

Campaign of terror: threats shut down capital of Sri Lanka. (1988, September 13). *The gazette*.

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## THE WORLD

# Campaign of terror: threats shut down capital of Sri Lanka

**New York Times**

COLOMBO — A sudden, silent campaign of intimidation and terror closed down Sri Lanka's capital yesterday.

Residents of Colombo, who have tasted much bitterness and violence in the last few years, say they have never experienced anything like this.

It took only a few posters and threatening letters distributed over the weekend — and word-of-mouth warnings of roving assassins — to close shops, scare off street vendors and hustlers and clear the normally busy roads of their fleets of noisy private vans and buses.

Civil servants did not come to work, leading to the closing of many government offices. Police officers and troops took up positions at many buildings and all intersections.

The government radio reported yesterday night that two government-run buses trying to follow normal schedules were attacked, resulting in injuries to at least 17 people. The radio did not report that the city was nearly paralysed.

### Sinhalese faction

The campaign of mass intimidation — which started with posters in Sinhalese — was believed to be the work of radical ethnic Sinhalese nationalists who have tried to bring the city to a halt several times over the last few months, with only limited success.

Their aim — or the aim of any other group that may have been involved — appears to have been to embarrass the government of President J. R. Jayewardene by demonstrating that it is impotent in the face of a mass refusal to work.

The government responded last night by ordering that all shopkeepers reopen their stores, according to

the official radio. It also told bus owners to return to the roads or have their permits to operate vehicles confiscated.

Yesterday's stifling of all business activity began with the posting on Saturday of mimeographed notices announcing that shops and offices would be closed yesterday, and that those who disobeyed this call would be "punished."

### Blamed for killings

The posters were signed by the Patriotic People's Front, which is regarded as a political wing of the People's Liberation Front, a Sinhalese group that has been blamed for assassinations of public officials in the central and southern part of the country over the last year.

The front has also been held responsible for explosions at Sri Lankan military installations.

The People's Liberation Front began as an underground Marxist organization in the late 1960s under Rohana Wijeweera, a former university student in Moscow.

But the organization has become a standard-bearer around which to rally Sinhalese opposition to the Indian-Sri Lankan accord signed last year, which brought Indian troops to Sri Lanka to disarm ethnic Tamil militants in the north and east.

For five years, the militants of the country's Tamil minority have been fighting a guerrilla war to gain a homeland, charging discrimination by the Sinhalese, who are a majority of the island nation's population.

There was speculation in Colombo yesterday that the recently announced merger of Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka may have been part of the reason for a call to paralyse Colombo.