

Four boys shot at close range. (1988, December 8). *The globe and mail.*

# Four boys shot at close range

• From Page A1

the JVP guerrillas who have used gruesome terror tactics to bring the entire south coast under their sway. Nor is it clear whether the armed assassins wanted to kill these specific four youths, or merely grabbed the first group they saw.

"We came out of the house after watching television," said Ranasinge Gunadasa, a spindly 15-year-old who is only five feet tall and weighs 90 pounds. "The people in uniforms grabbed us and blindfolded us. They took us to the water and ordered us to get in and take a bath.

"We took off our shirts, but kept wearing our sarongs. That's when the men told us to stand in line. Then they started shooting."

His mother stood forward to plead with the visitor, in the naive belief that a lone foreigner with a notebook might have power to set things right. "You tell them that my son has nothing to do with the JVP," she cried. "He is not a very brainy boy. He only went to the seventh grade in school. He knows nothing about politics."

Another village woman, tearful and near hysteria, hugged little Ranasinge and said defiantly: "But he is brainy enough to fool those killers."

The scene at Ampitiya village, replayed daily across Sri Lanka's benighted southern heartland, looks vastly different when viewed from the interior of a nearby army post. A captain on duty is willing to talk about the situation, as long as he isn't identified by name.

"Of course the people told you that these boys are not JVP," he shrugged. "You could hardly expect them to admit it. But if you had visited a different place on a different day, perhaps you would be writing a story about the victims butchered by these very same

young boys."

Does that mean that the captain approves of the killings?

"I don't have any idea what happened in Ampitiya," he shrugged. "There has been no report yet. We don't know whether these boys are innocent, or if they are JVP, or even perhaps if they are the victims of the JVP. Quite frankly, we will probably never know."

Death in this Sinhalese Buddhist area may be unaccountable, but it can at least be tallied. Nearly 500 have died in a renewed spurt of violence since the announcement two months ago that presidential elections would be held on Dec. 19.

The JVP, a shadowy ultra-nationalist group which staunchly opposes last year's Indo-Lankan peace accord, has demanded that the government of President Junius Jayewardene step down. That request has been repeatedly echoed by the opposition Sri Lankan Freedom Party and several influential religious organizations.

But the JVP has gone far beyond mere demands. It has brought civil administration to a complete halt in the south, and severely disrupted everything from public transportation to the simple movement of goods.

"They delivered their orders on Nov. 7," says a government clerk in Tangalle, "and promised to kill any of us who did any work. But they haven't had to kill anyone in our town, because we have obeyed them absolutely."

Such blanket death threats, along with the right-wing vigilante groups, a military Special Task Force and the moonlighting soldiers, make it virtually impossible to identify the killers in dozens of brutal massacres.

Playing into that confusion, the JVP often dress their hit-squads in army fatigues and use captured standard-issue T-56 assault rifles.

Back in Ampitiya, Ranasinge

Gunadasa can hardly begin to weigh the odds that the khaki-clad executioners might return to lead him once again to the water's edge.

Asked if he will leave his village, the boy shakes his head firmly and says: "I have no place to go."

His mother is equally adamant that he stay. "We are scared," she admits. "But what can we do? We are poor people, just minding our own business. In such times, the safest place is always at home."