

Sri Lanka's new president sworn in

Reuter

KANDY, Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's new president pledged to lead the strife-torn island to unity and peace yesterday as a powerful Tamil guerrilla group vowed to continue its separatist rebellion.

Ranasinghe Premadasa, prime minister for the past 11 years, was inaugurated yesterday at a Buddhist temple in the sacred city of Kandy, the island's former capital, 110 kilometres from Colombo.

The new president was sworn in at 10:40 a.m., a time deemed auspicious by astrologers, to thunderous applause from tens of thousands of people who chanted "sadhu, sadhu" (blessings, blessings) as hundreds of firecrackers exploded.

Army commandos and hundreds of policemen enforced tight security as an estimated 500,000 people thronged the picturesque city nestling in the central highlands.

Mr. Premadasa, 64, is the first commoner to rule the Indian Ocean island of 16 million people since its independence from Britain in 1948. He succeeded Junius Jayewardene, who retired after nearly 50 years in politics.

Mr. Jayewardene had been beset in the past six years by a revolt by the minority Tamil community in the north and east, and by attacks by a violent Marxist group from the majority Sinhalese community in the south.

Mr. Premadasa, in a speech to the nation from the balcony of the temple, pledged "to lead my people to unity and amity . . . to peace and harmony."

Dubbed the "common man's president," Mr. Premadasa repeated his invitation to the rebels to join in the democratic process.

"I am available at any time, anywhere, for any discussion in order to arrive at constructive solutions," he said.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the biggest Tamil guerrilla group, has rejected a pact signed by Mr. Jayewardene and Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in July of 1987 and is continuing an armed campaign to set up an independent state.

About 50,000 Indian soldiers are now in the north and east of the island trying to hunt down and disarm the Tigers.

Mr. Premadasa received a boost on the eve of his inauguration when, at his request, India announced it was withdrawing two battalions, 2,000 to 3,000 troops, from the island in the next few days.

But the Tigers said yesterday they would continue their fight against the Indian forces.

"The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam pledge to continue the struggle against the Indian occupation forces until their total withdrawal from the Tamil homeland," the group said in a statement issued shortly before Mr. Premadasa was sworn in.

Mr. Premadasa also made peace overtures to the Marxist People's Liberation Front, which has been attempting to topple Mr. Jayewardene's government in the past few months.

The Front opposes the agreement with India and attempted to disrupt last December's election by attacking polling stations, election workers and voters.

Mr. Premadasa said in order to ensure the island's independence, Sri Lankans should settle their disputes among themselves through a process of consultation.

