional and political solution to the civil war.

Many Western diplomats in the Sri Lankan capital believed that Premadasa, because of his relative independence from die-hard Sinhalese chauvinist politics, was the person most likely to find a negotiated end to the war.