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President Premadasa and political rival assassinated in ten days that shook Sri Lanka

Carnage in Colombo

THE assassinations of President Ranasinghe Premadasa and leading opposition politician Lalith Athulathmudali inside ten days in late April has stunned southern Sri Lanka and in the aftermath, sparked a new struggle for control of the island's ruling United National Party (UNP).

Mr Premadasa and 24 others including eight senior policemen and bodyguards were blown to pieces by a suicide bomber at the country's annual political showpiece the May Day rally in Colombo attended by thousands.

Police blamed the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) naming the assassin, whose severed head was found at the scene of the blast, as Kulaveerasingham Veerakumar from Jaffna. The LTTE denied the killing claiming it was a revenge attack by opposition politicians.

Eight days earlier Lalith Athulathmudali, who led a breakaway UNP faction in an unsuccessful bid to impeach President Premadasa in August 1991, was shot dead at a political rally in the Kirulapone area of Colombo. Police again accused the LTTE but half of Colombo was adamant that Mr Premadasa had contracted the killing from the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) one of the four Tamil militant factions supporting the Army in the struggle against the Tigers. EPDP leader Douglas Devananda fled to Trincomalee and at Mr Athulathmudali's funeral in Colombo on 28 April, two died and 26 were injured as police tear-gassed thousands of mourners when stone-throwing students from the pro-JVP leftist Inter University Students Federation (IUSF) provoked violence. It was already widely predicted that sections of Mr

Athulathmudali's Democratic United National Front (DUNF) party would exact vengeance from Mr Premadasa at the UNP May Day rally three days later.

The two men had contrasting political styles and backgrounds. Mr Athulathmudali, 56, educated at Oxford and Harvard was an aristocrat and an intellectual but a seasoned politician who knew his new DUNF party must broaden its base to become a third force in Sri Lankan politics. Mr Premadasa, 68, born to a low caste family in a Colombo slum confounded the establishment to become the "the Poor Man's President" through openly populist measures such as the *Janasaviya* poverty alleviation programme which opponents dismissed as "vote buying". His rise to power, which included ten years as Prime Minister, brought allegations of underworld connections and organised political violence. During his four years as President 40,000 people died or disappeared in the south as the military brutally suppressed the southern Sinhalese Marxist People's Liberation Front (JVP) insurgency.

The UNP party machine and 30-strong convoys of buses brought thousands of the rural faithful to Colombo for Mr Premadasa's state funeral on 6 May. Almost 5,000 Tamils had already left the capital fearing a repetition of the 1983 violence also attributed to Mr Premadasa which killed 3,000 Tamils in Colombo and the Hill Country. Tight curfew and a massive security presence on the Colombo streets preserved an uneasy calm.

Politically, there is an eerie sense of vacuum, of the blackboard being wiped clean say observers, but the UNP's overriding objective now is to project continuity and retain international confidence.

Prime Minister DB Wijekunge a cypher in Mr Premadasa's government was elected unopposed as President in a special parliamentary session. He pledged to preserve Mr

Premadasa's policies of export-oriented economic growth and ethnic reconciliation inviting LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran to Colombo for peace talks. Mr Wijekunge has retained the former Cabinet, appointing Information Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe as Prime Minister.

Mrs Hema Premadasa had already unsettled the UNP hierarchy with an emotive speech at the funeral pyre vowing to don her husband's populist mantle. But a more virulent regional strain of dynastic politics is likely to prevail, analysts say, in a struggle for party control between the *nouveau riche* Premadasa faction currently bankrolling the UNP and the old guard elite.

Former President JR Jayewardene still an important power broker may wish to ensure the succession of his nephew Ranil Wickremasinghe as presidential candidate in December 1994 and the restoration of the old order. Eighteen months as Prime Minister offers the ideal gymnasium to build up Mr Wickremasinghe's political muscle and to gauge the long-term disposition of the Premadasa faction led by Housing Minister Sirisena Cooray.

JR Jayewardene's older nephew, Gamini Dissanayake who split from the UNP with Lalith Athulathmudali and the breakaway DUNF faction may be the more legitimate heir. The strength of DUNF's showing at the Provincial Council elections on 17 May will dictate whether he can make a deal with either UNP faction that bolsters his seniority.

Whether by accident or by design, the LTTE and the population of the North-East have won a breathing space while the contending forces in the UNP succession struggle coalesce. Army chief Lt. Gen. Cecil Waidyaratne's call for a national government hours after the assassination was studiously ignored despite its potential as either war machine or peace forum. Politics and political parties in Sri Lanka are essentially internecine as the deaths of Mr Premadasa and Mr Athulathmudali so crudely exemplify.

A four-man detective team from the UK's prestigious Scotland Yard bureau, called to Colombo to investigate the Lalith Athulathmudali assassination, has widened its remit to include the Premadasa killing. Forensic evidence has been sent to London. At a press conference on 25 April, DUNF spokesman Sarath Amunugama openly accused the Sri Lankan government of Mr Athulathmudali's murder.

THE AFTERMATH

When the dust settles

COLOMBO eats conspiracy theories for breakfast, lunch and dinner and likes them baroque, heavily spiced and labyrinthine. For the Premadasa-Athulathmudali murders only the most charged and complicated theories will do. If the LTTE killed one or both of them, no one in Colombo wants to believe it. This despite the Tiger signature of the suicide bomber on the Premadasa killing and a supporting theory that Lalith would be a dangerous rallying point for the south if left alive.

Much of Colombo believes that Mr Premadasa or one of his inner circle commissioned Lalith's killing and that forces in DUNF or his own party struck back at him. One theory currently circulating houses responsibility for both deaths with a prominent UNP minister who faced Mr Premadasa's wrath if not retribution for contracting the Lalith killing independently.

There are puzzles and portents. DUNF insiders say the body of Lalith's alleged assassin planted on an adjoining road to the Kirilapone rally was the son of a Kotahena Tamil priest arrested by police two days earlier. The supposed killer, a bullet lodged in the base of his spine died of cyanide poisoning, another LTTE trademark and had an identity card naming him as Appiah Balakrishnan from Manipay, which Colombo police now agree is a fake.

Then there is Mr Premadasa's last curiously prescient speech delivered in the same Kirilapone neighbourhood of Colombo the night before he died. "Assassinate me by whatever means but please do not assassinate my character - an asset I have treasured since childhood" said the President, his voice hoarse with emotion, in a reference to his supposed involvement in the Lalith killing.

Did Mr Premadasa know that forces in his own or other parties were mobilising against him?

Police say Mr Premadasa's assassin allegedly Kulaveerasingham Veerakumar, a Jaffna Tamil, arrived in Colombo two years ago and established a base in the heart of the Pettah commercial district by helping a Sinhalese shopkeeper to expand his grocery business. Analysts believe there may be many other LTTE sleeper suicide squads in Colombo, established as early as the 1989 *Hilton Honeymoon* peace talks between the Tigers and the government, still waiting to be activated.

Persistent reports throughout April warned of LTTE hit squads in the capital. Police arrested two top LTTE activists from Puthur in Jaffna in an Armour Street lodge close to the assassination site on 4 April. Five days later, intelligence reports said *Jegan, Kugan* and *Neelan*, three LTTE assassins from Batticaloa had arrived in Colombo. Police warned that two LTTE vehicles packed with explosives had infiltrated Colombo in late April seeking high profile targets.

Over 200 Tamils have been arrested in the capital in the wake of the assassination. When the dust settles, the circumstantial evidence for LTTE involvement in the Premadasa killing appears conclusive. The President perhaps wrongly believed the Tigers would not target him because of his perpetually delayed commitment to a peaceful settlement. The death of LTTE leader *Kittu* returning to Jaffna in January and alleged Sri Lankan forewarning perhaps accelerated LTTE impatience. Lalith's killing has a multitude of loose ends that Colombo's myopia makes into political symmetry in its bowels.

Warning

US State Department officials summoned Pakistan's Ambassador in Washington in early April and expressed concern over continuing reports over the Islamabad regime providing arms and assistance to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Demand

Over 450 Tamil detainees at Kalutara prison south of Colombo petitioned Sri Lankan authorities in mid-April to file charges against them or secure their release. Many have been in custody for over two years.

Plot

A new campaign by Swedish NGO Redda Barnen to highlight child prostitution in Asian countries is a plot to destabilise Sri Lanka's economy and reduce tourist arrivals said a Tourism Ministry official in Colombo on 16 April.

Attack

Neo-Nazis attacked a leading Sri Lankan Tamil exile in Rome in mid-April dousing him in petrol and carving a swastika on his cheek, Italian police reports say.

Inadequate

Amnesty International (AI) has described Sri Lanka's recent amendments to Emergency Regulations in April as "inadequate" and called on the government to fully implement recommendations to protect prisoners, prevent extra-judicial executions and to investigate human rights violations, as outlined in a recent report from Colombo University Human Rights Centre.

Poll position

PROVINCIAL COUNCIL (PC) elections to be held in seven southern provinces on 17 May will offer a vital electoral profile in the scramble for power in the wake of the Premadasa-Athulathmudali assassinations.

The opposition Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) who boycotted the last PC polls will contest along with the new DUNF in a vicious three-cornered fight with massive sympathy votes expected for the dead leaders. Over 400 opposition candidates have asked the government for arms to protect themselves and

observers predict widespread violence especially in rural areas where local warlords or *mudalalis* (businessmen) run political life. Over 5,000 civilian volunteers from the NGO coalition People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL) will monitor the elections along with a team from the regional political body the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

Before the assassinations, the PC elections were widely viewed as a plebiscite on Mr Premadasa's four years as President and his Parliamentary Select

Committee proposals to demerge the North-East Province and offer the Tamils a watered-down federalism on the Indian model. As the London-based *Tamil Times* pointed out last month, whatever mandate Mr Premadasa sought at the PC polls to solve "the Tamil problem" would come from the Sinhala south in the absence of elections in the North-East. Once again the Tamils were to be excluded from shaping their political destiny. For better or worse, the assassinations and their aftermath will wipe the North-East issue off the PC election agenda.

Jaffna: the siege within

JAFFNA'S food crisis eased marginally this month, relief workers say, but the noose is tightening around the peninsula as continuing air and sea attacks take their toll on fleeing civilians.

Sri Lankan Rehabilitation Secretary Christie Silva says over 26,000 tons of food has been sent to Jaffna in the last three months, 60% of the estimated need. Bureaucracy, corruption and the crumbling jetty at Point Pedro have created a logjam that seems part of the military blockade. Colombo police are now investigating missing relief consignments implicating government officials and Army officers.

Sri Lankan forces pushed four kilometres south to Idaikadu from their foothold in the peninsula at Palaly on 10 April

killing or wounding 40 LTTE cadre, defence sources claim. Thousands of civilians sought refuge in temples and schools after three days of aerial bombing devastated much of Valikamam North and areas around Pandatharippu. Sarma Sivakumaran, 23, hiding under a tree was killed by helicopter gunships and many other civilians were injured.

Jaffna Red Cross Vice President K Buvanendran and his driver were killed as their ambulance was strafed by helicopter fire near Avarangal. Defence sources claimed they were caught in Army-LTTE crossfire and described their deaths as "unfortunate".

The now-daily shelling from Palaly killed student Yogadarshan, 16, in Kantharmadam ten days later as Army

units from the strategic Elephant Pass link to the mainland pushed four kilometres up the Chavakachcheri road. Two soldiers died and five were injured before the military pulled back to Iyakachchi. The stop-go offensives inside the peninsula suggest the military can take territory but lack the logistics to hold it.

East of Elephant Pass every night, hundreds of civilians run the gauntlet of Sri Lankan naval attacks to make the dangerous crossing of the Jaffna lagoon at Kilali. Two died and six were injured in a gunboat attack on 7 April and three fishermen were killed in a separate incident. International refugee agency UNHCR wants to open up a safe passage to Jaffna for civilians and food aid through the Pooneryn crossing but the Premadasa assassination may set back negotiations by six months.

In Jaffna they also fear the enemy within. LTTE slogans are everywhere warning "beware of spies" while radio propaganda eulogises martyred teenagers. No male below 21 may leave Jaffna. Older men pay Rs 10,000 for an exit visa and must find another man to stand surety for them. If they fail to return their friend vanishes into the prison bunkers. All school boys must now belong to one of the three brigades, armed cadets, St John's Ambulance Brigade and hospital auxiliaries. They will need them all in the months to come. When the bombers come over, one million lives hang by a thread.

Battleground

ISOLATED Mannar Island where 4,000 refugees wait in UN-run camps, is now the prime target for a new LTTE elite amphibious squad, defence sources say, after a string of attacks last month. Their target is more probably the district's hardline Army Commander Brigadier Karunatileke who cut his teeth on the JVP in Hambantota and was responsible for the disappearance of 158 Tamils from Vantharumoolai refugee camp in Batticaloa in September 1990.

A LTTE seaborne attack killed three soldiers on Mannar causeway linking the island to the mainland on 5 April. After another five soldiers died in a Tiger ambush on the Pesalai road ten days later, Karunatileke shelled Mannar town from Thallady Army camp, killing two little girls and injuring 19 others. The LTTE has told the Brigadier he will not leave the district alive.

A team of Pakistani doctors has already fled Mannar hospital, leaving the island without adequate medical cover. Matches, candles, polythene and bicycle spare parts are prohibited from shops after a lucrative smuggling racket to the mainland was uncovered. Major Karunatileke has already stopped all sea traffic to LTTE-controlled areas on the mainland increasing food shortages and pushing up prices. Passenger traffic to Kalpitiya is carefully vetted to prevent the few hundred Muslim traders and school teachers who remain, from joining another 35,000 Mannar Muslim refugees in Puttalam.

The LTTE's attitude to Mannar Muslims remains ominous. The decapitated bodies of two traders gathering firewood were found in the jungle near Puthukudiruppu in mid-April.

Eastern cordon

BATTICALOA is in the grip of major drought and NGO teams who visited Valaichenai last month say refugee camps are overcrowded and rife with disease. Many refugees have been pushed out of Batticaloa town as the cleanup for the Presidential Mobile Secretariat in July continues. There were cordon-and-search operations in Valaichenai and surrounding areas in mid April as the military strengthens its control of the string of coastal villages that straddle the main road through the district.

In the hinterland, the Tigers occupy Vaharai and Unnichchai after the Army withdrawal last August and miles of Thoppigala jungle. More than 28 LTTE cadre died in a fresh Army offensive north-west of Batticaloa in late April. Road and rail links out of the district remain under pressure. Four soldiers died in a LTTE ambush while patrolling the

railway line near Welikanda on 25 April.

In Amparai District, the military has banned agricultural activity around Thambiluvil after Tigers hijacked two tractors in mid-April. Farmers say they cannot plant fresh crops and seed paddy is spoiling.

Further north in Trincomalee District, the same pattern pertains of the Army consolidating control of urban centres and the Tigers creeping dominance in the rural periphery. Major cordon-and-search operations brought Trincomalee town to a standstill on 20 April, after most of the adult population was paraded in front of masked informers at St Joseph's College. An unknown number were detained. Over 20 soldiers died in a LTTE dawn attack on Kalayanapura on 9 April, in the flashpoint Weli Oya area north of Trincomalee district, housing vital Tiger supply trails linking the north and east.

200,000 SRI LANKAN REFUGEES IN SOUTH INDIA RELUCTANT TO RETURN

Lives on hold

OVER 80,000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees remain in 135 closed camps in south India trapped in the political fallout after the Rajiv Gandhi assassination. Another 120,000 Sri Lankans live outside the camps dependent on remittances from 300,000 Tamil refugees in Western countries as Tamil Nadu struggles with the threat of LTTE terrorism.

The camps are societies in miniature complete with political factions, improvised nursery schools and dreams of a better life. In some camps sympathetic police officials allow refugees to go out to work for a cut on their daily wage. When they undercut local labour, relations with nearby villages, already strained, flare into open resentment.

The inter-governmental programme to repatriate the refugees remains on hold while Indian officials haggle over who will pay for the next phase. International refugee agency UNHCR, monitoring the repatriation now has an office in Madras but has no access to the refugee camps.

Only one in 20 of the refugees wants to return before the war ends and most hope UNHCR's presence will protect them from forcible repatriation.

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha plays political football with the refugee issue, calling again for the Sri Lankans' wholesale expulsion in late April. Having publicly dissolved her alliance with Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's Congress (I) Party, her survival now seems unlikely.

Having swept to power on a wave of sympathy after Rajiv Gandhi's assassination in May 1991, Jayalalitha spearheaded a state-wide crackdown on the alleged killers, the Tamil Tigers, which petered out mysteriously last October after she allegedly paid off the LTTE in Singapore to forestall her own political murder.

After ten years of playing off patronage between the Madras and New Delhi governments, the Tigers retain a powerful underground machine with links to organised crime and ultra-nationalists

among south India's 60 million Tamils. The refugees remain ready-made scapegoats for LTTE excesses, hostages to political fortune.

Seven of the refugee camps are informal jails for militant suspects with hardcore LTTE held in prison. One policeman died and another was wounded when LTTE cadre *Ravi, Kiruban* and *Chandran* escaped in a hail of bullets after an ambush on the Madras highway, seven kms from Chengalpattu, on 29 April while on their way to court.

Other militants are more interested in loot than in liberation. A 24-strong gang from Aiyannur and Puzhal camps was arrested in mid-April implicated in 17 robberies at knivepoint of \$20,000 worth of jewellery and other valuables.

For most refugees, decent hard-working families robbed of homes and livelihood, the militants are part of the nightmare. For an increasingly impatient Tamil Nadu government, the refugees are the Tigers' breeding ground.

The politics of going home

UNITED NATIONS refugee agency UNHCR plans to spend over \$2 million to rebuild infrastructure in LTTE-controlled areas of the North-East to encourage refugees to return to their villages. But some NGOs believe the UN is risking lives, in offering incentives to the displaced and destitute to return to the war zone.

UNHCR says such quick impact projects rebuilding schools, bridges or wells will target areas only after people have returned and will also benefit those who stayed behind. Similar work by relief NGOs could attract the same criticism argue UN officials but they do not have the same upfront mandate and responsibility to protect refugees.

More cynical observers wonder if the Sri Lankan government will endorse a \$2 million injection into "uncleared areas" and whether the Tigers will not demand a substantial cut. Government guidelines for resettlement emphasise security but military objectives retain priority. Over 2,000 people have already returned to Kilinochchi many of them returnees from India but after Sri Lankan bombers pounded the front of St Theresa's school

in February instead of the LTTE camp behind it, there is little confidence in government's goodwill.

Hundreds more Indian returnees will move north when the Thandikulam camps closes shortly. The first obstacle is

the Nochchimodai checkpoint into Tiger-controlled territory. Three PLOTE cadre died and 14 civilians were injured in a LTTE attack on the crossing on 1 April.

Army definitions of "cleared areas" remain wishful thinking with LTTE units within striking distance. Refugees returning home constitute an illusory buffer zone between raw recruits on the Forward Defence Line and the feared guerrillas. Returnees at Cheddikulam west of Vavuniya and Eechilampathai south of Trincomalee are in contested territory with the battle lines flowing back and forward. Medical provision is rudimentary and dry rations insufficient and irregular. They are the pawns in this game to be pushed forward into holding positions. Retreat is a military prerogative. The 50 Muslim families resettling Kuchchaveli north of Trincomalee know in their bones the Tigers will not let them stay there.

Until there is peace, there is no absolute security for returning refugees. But when you have lost everything the promise of even a few hundred rupees can make going home seem attractive.

THE SRI LANKA MONITOR is part of an information processing service set up by the British Refugee Council to keep Sri Lankan refugees in Britain, Europe and elsewhere, informed about the current situation in their home areas. If you have any information you wish to share, or any enquiries you wish to make regarding developments in Sri Lanka, contact

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