

Curfews and chaos on island of fear

THE ATTACK came without warning. The political meeting had been going on for some time and, like political meetings everywhere, it was becoming boring as we waited for the main speaker. Then hand grenades were thrown into the crowd from the darkness, one rolling along the tin roof of the stage where the presidential candidate was waiting to make his speech.

His security chief rushed forward and fell on the bomb, covering it with his body before it exploded.

When the smoke and tear gas fired by nervous police cleared, four people were lying dead and about 50 were injured, some seriously, blood covering their clothes. Another bomb was later found under the platform. When I went to talk to one of the speakers next day, there were steel shutters at the entrance to his office and an old revolver on his desk.

The outrage took place in the middle of Colombo, the Sri Lankan capital, but it didn't seem to be reported in the government-controlled newspapers next day. The main item on the television news was the riveting fact that the Prime Minister, Rana Singhe Premadasa—another presidential candidate—had opened a new folk art centre.

This could be because the candidate at the rally came from an opposition group. Or I could have missed the item among all the other reports of terror. There were a total of 18 separate deaths reported on that day alone: four bus drivers here, a postman there, a couple of government officials, several

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shopkeepers and other ordinary civilians.

Sri Lanka is in total chaos. Things have fallen apart, the political centre has long since failed to hold and anarchy is now loosed upon the island.

If tourists had not been advised by the authorities to leave, they would be holidaying amid three-day curfews, power cuts and blackouts, fuel shortages, and fear.

Many hospitals have to use standby generators. Few buses are running, and the railway lines have been blown up in several places. The historic town of Kandy was without water and petrol. Last week, many resort hotels were forced to close. Schools have been shut for almost a month, and government offices are closed.

The government has all but declared a state of emergency, and introduced martial law. Apart from the almost permanent curfew in some areas, police and soldiers are now empowered to shoot curfew-breakers on sight and they are allowed to take away bodies and bury them without inquest. The printing of 'subversive' literature is punishable by imprisonment, even death.

In the north of the island, terrorists fighting for a separate Tamil homeland and keeping 50,000 Indian troops at bay last week ambushed a bus and killed 27 people.

There were provisional elections in the area yesterday. Because the voting is being boycotted by the main Tamil group, the Tigers, polling booths had to be manned by officials flown in from other parts of the island and guarded

by Indian soldiers. The boycott means that the elections will be meaningless, doing nothing more than fulfilling a pledge made when Indian troops arrived a year ago.

North and South are not geographical definitions in Sri Lanka, but political.

North is where the Tamils, who make up 17 per cent of the population, live. All the rest, most of the island, is the home of the Sinhalese and is termed South. There is trouble here too, from the underground JVP or People's Liberation Front movement (once Marxist-inspired, now seemingly fascist controlled).

While the Tamil Tigers are easily recognisable in the North—they carry guns openly and any villager will put you in touch with them—the JVP, once a political party, is now an underground terrorist movement.

Though reckoned small in numbers, it wields an alarming degree of influence on the presidential election set for next month. The Prime Minister has studiously avoided outright condemnation of the JVP in his campaign speeches, claiming disingenuously that there is no hard evidence it is responsible for daily murders. His main rival, Mrs Bandaranaike, put out tentative feelers to the terrorists when forming her coalition, but discussions broke down.

It is not entirely clear what the nihilistic JVP actually wants. Its myriad demands also seemed to call for the wholesale dismantling of the constitution. But it is clear what effect its brutal policy is having, terrorising the country. The JVP flourishes in the villages of Sri Lanka, with people too terrified to disobey its commands.