

Suicide bomb blast kills 50 Sri Lankans. (1994, October 24). *The Toronto star*.

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Opposition chief among victims as election nears

COLOMBO (CP) — A suicide bomber killed up to 50 people, including Sri Lankan opposition leader Gamini Dissanayake, and wounded 300 at a presidential election rally yesterday, military sources say.

A senior military officer called it "a human bomb."

"There was a person in the crowd in the second or third row who had explosives. Then there was a blast which was carried forward towards the stage."

The assassination of Dissanayake came less than three weeks before the election and just before peace talks were to resume with Tamil Tiger guerrillas.

The 11-year-old civil war in the South Asian country has killed more than 34,000 people.

Dissanayake was an outspoken critic of the talks that began this month and the government warned him three weeks ago the Tigers would try to kill him.

The bomb ripped through the

rally on the outskirts of Colombo shortly before midnight. Dissanayake had just finished speaking and was stepping off the stage to greet supporters at his last stop of the day, a defence ministry official said on condition of anonymity.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility and police said it was too early to say who might have set the blast. But the Tigers have a long history of assassinations and suicide bombs.

They were blamed for the killing last year of President Ranasinghe Premadasa and of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in May, 1991. Dozens of Sri Lankan politicians and military leaders have also been killed by bombs.

About 50 bodies were taken to General Hospital in Colombo after the blast yesterday, a hospital official said.

Among the others killed were the United National party's general secretary, two former cabinet ministers and a member of parliament.

Thousands of people gathered outside the hospital, waiting for information. Police threw up a cordon to keep the

crowd under control.

Prime Minister Chandrika Kumaratunga called an emergency cabinet meeting to discuss postponing the Nov. 9 election, in which she was to stand as a candidate for the governing alliance.

After 17 years in power, the United National party lost control of the government to Kumaratunga in August's legislative election.

Kumaratunga, whose People's Alliance pledged to end the war, immediately offered to hold unconditional talks. The United National party refused to negotiate until rebels lay down their arms.

The Tigers have been fighting since 1983 for an independent homeland for the Tamil minority in the north and east of Sri Lanka, where they say they are discriminated against by the Sinhalese majority. The Tamils represent about 18 per cent of Sri Lanka's 17 million people.

Talks scheduled to begin today in the guerrilla stronghold Jaffna were to focus on a cease-fire and the opening of a land route for supplies to the rebel-held Jaffna Peninsula.