

COVER STORY



SRI LANKA FALLING APART

FOR a microsecond the roar of gunfire came as a relief, shattering the nervous silence of the night. A groan, and then the silence again. When a man is shot in the head with an M-16 rifle at 30 metres, he just drops dead. The body lay in the middle of Galle Road, Colombo's shopping pleasure strip studded with casinos and shopping malls. Soldiers jumped past streams of blood and poked it with gunbarrels. "Anyone who tries to take a picture will join this body in the ambulance," barked the officer.

It was a public execution, in full view of hundreds. The victim had been clutching a bag. Soldiers suspected it contained a bomb. First shot in the shoulder he lay writhing in pain. "Shoot him. Kill. Now,"

shouted the officer. A sharpshooter pulled the trigger. Five minutes later, the road was open and life back to normal.

The chilling execution typified the Sri Lanka of today. Not long ago, the island paradise was a virile country on the threshold of an economic miracle. It was called the new Korea, another Taiwan. Today it is compared with Cyprus, Lebanon, Cambodia, even Afghanistan. Sri Lanka is even more of a socio-ethnic powder keg. Centuries of racial hatred was blown into open warfare by Sinhala-dominated Sri Lanka's anti-Tamil policies. Ideological contradictions and economic imbalances have today created a macabre scenario where Tamil fights Sinhala, pro-India Tamil fights anti-India

Tamil who in turn fights India, leftist Sinhala fights conservative Sinhala and so on; anarchy abounds.

With more than 5,000 dead in the past five weeks—bringing the toll for the year close to 10,000—Sri Lankans are locked in a hopeless war with themselves. Its economy, once booming at 5.5 per cent annual growth is now in ruins with a pedestrian growth of around 1.5 per cent and faces hyperinflation and atrophy of the three Ts: textiles, tea and tourism that bring most of its foreign exchange.

Corpses flow down the rivers, hang from the trees, smoulder by the roadside, emitting a stench that is a mix of burning flesh and rubber—evidence that most executions in Sri Lanka are not done

“We are all completely shattered. What kind of democracy is this? My country is becoming a graveyard.”

**SIRIMA
KARIAWASSAM, 46**
*Ruling party
legislator*

**She and husband
Merril, a UNP
leader, seemed
headed for a
bright political
future till
gunmen broke
into his office and
shot him dead.**



Photographs by SHYAM TEKWANI