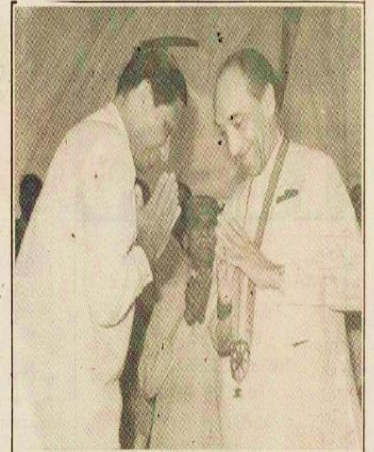
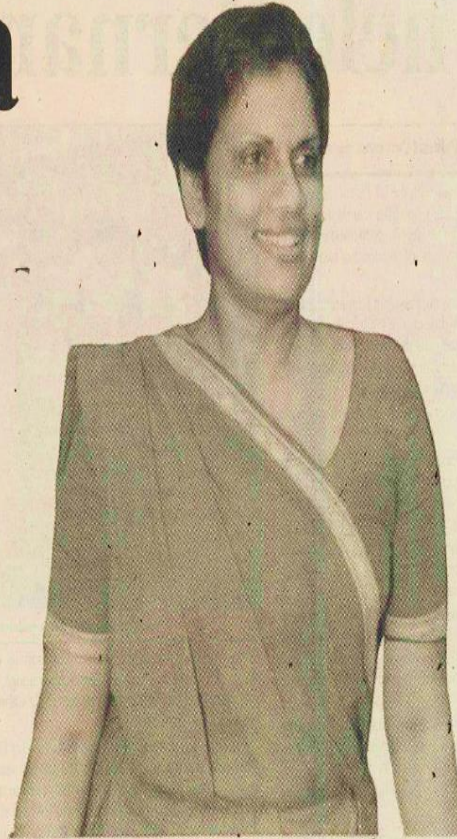
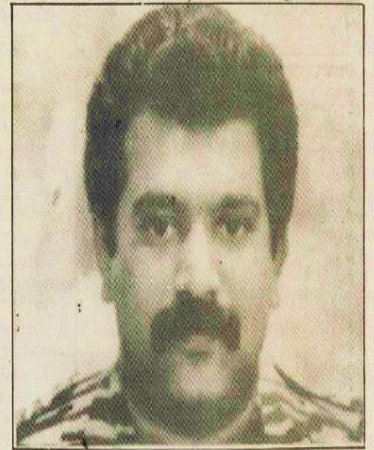


INTERVIEW

Chandrika slams Prabha, former presidents



Former Presidents Jayewardene and Premadasa: "Both were disastrous"



Prabhakaran: a ruthless megalomaniac

Interview with
India Today

"..... if Prabhakaran did not get from me what he wanted, I would be the first person on his list.....he is paranoid about peace.....he is terrified of peace."

In one way Chandrika Kumaratunga's ascent to power in Sri Lanka conforms cruelly to the subcontinent's paradoxical history of flourishing democracies amid assassinations and the trend of an orphan or a widow taking over the mantle of a slain leader. Chandrika's father, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike was assassinated in 1959, when he was Prime Minister, her film star-politician husband Vijaya Kumaratunga in 1988. Her mother Sirimavo Bandaranaike, was disenfranchised and hounded for more than a decade after she lost power.

disappointment marked the exclusive two-hour interview with Senior Editor SHEKHAF GUPTA at Temple Trees, her official residence in Colombo. Excerpts:

Q. How do you look back on your six months as President?

A: To be very honest, we can be happy about what we have achieved. We got a clear mandate to repair democracy, which had been very severely damaged. We have restored the right of speech, freedom and the right to not be killed. Despite grave continuing threats and pressures, we have not misused the vast emergency powers.

Q. But surely the security

free rations and fuel for the people of Jaffna which the LTTE grabbed.

Q. How bitter are you?

A. Not at all. I did not expect anything else from the Tigers. It is the most ruthless and most effective guerrilla organisation in the 20th century. We tried our best, keeping in mind that we were dealing with a merciless megalomaniac who has killed every single person who was on-

For 11 years, the past government had waged a war and the armed forces were very badly equipped. And the Tigers know all the details about this. You know, as far as military equipment goes, I don't know what happened to all the money that was spent, the billions and billions of dollars. A lot of it evidently hadn't gone into buying what was necessary.

you see, the psychology also changes when external factors play on it. We knew from our intelligence that the LTTE was very seriously divided. There was the Mahattaya group which was saying you should be flexible with this government. This is why Mahattaya has disappeared now. Whether he is alive or not we don't know, but he's not allowed to operate.

Q. What is your analysis of Prabhakaran and his psychology?

A. Apparently he had started to somebody in discussions: "I have killed so many of my own people; how can I live in a situation of peace?"

Q. If you look at it from his point of view, what guarantees does he have?

A. May be you are right. But there are solutions to these things and we wanted to discuss these with him within a framework of a devolutionary package while he could still keep his own security

discuss the political package. We should have allowed them to go on with the administration and keep on building bridges to pacify the people and deal with whatever Prabhakaran's mental problems were.

Q. Then how does one explain Premadasa's assassination? He was talking to them.

A. He was another man who needed psychiatric treatment pretty seriously. You see, in his case he wanted the Indians out first. His hatred of Indians was more than his hatred of the LTTE. And he thought he could manipulate the Tigers to get the Indians out and continue to manipulate Prabhakaran with money and arms and all this, and then do what he wants.

Q. Where do you see India in this equation now? Is it neglecting the problem?

A. I think the Indian Government is taking a very right attitude saying it is your internal problem and hands off as far as the LTTE is concerned. I don't

Q. Weren't the risks large?

A. The only risk was that I would get knocked off. I knew this right from the beginning. We were trying to do some thing that didn't suit him. Then, the first reaction would be to kill me off. It has already started. They began reconnoitering and spying on me about three to four months ago. But as I have constantly said, people do not exist in a vacuum. In fact, Anton Balasingham said this about two months ago to a French journalist who interviewed him.

Q. You think that the fear of your government gaining popularity in the north was on Prabhakaran's mind when resuming hostilities?

A. They were very worried about it. They had these posters that were issued during elections, they used to keep them inside their houses along with the deities and they used to light lamps

Trojan. He could have taught Machiavelli how to write his book.

Q. So you agree that he fooled Rajiv?

A. Jayewardene actually gave them (India) the rope to pull out and hang themselves with. By then India was so deeply involved they had to somehow unravel this thing. So Jayewardene set the Indians and the LTTE against each other, washed his hands off it and sat back and had a good laugh. And Rajiv Gandhi paid for it with his life.

Q. And Premadasa?

A. He was killed for different reasons.

Q. But even that is no conclusive logic as to why they would kill Rajiv and expose themselves to opprobrium in Tamil Nadu.

A. This is where the other factors come in. They were just paranoid when they saw the pos-

In another way, the 50-year-old Chandrika stands apart from the other legacies of the subcontinent's violent democracies. She sought, and secured, a mandate for peace with the majority Sinhala ethnic rivals, the Tamils. This was the centerpiece of her election campaign and it brought her a landslide 62.5 per cent vote. Never in the history of the region has a leader or a political party used peace as an election plank in such a manner - rarely indeed in modern world history, except perhaps the riding coalition in Israel, which sought a vote for rapprochement with the Palestinians. She was brought up in Europe in the heady days of the students' movement and liberalism, traits that she imbibed first at the Sorbonne, where she studied and later at London where, hiding from the violent, left wing Janavita Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) activists who had assassinated her husband, she worked on a PhD thesis on political violence in Sri Lanka. She had friends in Amnesty International and other civil rights groups. By the time she came to power she had begun to identify so strongly with the Tamil cause as to have become "dangerously equidistant" on the issue, Chandrika, however, says she was only trying to emphasise that hers was the Government of "all of Sri Lanka".

But survival is not easy for peacemakers on Sri Lanka's ethnic battleground as was proved by the events of last week much to Chandrika's bitterness. The truce between her government and the LTTE collapsed when the Tigers sank two navy gunboats (a fourth of the Sri Lankan navy's entire gunboat fleet), wiped out a military camp killing at least 30 soldiers, and destroyed a police post killing another six. With the gloves off, Chandrika, too, was left with no option but to send her army into battle.

The resumption of war has brought out of the woodwork in Colombo all the sceptics of wet-told-you-so and many of whom had dismissed Chandrika as no more than a "bleeding-heart liberal wishfully employing a Sorbonne style in Sri Lanka." She vehemently contests that description, but deep down, the resumed fighting has shattered many of her beliefs, hopes and, most of all, the ambition to grow into a figure who would be remembered by history for settling with peace what apparently stronger men, and armies, had failed to sort out with arms.

Some of that bitterness and

Q. But surely the security situation has not improved and you might have to fall back on those powers soon.

A. We could have fallen back on that. There were problems as soon as we took over. The UNP (United National Party) and the JVP caused strikes not just in the public sector but also in crucial areas of foreign investment. It was very easy to go back to emergency regulations and arrest everybody. We used the method of dialogue. Even with the Tigers, our approach has been very different. We have treated them as equals. We hoped that the human aspect would prevail. Yet we did that without betraying the armed forces as the previous government had done. They would talk to the Tigers, give them arms and money and tell the armed forces to fight them.

Q. Doesn't it now look as if there was some wishful thinking behind your approach?

A. No. We had a mandate for peace - 62.5 per cent of the people had asked us to bring peace. So we negotiated without any preconditions. We did not ask them to lay down arms. The Indian Government insists on certain conditions before talking to such groups. Benazir Bhutto has also said that she will not talk to extremists unless they lay down arms.

Q. Do you agree with your critics who call you a bleeding-heart liberal who miscalculated?

A. We had no choice. We had to fulfil the mandate. We did our best to alleviate the problems of the Tamil people. We lifted the blockade, we even conceded the demand for lifting the ban on the supply of fertilisers, wires and batteries. In the hands of skillful people, you know, that adds up to an explosive device. We lifted the fishing ban totally while knowing that this would be very bad for our navy.

Q. But didn't the navy pay the price for this ultimately, with the Tigers sinking two gunboats last week?

A. The two boats that were sunk were supposed to have been secure in the harbour. I have set up a court of inquiry to go into this. It looks as if there was quite a lot of negligence on the navy's part.

Q. Do you now regret conceding so much?

A. No. We had to do all this even when the Tigers did not reciprocate. We sent shiploads of

megatonnage who has killed every single person who was opposed to him. Even the way he decided in cold blood to kill Rajiv Gandhi. And they were nurtured, fed, financed and armed by Mrs. Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi. He just decided to bump Rajiv off. And I was also personally very much aware that if he did not get from me what he wanted, I would be the first person on his list. On that count now there is no doubt.

Q. In hindsight, would you have handled the LTTE differently?

A. I have been asking myself this question last week. I cannot think of any other way I would have handled it given the commitments we had taken on. Except, perhaps, on one score which I cannot mention yet. But, politically, it would have not been possible to change that either, because we have an electorate in the south. We are not dealing only with Prabhakaran and the LTTE.

Q. When you started the peace process, a lot of people said the Government doesn't know who it's dealing with. That it's going out on a limb. Do you think they were right?

A. No, because every other kind of thing that was used had not succeeded. There is no other way possible apart from going for an all-out war against the LTTE with an army and armed forces which were not the best trained and not at all equipped.

Q. Are you saying the chemistry had changed but the psychology hadn't?

A. It seems like that. Then,



The Indo-Lanka Accord: giving India a rope to hang itself

what was necessary.

Q. So you had no option.

A. We were certainly not going to go into an all-out war. Second, even if we wanted to, we were not properly equipped. And we thought, well, let us try something which nobody had tried till now.

Q. And you thought there wasn't very much to lose any? If you get into discussions for a few months, and it didn't work out...?

A. Yes. Exactly. But the feeling was that if it doesn't work out, well, then we cannot rule out other options. But we did not say it. We can't say it. So we thought let us tell them that for the first time there is a government that is willing to consider them as our equals and consider very favourably their requests, except for a separate state.

There was another calculation. The people of the north desired peace desperately, like never before, because they feel that this time if there is peace they will not get licked by the government in power. You see, the chemistry had changed. Though we knew that the LTTE, and especially Prabhakaran, is paranoid about peace. He's terrified of peace.

Q. Suppose they don't attack your forces and carry on just running their own administration in the north and the east. Then what do you do?

A. Well, that was the situation there for about eight months. So, in fact, some people felt we shouldn't have pushed them to

with him within a framework of a devolutionary package while he could still keep his own security guards.

Q. But if you think of it from his point of view, what is his charisma, unless he's fighting a war?

A. But, of course, in a situation like this where a war has dragged on for 12 years, people get tired of war. They want to live normal lives. He also has two young children. And as I said, the pressure of his own people who want to live normally. And look at people like Anton Balasingham, his main spokesperson, making statements like they are willing to go in for a federal solution as an alternative to Eelam.

Q. The Tigers have complete control of the place. All they need is foreign recognition, but you can't help them with that.

A. The first thing is that they can live peacefully. Without getting bombarded from the air and sea and shot at from the ground. And I think that this is a strong, very strong point in favour of peace.

Q. Did you get any feelers from the Tigers checking on this?

A. Well, we sent them a copy of the correction that I sent to the papers denying all that. But they don't work like that. They don't trust others. I had serious problems.

Q. But isn't the whole thing hypothetical - how do you extradite Prabhakaran unless you've caught him?

A. Exactly.

Q. But why this fear then?

A. In a situation of peace, he must be thinking that it will be easier to catch him. In a situation where he would have to become a democratic politician, he would have to be seen, he would have to go about, I don't think Prabhakaran can see that anything can exist in the world different from the way he sees it.

Q. You mean his view of the world is absolutely firm and cast in concrete?

A. He is incapable of seeing that there are other people who are able to think and feel differently. We thought that may be he would understand that there is a possibility of a Sri Lankan Sinhala-based government being human. But I don't think he understands that. Yet, it's worth trying.

ment is taking a very right attitude saying it is your internal problem and hands off as far as the Indian Government is concerned, which is quite right. Why do you say neglect? It is not the Indian Government's business to solve our problems unless we ask them.

Q. It was seen like that for a long time.

A. That's very wrong. The Indian Government is very concerned as a friendly neighbour but they have taken the very clear decision that they shall not interfere unless the Sri Lankan Government wants them to. And even then I think they would think ten times before that, which should be the correct attitude.

Q. How did the extradition factor play in all this? Do you think that is the concern in Prabhakaran's mind?

A. That could very definitely be one fear and we had a very major newspaper group which has been sabotaging the peace process. They misrepresented our foreign minister as having said that I was coming to India and that I would discuss the extradition problems with my prime minister which was utterly and truly false. It was not even on the agenda.

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Q. Do you believe allegations that Premadasa supplied arms to the LTTE while the IPKF was still in the island?

A. Yes. Arms and Rs. 200 million from the treasury, out of secret funds which don't have to be accounted for. Billions of rupees have gone out of that fund.

Q. How do you assess your two predecessors, Premadasa and Jayewardene.

A. Disastrous. Both were disastrous for Sri Lanka.

Q. Who was worse?

A. Definitely Jayewardene, because he started everything which was horrible. Premadasa only continued it. He was more dangerous because he was smarter, more suave.

Q. Did he take Rajiv for a ride?

A. He was the dirtiest of politicians. But he was one of the most shrewd. He could lie like a

they used to keep them inside their houses along with the deities and they used to light lamps saying that this person is going to bring us peace. And they called me by the name of some goddess that they worship. There were Chandrika bangles and Chandrika bracelets. So it became a myth-like thing which was particularly terrifying Prabhakaran. Every-thing went against his accepted view of the world. I am sure that he couldn't possibly accept that a woman can be leader, a Sinhala woman at that, and that a Sinhala could talk peace. All the factors that helped the Tigers get sympathy, money and arms in the past don't exist any more. We have removed all the black marks. The LTTE has no more logic to carry on the war now supposedly on behalf of the Tamil people except for the personal likes and dislikes of a handful of LTTE leaders.

Q. Where do you go from here?

A. We are not going to take it lying down. But we are still trying to avoid going into an all-out war which would mean a lot of civilian casualties. But because of the way the Jaffna peninsula is, if you have to defeat the LTTE there, you have to launch an all out attack and the place will be wiped out.

Q. Is that possible? Can the Sri Lankan forces do it?

A. Of course it is possible. That is what the IPKF tried to do. The point is, if this Government gives the orders to wage war, we won't go back on our word on that either, unlike the previous governments who told the army to fight but cut private deals with the Tigers.

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Tamil Nadu. A. This is where the other factors come in. They were just paranoid when they saw the possibility of Rajiv coming to power. They are very much like the Corsican mafia. Once they swear vengeance against somebody they kill him.

Q. But in terms of timing, politically, wasn't it a disastrous move to kill Rajiv?

A. I think anyway it was a disastrous move to kill Rajiv. I really think he was a decent man. I don't think they thought the Indian Tamils would turn against them. But he was getting so much support in Tamil Nadu that they feared him. They must have thought they will finally get the support of the Tamil Nadu government and the people anyway (even after killing Rajiv).

Q. Do you worry about the India factor while talking to the Tigers now?

A. We had the confidence that the Indian Government has sufficient statesmanship to realise that the solution to terrorism in the north is more important than having one person behind bars, however heinous the crime committed by him.

Q. Did you get any signals like that?

A. Some signals. **Q. Was your view based on these signals or your assessment?**

A. Both.

Q. There is a cynical point of view that the resumption of fighting is good because Prabhakaran as a bad guy is politically more convenient than Prabhakaran as a good guy while India demands his extradition.

A. How can anyone who killed so many people be a good guy? But you have to be realistic. The man today controls one-third of our country, two-thirds of its coastline. Whether one likes him or not one has to deal with him. But we can accept Prabhakaran as the democratic leader of the north if he gave up terrorism and turned the LTTE into a political party.

Q. Do you worry for your life?

A. Fear is a word I do not know. When I took over this responsibility I knew what this would mean. The only thing I am worried about is that I have two children who are very attached to me. Apart from that there are no fears.

Q. Are they interested in politics?

A. They hate it.