

Assassination fuels political crisis

• From Page A1

Sri Lanka was catapulted into its latest crisis when the 68-year-old Mr. Premadasa and 23 others were killed at a May Day celebration by a teen-aged bicyclist, apparently with a bomb strapped to his body, who rode to within a few metres of the president before triggering the explosive. Police said 38 people were injured.

Nine days earlier, Lalith Athulathmudali, one of Mr. Premadasa's most popular opponents, was shot dead at a political rally.

Lionel Gunatilleke, head of the crime detection bureau of the Colombo police, said last night the Tamil Tiger rebels were the primary suspects in both murders. He said police found fragments of a cyanide capsule, carried by all Tigers in case they are caught, embedded in the remains of the suicide bomber's neck.

But few political experts subscribed to the quick accusation. "I just can't see why the Tigers would want to kill Premadasa at this juncture," said Mangala Moonesingha, an opposition MP who chairs a key parliamentary committee on Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict.

The Tigers denied involvement in both deaths.

On an oppressively humid Sunday after a nightlong curfew, tens of thousands of mourners stood for two hours in a line that snaked through central Colombo to pay their last respects to Mr. Premadasa, whose remains lay in state in a closed coffin in his private residence. A state funeral has been scheduled for Thursday.

In the city centre, white flags of mourning fluttered from almost

every balcony while loudspeakers played Sinhalese songs of grief and school children hung portraits of Mr. Premadasa from rooftops. The city's main boulevards were lined with scores of life-size cutouts of the former president.

Jeps of soldiers with automatic weapons patrolled the streets, but there was no sign of the retaliation that in the past decade has become a hallmark of Sri Lankan society.

"He would want us to be peaceful," said Ranjith Bandara, 37, a gem trader.

For 10 years, Sri Lanka has been submerged in one of the world's bloodiest civil wars between Tamil separatists, who control the country's northern tip, and the Sinhalese-dominated central government. The conflict in the north has claimed more than 20,000 lives.

Three-quarters of Sri Lanka's 15 million people are ethnic Sinhalese. Tamils account for 18 per cent of the population.

The government has accused the Tigers of successful suicide attacks on its defence minister, Ranjan Wijeratne, in 1990 and its navy commander, Clancy Fernando, in November. The Indian government also has accused the Tigers of assassinating former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 in a similar suicide bombing.

But some officials in Colombo wonder why the Tigers would kill Mr. Premadasa, who was considered to be their best hope for a peace compromise.

Mr. Premadasa, who was a hero among Sri Lanka's rural poor for his

long anti-poverty campaign, had no shortage of enemies as he tried to straddle the divide between two ethnic groups. In the past two years, he had grown increasingly autocratic, alienating members of his own party and driving opposition members to try to impeach him last year.

Many opposition members felt Mr. Premadasa's government was behind the recent assassination of Mr. Athulathmudali, who was a growing political threat, especially in the current campaign for May 17 provincial council elections. Many people in Colombo believe Mr. Premadasa's death was a revenge attack.

There are even suspicions that senior members of the military, angered by Mr. Premadasa's unwillingness to let them launch a full assault on the Tamils' northern base, wanted to be rid of him. The army, which a decade ago numbered 15,000, is now 80,000 strong and consumes 19 per cent of the national budget.

Mr. Premadasa was equally unpopular among Sinhalese extremists, who considered him too soft on the Tamil issue.

His government deployed hit squads to wage war on political opponents from 1988 to 1990, when, according to a United Nations report, more than 40,000 Sri Lankans died or disappeared. Last year, the government focused its harassment on journalists and newspaper owners.

But when foreign aid donors threatened to suspend development assistance, which totalled \$825-million (U.S.) in 1992, Mr. Premadasa started to clean up his government's

human-rights act. He invited Amnesty International to visit the island, reined in the security forces and released hundreds of prisoners who had been detained without trial.

According to a Western diplomat, the International Committee of the Red Cross told the donor community last month that the disappearances of individuals in the northern and eastern regions, where the ethnic conflict has been most intense, "are practically down to zero."

Mr. Premadasa, who rose from a low-caste washerman's family to the president's office in 1988, considered himself a populist. He was obsessed with freeing Sri Lanka from poverty and turning it into a newly industrialized country by the end of the century.

He created innovative programs to supply free school uniforms, help the poor build homes, improve farm incomes and develop rural savings schemes.

Mr. Premadasa also was an ardent supporter of conservative economic policies, selling off state enterprises, liberalizing the domestic market and campaigning heavily for foreign investment.

Despite the civil conflict, Sri Lanka's economy grew 4.3 per cent in 1992, while foreign exchange reserves reached record levels.

But Mr. Premadasa also detested dissent and drove many of his opponents from the ruling party.

Godfrey Gunatilleku, a social activist in Colombo, said the acting president, Mr. Wijetunga, is likely to be more conciliatory. "Decision-making may be of a more collective nature," he said.