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SRI LANKA

'Reign of terror' breaks over island

By Sheila Tefft
Special to The Christian Science Monitor

SRI LANKA is careening through the most dangerous and critical period in its modern history.

For weeks, the government of President Junius Jayewardene has been besieged by strikes, demonstrations, prison riots, assassinations, and attacks on military installations.

The tumult is being fired by a radical Sinhalese group, the Janata Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) or People's Liberation Front. A shadowy group with Marxist roots, the JVP surged into prominence in the wake of Mr. Jayewardene's July 1987 peace pact with India. The pact was intended to end Sri Lanka's five-year civil war between the majority Sinhalese and the Tamils.

Many Sinhalese oppose what they see as the accord's concessions to Tamil separatists. The JVP has ridden the crest of this opposition. It has opposed local elections scheduled for Nov. 19 in the Tamil-dominated north and east. (See story at right.) The vote would formalize the merger of the two provinces under an interim government; many Sinhalese view it as a first step toward Tamil secession.

In addition, the JVP embodies growing Sinhalese opposition to the presence of some 50,000 Indian troops in Sri Lanka. The Indian forces are fighting to disarm Tamil separatist guerrillas in the north and east.

In 16 months, the JVP has killed more than 500 members of Jayewardene's ruling United National Party and unleashed a national reign of terror.

(Tamil extremists are also responsible for some of the violence. This past week Tamils ambushed a bus in eastern Sri Lanka, killing 27 Sinhalese. But the presence of Indian troops has left Tamil guerrillas unable to operate outside their areas in the far north and east.)

"Opposition to the accord has coalesced around the JVP," says a Sri Lankan analyst who asked



Tamil women in southern Sri Lanka: many Sinhalese oppose what they see as moves toward Tamil secession.

A. NORMAN MATHEW - STAFF

to remain anonymous. "They are emerging with increasing self-confidence as the main opposition to the government."

Indeed, the JVP has become the main factor in next month's presidential elections to choose a successor to 81-year-old Jayewardene, who is retiring.

Through its escalating campaign of violence, the JVP is mounting pressure on Jayewardene to step aside early, dissolve the parliament, and appoint a caretaker government until fresh elections can be held. His government, which banned the JVP in 1983 for instigating vicious anti-Tamil riots, is negotiating with a coalition of opposition parties to bring the Sinhalese extremists back into the political mainstream.

This is "imperative," says an opposition politician involved in talks with the JVP. "All of our lives are at stake."

Presidential candidates are trying to court the JVP. Former

left-wing Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, whose government put down a 1971 JVP insurrection in which more than 10,000 people were killed, is trying to form an alliance with the extremist group. Current Prime Minister Ranasinghe Prema-

sources, the JVP has a plan to disrupt the presidential campaign in hopes of coming to power in a widespread insurrection. The group has been penetrating the military and security forces whose weapons and support it needs to topple the government.

Meanwhile, both candidates have vowed to force out Indian troops after the election. "The presence of a foreign army in this country is a slur on our independence," Mr. Premadasa said.

An Indian pullout, which could undercut the JVP's momentum - is not likely in the near future, Sri Lankan observers and diplomats in Colombo say. Although India's Army is anxious to bring the troops home, New Delhi wants to do so on its own terms and not under pressure from Sri Lanka.

Indeed many Sri Lankans worry that as the situation here

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Provincial vote opposed by both sides

L EADING a column of soldiers, the Indian Army captain cautiously combed Trincomalee market.

Many shops were shuttered, under threat from Tamil militants opposing Indian enforcement of the 1987 peace accord.

In recent weeks, the bazaar has been rocked by bomb blasts that have killed Indian troops and local residents. "This is a dicey area," said the young Indian officer. "Thank God it's quiet now. If we can just get through this election..."

Trincomalee, a strategic seaport on Sri Lanka's east coast and a flash point in the country's ethnic conflict, has been bracing for controversial provincial elections Nov. 19.

The voting, for a 36-seat council, will formalize the merger of Sri Lanka's Eastern and Northern Provinces under an interim government. The union is a crucial provision of the July 1987 peace plan between India and Sri Lanka. Under the accord, Tamils are to receive a measure of autonomy in the north and east where militants have fought for an independent homeland.

Both Tamils and Sinhalese, however, are split over whether the election should be held at all. The Northern Province, a militant stronghold, is overwhelmingly populated by Tamils, who are Hindu. But in the Eastern Province less than half of the population is Tamil; the rest is Buddhist Sinhalese and Muslim. Officials in the Sri Lankan government have cited this in opposing a merger of the two provinces.

Furthermore, moderate Tamils in the east have refused to take part in the vote because militants have threatened reprisals. - S. T.



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dasa, a leader in Jayewardene's party and a bitter critic of the peace accord, has taken a soft line toward the JVP.

But the JVP, capitalizing on growing antigovernment feeling and emboldened by its success, is spurning opposition overtures, and even threatening Jayewardene's political foes.

According to informed