

Sri Lanka

Whose revolution will it be?

FROM OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT IN SRI LANKA

"PLEASE write something nice about us," says a government official weary of Sri Lanka's woeful reputation for self-destruction. Very well. The shops and banks are open; the buses and trains are running again; there is petrol in the pumps, the curfew has been lifted. Many in Sri Lanka, where "auspicious days" decide the movements of people from the president downwards, attribute the present relaxed mood to an unusually favourable arrangement of the planets. An earthier view is that Sri Lanka seems to be pausing for breath between its presidential election of last December and the parliamentary election due on February 15th. Perhaps, the optimists are saying, Sri Lanka's troubles can at last be settled by talk instead of violence.

This optimism manages to survive a daily battering as some new atrocity is reported. The most dangerous occupation in Sri Lanka is that of parliamentary candidate. By the middle of this week 12 of them had been shot dead and many of their supporters had died in the crossfire. These murders, however, appear to be mainly the result of personal animosities and party rivalries rather than the work of terrorist groups, although it has sometimes been expedient to blame the terrorists. The Tamil Tigers and the JVP (Janata Vimukthi Peramuna, or People's Liberation Front), the two main groups that believe the way to

a better future is to kill people, are lying low.

This is of little comfort to the bereaved, but it cheers up everyone else. If only the Tigers and the JVP can be persuaded to keep quiet, business will boom, the universities will reopen and the tourists will return, lured once again by travel articles about sun-kissed beaches and the ancient frescoes of bare-breasted ladies at Sigiriya. "The tears of grief will turn to tears of happiness," says President Ranasinghe Premadasa.

Yes, it is easy to get carried away. The reality is that Sri Lanka has a range of mind-splitting problems. It has the now famous problem of the Tamils who want a separate state in the island; the problem of the majority Sinhalese who have come to hate the Tamils; and the problem of what to do about the 45,000 Indian soldiers whose presence in Sri Lanka is resented by Tamils and Sinhalese alike.

Many Sri Lankans, probably most, blame India for all their troubles. From the early 1980s India supported the Tamil independence movement and allowed Tamil guerrillas to train in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. In 1987 India persuaded the Sri Lankan government to grant the Tamils limited self-rule in the north-east. Indian soldiers were allowed in as a "peace-keeping force" but were soon fighting those Tamils who continued to demand an independent state. An anti-Indian movement



Premadasa is feeling generous

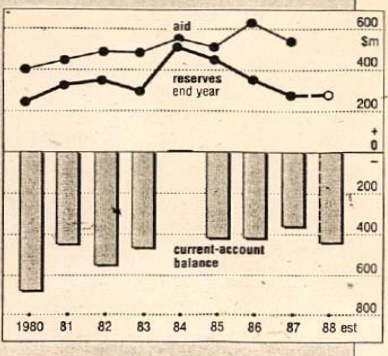
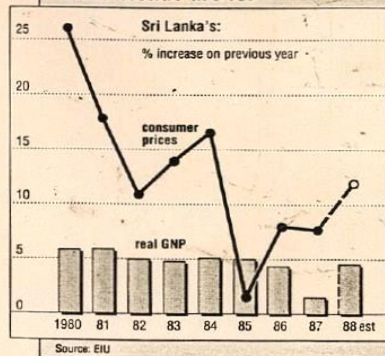
sprung up in the Sinhalese south. Its most violent expression is the JVP. Call it the Jolly Vicious party, says a Sri Lankan with a taste for black humour. In little over a year it has killed more than 700 supporters of the government. Their offence, the JVP says, was that they allowed India, a traditional enemy, to invade Sri Lanka.

Get rid of the Indian soldiers then? If they go, the Tigers, a subdued but far from beaten force, will come out of the jungle and resume their fight for the state they call Tamil Eelam. The Sri Lankan army is not reckoned strong enough to replace the Indians. Mr Premadasa says the Indians will go but has not said when. Although he was prime minister in the government of the previous president, Mr Junius Jayewardene, he has managed to distance himself from the deal that Mr Jayewardene did with India.

The JVP, which tried to kill Mr Jayewardene, has spoken approvingly of Mr Premadasa. The Sinhalese guerrillas claim they helped him to power. Their threat to kill voters prevented the high poll that would have helped the main opposition candidate, Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike, whose government put down a JVP uprising in 1971. In the JVP view, Mr Premadasa will prove to be a weak president unable to cope with the revolution it judges is close. When he falls, the small group of well-educated and ruthless young people who control the JVP believes it will take over the country.

Nonsense—maybe. Mr Premadasa's supporters claim he is strong, even ruthless. They note that during the presidential campaign he cruelly cold-shouldered Mr Jayewardene, his former mentor, in order to demonstrate that he is his own man. But Mr Premadasa's own thinking coincides with the JVP's on one point: he believes that unrest starts with poverty. He plans a revolution of his own. He is promising more than 1.4m poor families a gift of 2,500 rupees (\$80) a month for two years. This is a lot of

What friends are for



money in Sri Lanka. A factory worker in a free-trade zone gets 1,000 rupees a month.

Each year, this handout would equal at least half and possibly all of the government's present yearly revenues, depending on how the largesse was distributed (under one plan part of it could not be drawn until the end of the two-year period). The president's advisers propose less apocalyptic ways of helping the poor, but he appears to be unshiftable. He recalls that he grew up in a poor family to whom a lump sum such as this would have been salvation, the means to start a small business. That is what he is promising his people. If necessary he will

simply print the money. Economics is not Mr Premadasa's strong suit.

The International Monetary Fund is already frowning. The second instalment of a loan agreed to last year is due to be given to Sri Lanka in March. If this is withheld it will cast a cloud over an aid meeting in June arranged by the World Bank.

Under the Jayewardene government the country became self-sufficient in rice and substantially increased its export earnings, mainly from textiles and tea. But Sri Lanka still has to count on the generous charity of overseas friends (see chart on previous page). The former finance minister, Mr

Ronnie de Mel, who fell out with Mr Jayewardene last year, was the wizard who kept the aid flowing in. Mr de Mel, who (unlike the new president) is economically literate, might have been able to persuade Mr Premadasa of the vices of his plans. If not, even he would have found it impossible to persuade donors to keep writing cheques.

The paper kites are flying cheerfully over the green on Colombo's seafront. The splendid Buddhist temple in Kandy has a new roof of gold. It is not difficult to find pleasant things to say about Sri Lanka. Alas, they are mostly superficial ones.

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