



Greg Girard - Asiaweek

In the south, the aftermath of a terrible time: A glint of light at the end of the long tunnel of strife

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

SRI LANKA

A Welcome Breathing Space

It is not known exactly how many Sri Lankan lives ended violently in August. The official estimate runs to about 1,000, but body-counts are a grimly imprecise exercise when applied to piles of smouldering ashes along a rural roadside or to bloated cadavers floating down a river. What is sure is that the worst sustained carnage Sri Lanka has ever witnessed engulfed the land at the height of a government offensive against the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, the militant Sinhalese nationalist group that has held the island's south in a grip of terror. But by the end of August, it seemed the JVP's hold had been weakened. There was a marked reduction in the number of attacks against security personnel and their families, although sporadic killings continued. The uneasy lull gave politicians a chance to reassert themselves in the quest for solutions.

There was respite for President Ranasinghe Premadasa on other fronts as well. Foreign Minister Ranjan Wijeratne, Premadasa's emissary to the Sept. 4-8 Non-Aligned Summit in Belgrade, Yugoslavia,

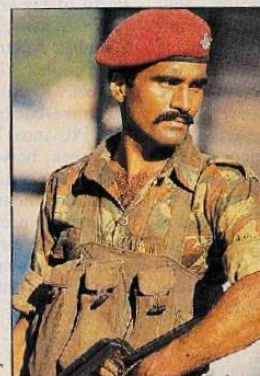
returned bearing the prospect of a new agreement with New Delhi on the withdrawal of the 40,000 Indian troops stationed in Sri Lanka's Tamil northeast. New Delhi, said officials, was now ready "to make all efforts" to bring home its remaining soldiers by the end of the year. At the same time, the government invited the opposition — including the armed rebels — to an all-party conference on the country's troubles, gamely describing it as "an opportunity for a collective search for pragmatic and viable solutions."

For beleaguered Sri Lankans, there seemed at least a glint of light at the end of their nation's long tunnel of ethnic strife. Along with the renewed prospect of a settlement to the Tamil issue came the perception that the anti-JVP blitz in the south had

paid off. "There has been a tremendous improvement in the security situation," said Gen. Cyril Ranatunge, secretary to the Ministry of Defence. Some 3,500 people had been arrested as subversives, while 153 others had surrendered. Many analysts felt the turning point had come when the JVP began targeting the wives and children of servicemen. The murder of some 31 such families, said Ranatunge, "hardened the attitude" of soldiers in going for retaliatory kills.

With the massacres beginning to tail off, the government scored some success in exhorting public-sector workers to defy death threats and report for work. "Do your duty," the president implored them, "or in the name of God go." His imprecations did not go unheeded: a rebel strike called for the second week

Indian soldier: A deal?



Frank Sison