

Tamil fear assassination aftermath. (1993, May 4). *The Globe and mail.*

Tamils fear assassination aftermath

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EVEN if the notorious Tamil Tigers, one of the world's most enduring insurgencies, didn't kill Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa, the very suspicion of their involvement has swamped the island state with torrents of terror and anger.

The thought of renewed Tiger attacks has sent politicians, human-rights activists and aid workers into hiding or public silence.

To Tamil civilian leaders, ethnic retaliation seems imminent, perhaps at Thursday's state funeral for Mr. Premadasa, who was killed by a suicide bomber on Saturday.

"I fear there will be a backlash," said Siva Sivanesaselvan, editor of *Virakesari*, a leading Tamil newspaper. "That fear is among every Tamil."

The fear of the Tigers, and the loathing they create toward the Tamil minority, has polarized Sri Lanka for a decade. In that period, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, as they are formally known, have killed dozens of political and military leaders and thousands of civilians and government soldiers.

In Mr. Premadasa's death, some believe the Tigers would have wanted to create a political vacuum in Sri Lanka, allowing them to reb-

uild their demoralized forces, which have been driven against a wall by an 80,000-strong government army. They also may have wanted a show of force, to stop the growing impression that they were losing the war.

Others can't imagine the Tigers killing Mr. Premadasa, who was one of the few Sri Lankan leaders willing to talk peace with them.

Once in favour of an independent state, known as Tamil Eelam, the

cal population in their stronghold, the northern Jaffna peninsula, are said to be exhausted from war.

Cut off from the rest of the country, Jaffna has gone two years with no electricity, few medicines and only basic foodstuffs.

"The government is trying to starve them out," said one relief worker who visits Jaffna regularly. "It's psychological starvation."

To get to the mainland, Jaffna residents must cross a lagoon, invari-

In January, the Indian navy intercepted a Tiger supply boat said to be carrying weapons, including anti-aircraft guns. Brigadier Naline Angamma, spokesman for the Sri Lankan military, said the Tigers have two or three more ships to carry weapons and supplies, mostly from Singapore.

He said the Tigers, who have shielded themselves among Jaffna's civilian population, also continue to use advanced machine guns to fire at army helicopters. They appear to be financed by Tamil groups in Europe and North America.

Since the military launched its northern campaign in 1990, it says about 4,900 Tigers and 2,750 government soldiers have been killed. Brig. Angamma estimated that the Tigers have 10,000 fighters left.

Before Mr. Premadasa's death, other efforts were being made to bridge the two sides.

To help improve living conditions in Jaffna, the United Nations proposed opening a "safe passage" at the northern front line. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees would escort people across the line, thus enabling traders to travel more safely to Jaffna, said Peter Nicholas, UNHCR's deputy director in Sri Lanka.

The Tigers agreed in principle to the proposal, but government approval may take months because of the current political crisis, Mr. Nicholas said.

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Tigers have talked more recently of a political compromise. One frequent suggestion: a reconstituted federation, with Sri Lanka's north and east merged as a semi-autonomous province.

"This struggle cannot be settled militarily. It has to be settled politically," said Joseph Pararajasingham, a member of parliament for the opposition Tamil United Liberation Front, which has been sympathetic to the Tigers' goals.

Some of the pressure for change appears to come from within. Despite the renowned discipline of the Tiger soldiers, who carry cyanide capsules with them in case they are caught by Sri Lankan forces, the lo-

ably at night. About 150 people have been killed making the crossing as their boats hit mines or were sunk by government patrol boats.

Once on the mainland, Tamils wishing to enter government-controlled territory must obtain an exit visa from the Tigers, who demand gold coins for a permanent visa and rarely give them to young men.

As if to lure the Tamils over, the government has established a prospering market on its side of the line and stocked it with consumer goods.

Despite their own spartan home life, the Tigers appear to have no shortage of weapons or ammunition.