

THE ECONOMIST DECEMBER 3 1988

Sri Lanka

Enter Hydra

SURELY there must be something to report about Sri Lanka that is not wholly gloomy? Well, there's the tea crop. It is unusually good this year. Unfortunately, much of it is likely to stay on the plantations. The roads from the tea-growing areas to the capital, Colombo, where the tea would be auctioned, packed and exported, are unsafe. Some gets through, escorted by soldiers, but a lot of it will never reach the teapot.

The tea is a metaphor for all of Sri Lanka, a country with an abundance of good things to offer the world, cash crops, precious stones, textiles, free-trade zones and tourism, but all of them stymied by a civil war that is getting more terrible each day. It is now taking on the character of Hydra, the monster of Greek mythology that grew two heads when one was cut off.

Sri Lanka's only monster used to be the Tamil Tigers, who have been fighting tooth and claw for a separate state for the minority Tamils in the north-east of the country. Sri Lanka has not quite cut off the Tigers' head, but it has shooed them into the jungle with the aid of soldiers from India. But by bringing in the Indians, and by offering political concessions to the Tamils, it has created a second monster.

The People's Liberation Front, generally known by the initials JVP (for its Sinhalese name, Janata Vimukthi Peramuna), claims to speak for the island's Sinhalese majority. It is bitterly opposed to the provincial autonomy offered to the Tamils of the north-east, and to the presence of 50,000 Indian soldiers in Sri Lanka, who came in as part of a deal designed to bring peace to the Tamil areas. The Front has declared war on the government of President Junius Jaye-

wardene for doing this deal, which, it says, has put Sri Lanka under India's thumb.

Like the Tigers, the Front has a philosophy which is an unlovely and implausible mixture of Marxism and racism. Its aim is to disrupt the country so much that the government will collapse. It has frightened the drivers of the tea lorries and destroyed the tourist trade.

The Front is as brutal as the Tigers. Since the government signed the pact with India in July 1987 it is believed to have killed more than 600 people, mostly government supporters. In a 24-hour period this week it



Will the Indians sit tight?

shot dead 15 people. In the rural areas of southern Sri Lanka, where most Sinhalese live, its word has become law. It forbids people to go to work; so there is no public transport, shops run out of supplies, hospitals have no medicine and there is a shortage of cash because banks do not open.

The JVP's target now is Colombo. Its posters went up in the capital this week decreeing that all activity should stop on December 5th. From that day even private cars will not be tolerated on the streets. The order will remain in force until December 19th, when a presidential election is due to be held. It seems the Front plans to make that election impossible.

It looks fairly impossible anyway. Were the country not near anarchy it would be a straightforward choice between Mr Ramasinghe Premadasa, the candidate of the ruling United National party, and Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the candidate of the main opposition group. After 11 years of United National party government under Mr Jayewardene (who is retiring), Mrs Bandaranaike would probably win. She is a former prime minister and has the right background: all but one of Sri Lanka's governments during the 40 years since independence have been headed by someone

from one of the great political families, the Senanayakes and the Bandaranaiques. She is of high caste (as important to Buddhist Sinhalese as it is to Hindu Tamils), while Mr Premadasa is of low caste.

Such rationalities no longer seem to matter as much as they did even a couple of months ago. Mrs Bandaranaike has hinted that she might pull out. She suspects that the government may be fixing the election. In Colombo suspicious opposition people mutter that 1.2m illegal voting slips have been prepared to stuff the ballot boxes. The story is a symptom of the malaise in Sri Lanka, a once rather decent country where previous elections have been mostly fair. Mr Jayewardene sought to counter the rumour this week by agreeing that foreign observers could monitor the election.

Or Mr Jayewardene may call off the election, believing that it will end in chaos (even though the soothsayers claim it will be auspicious for Mr Premadasa). He would then continue as executive president, perhaps calling a parliamentary election, a popular move as there has not been one since 1977.

Assuming the presidential election goes ahead, the winner, whether Mr Premadasa or Mrs Bandaranaike, will come to office on a promise to scrap the deal with India. Not only would the Indian soldiers be asked to go home, removing from Sri Lanka its most disciplined group on the side of law and order, but one of Mr Jayewardene's greatest achievements would be endangered. This was the highly successful election in November of a Tamil-run provincial council for the island's northern and eastern districts. Voters turned out in great numbers, despite a demand from the Tigers for a boycott. The council, which once seemed a hopeless dream, has now appointed a terrorist-turned-democrat as provincial minister. If the council collapsed, any hope of peace for the north-east would be over.

These are agonising times for the 82-year-old Mr Jayewardene. He acted courageously in bringing in the Indians and pressing ahead with some kind of Tamil self-government. The army is stretched to run even essential services, but Mr Jayewardene has declined to impose martial law. He may not despair, but he finds it difficult to know what else he can do to hold his little country together. Getting rid of Hydra took all the strength and guile of Hercules.