

A nation Mourns. (1994, October 30). New York Times .

JOHN F. BURNS
NEW YORK TIMES

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka — As Sri Lankans struggle to cope with the suicide bombing that killed the country's main opposition leader and dozens of others at a political rally, many found a focus for their grief in a moment that one newspaper called the "gathering of the widows."

In an encounter that encapsulated the melancholy that has settled on this country like a shroud, three women who lost their husbands in previous political killings met on Wednesday by the rain-swept bier of Gamini Dissanayake, the slain opposition leader, to console his widow, Srma. The brief meeting, at an open-air pavilion at the country's parliamentary complex, was wordless.

Leading the widows was Prime Minister Chandrika Kumaratunga, whose husband was shot dead six years ago. Also in the group was Mfs. Kumaratunga's mother, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, who became the world's first female prime minister in 1959 after her husband, also prime minister, was shot dead by a Buddhist monk.

Sri Lanka has billed itself in travel brochures as a "fantasy island" of graceful Buddhist and Hindu temples, south sea beaches and swaying palms. But nowadays, many in this island nation see themselves not so much blessed as cursed, by a seemingly endless cycle of bombings and shootings and massacres, many of them, like the latest, carried out with a ferocity that seems to have taken on a grisly logic of its own.

"A dozen leaders you worked closely with, whose families you knew, all killed — it eats into your very being," said Neelam Tiruchelvam, a 50-year-old Harvard-educated lawyer who knew Dissanayake since the two were schoolboys.

After a moment's silence, Tiruchelvam added: "They say it's immoral to be pessimistic at a time of moral crisis. But events like this induce a sense of helplessness."

The despair felt by many here runs beyond the 11-year civil war that has pitted the majority population of ethnic Sinhalese, mostly Buddhists, against the rebel group suspected of having killed Dissanayake, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

The Tigers, who are renowned for the brutality of their tactics, including suicide bombings, are fighting for a separate state in northern and eastern Sri Lanka for the country's minority of ethnic Tamils, mostly Hindus, who make up about 12 per cent of the population.

The war has killed at least 40,000 people since it began in 1983. But at times it has been a sideshow to other eruptions of political violence in which the main perpetrators, and victims, have been ethnic Sinhalese.

Then, in the late 1980s, the government army and police went to war against an extreme Sinhalese nationalist group, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna. From 1987 to 1990, the two sides engaged in a deadly trade of assassination, massacre and torture in which 20,000 to 60,000 people are said to have been killed.

The two conflicts gave birth to a wider cult of violence. Hardly a day goes by when newspapers here do not chronicle killings that have grown out of political rivalries, ethnic or religious tensions, or gang warfare that is rife in Colombo and other major cities.

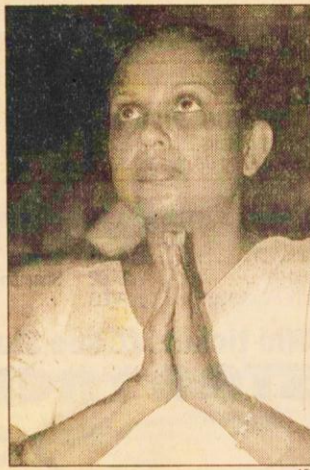
Shootings or knifings are the exception. Often, the victims are pushed into burning cars, hacked to death with machetes, or tortured to death over hours or days. Often, their children die with them.

But few recent events have stunned Sri Lanka's 18 million people more than Monday morning's blast. Just past midnight Sunday, as the 52-year-old Dissanayake closed the rally in a Colombo suburb by bidding the crowd a cheery "Good morning," a young woman with braided hair stepped forward, positioned herself three metres from the platform, and reached beneath her T-shirt to deto-



Prime Minister Chandrika Kumaratunga
Her husband was shot to death six years ago

"They say it's immoral to be pessimistic at a time of moral crisis. But events like this induce a sense of helplessness."



Opposition leader Srma Dissanayake
Her husband was killed by a bombing Monday

nate a bomb.

The bomb, laced with five kilograms of ball bearings, killed 54 people and wounded more than 100, many critically. Among the dead were three former cabinet ministers, seven police officers, and several wives and daughters of leading political figures, as well as many others on the platform and in the front rows of the crowd. The head of the suicide bomber, who remains unidentified, was found more than 25 metres away, on a second-storey rooftop.

The blast threw Sri Lanka's political landscape into chaos for the second time in 18 months. During a May Day procession through Colombo last year, President Ranasinghe Premadasa was killed with more than 20 others by a suicide bomber on a bicycle, apparently sent by the Tiger rebels.

A week earlier, a man who had been widely touted as the country's future leader, Lalith Athulathmudali, a political partner of Dissanayake, was shot to death at another rally. That killing, too, was blamed on the Tigers, though many here believe it may have been ordered by Pre-

madasa. Athulathmudali's widow, Srmani, was one of the widows who gathered at Dissanayake's bier last week.

The earlier killings left Dissanayake on a short list of middle-age politicians considered capable of running the government. His United National Party, a conservative grouping that had governed for 17 years, narrowly lost a general election in August to a left-of-centre coalition headed by Kumaratunga. It was hoping to make a comeback in the presidential election on Nov. 9, in which the two main candidates were to have been Kumaratunga and Dissanayake.

Now, the United National Party's candidate will be Srma Dissanayake, a 50-year-old lawyer, who will be continuing the tradition of widows' stepping into politics that was started 35 years ago by Bandaranaike, Chandrika Kumaratunga's mother.

In a measure of how democracy here has been inhibited by violence, both Kumaratunga and Dissanayake have said they will hold no further public rallies before the election.

But for many Sri Lankans, who wins the presidency has become almost irrelevant. As middle-class families gathered, searching for explanations for the violence, the talk was more of culture and psychology than of the election. One prominent doctor stunned guests at dinner into silence when he interrupted a discussion to say, "If you ask me, what this country needs is a crash program in mental health."

The immediate problem is what to do about the Tigers, who were drawn into preliminary peace talks by Kumaratunga after the August general election. The prime minister has frozen contacts with the rebels while last weekend's bombing is investigated. But many who voted for Kumaratunga two months ago are saying now that the Tigers have shown by the killing that they will never change into a conventional democratic party.

Instead, these critics say, the Tigers' leader, Vellupillai Prabhakaran, will exploit what he regards as the new government's weakness, dispatching new terror squads to kill other leaders, and manipulating talks to win time, and new supplies, for his fighters. In this view, the killing of Dissanayake may have been part of a long-established — and, as this week's events have suggested, successful — Tigers' strategy of demoralizing their opponents.

Some in Colombo believe Prabhakaran has mesmerized the country with the suicide bombings, and with a Pimpernel-type existence, in which he rarely appears anywhere, and then only under heavy guard.

"If you talk to many Sinhalese, they are in awe of the man," said David Ratnavale, a psychiatrist who returned to Colombo three months ago after practicing in Washington for 30 years. "They see him as almost superhuman. It's a feature of the general sense of helplessness."

Pessimists say that sometime in the last 20 years something in the Sri Lankan psyche snapped. Tens of thousands have fought in the military conflicts, witnessing killing on a large scale. Hundreds of thousands of others have been uprooted or otherwise had their lives disrupted by the fighting, by crash rural economic development schemes in the 1980s and by the migration of hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankans to work, many in menial jobs, in the Middle East.

Traditionally, social and political tensions here were ameliorated by the predominating religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, which preach tolerance toward enemies and acceptance of adversity.

But many Sri Lankans say that the days when religion exercised a restraining influence have gone. "Buddhism and Hinduism preach peace and harmony, but as a practical matter they have failed," said I.V. Idrisinghe, a sociology professor at the University of Colombo. "The old social order here has been destroyed, and it is going to be extremely difficult to recreate it."