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Fear spurs exodus

By Derek Brown
in Colombo

STEADILY mounting violence, and growing fears for the long-term political stability of Sri Lanka, are leading to an exodus of the middle classes and expatriates.

Indian nationals working in remote areas of Sri Lanka have been advised by their High Commission to come to Colombo, and many of the 500-strong community are preparing to leave the island.

India, which has at least 50,000 troops in the mainly Tamil north and east of the island, has demanded better security for its nationals in the south, where Sinhalese militants are waging a bitter guerrilla campaign against the government.

British expatriates, too, are pulling out. Reliable sources said that about 10 Britons working for a sugar-producing company in the strife-torn district of Moneragela were expected to leave this week. Aid workers are also said to be meeting regularly to review their increasingly precarious position.

Airline tickets are in great demand, several foreign airlines, including British Airways, having pulled out earlier in the year.

Although the main insurgent group, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), has not made a point of attacking foreigners, its propaganda is heavily xenophobic, and obsessively anti-Indian.

The JVP is bitterly opposed to last year's Indo-Sri Lankan accord, which, they say, has partitioned the island. The rebels' elusive leader, Mr Rohanna Wijeweera, has talked extravagantly of driving the huge Indian force into the sea, and, if necessary, marching on Delhi.

Another 46 deaths were reported over the weekend. They included three soldiers travelling as armed guards in state-owned buses, shot by suspected JVP men among the passengers. A woman also died in one of the attacks. Some 31 supporters of the ruling United National Party (UNP) were also among the weekend's victims.