

Peace talks hang on outcome of Sri Lankan vote

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COLOMBO, Sri Lanka - Sri Lankans choose a president tomorrow and the options represented by the candidates, two political widows, are clear: peace talks with separatist rebels or more war.

As campaigning for the Nov. 9 presidential polls ended Sunday, Prime Minister Chandrika Kumaratunga, who supports negotiations with the Tamil Tiger rebels, appeared to be riding a popularity wave.

The election is crucial for the course of this nation because the president holds executive power and can veto action by the prime minister and the cabinet.

Three months ago, Kumaratunga led her People's Alliance to victory in a parliamentary election and became prime minister, ending 17 years of government by the United National Party.

Her main rival, Srima Dissanayake, is hoping to cash in on public sympathy over the assassination of her husband, Gamini, who was killed with 55 others in the suicide bombing of a campaign meeting in Colombo on Oct. 24.

Kumaratunga's husband, a popular movie actor who went into politics, was assassinated six years ago.

If Kumaratunga wins, it will be a mandate to push ahead with talks she initiated last month with the rebels. On the eve of the second meeting, the talks were suspended after Dissanayake's killing. Police suspect a Tamil rebel was the assassin.

So far, 34,000 people have been killed in the civil war.

An upset victory for Srima Dissanayake would reflect a vengeful mood toward the Tigers and a wariness about hopes by the guerrillas to split this small Indian Ocean island into separate Tamil and Sinhalese countries.

Even before the bombing, many Sinhalese suspected the Tigers would use the respite of negotiation to rebuild their strength and continue the war.