

UNP GETS A SHOT IN-THE- ARM

UNPers whose spirits had been low after being removed from office came alive on Tuesday with the news of the sinking of the Navy's 'Sagarawardena' and the fiasco in Parliament with Premier Chandrika Kumaratunga failing to turn up on time.

The news came at a time when the new Prime Minister's moves with breathtaking speed on the ethnic issue was earning her plaudits all round even in far away places. More important, she was also winning the hearts and minds of the Tamils whose votes could be decisive in the forthcoming presidential election. Besides, Prabakaran himself had written to Ms. Kumaratunga and named his negotiators. Much of the banned goods were going into Jaffna. Clearly Chandrika was on the ascendant, as astrologers would have it, and the UNP were in the doldrums.

But news about the sinking of the ship with 40 men on board and only 16 been saved, was a cold bucket of water thrown on all that euphoria. The UNPers were nodding their heads like sages saying: "We told you so". While the news from Mannar stunned the nation, came the

news that parliament had to be adjourned because the Prime Minister could not turn up on time. Ms. Kumaratunga had already earned a name for her unpunctuality and this was pounced upon by the Opposition. Others were saying that the adjournment of parliament on Tuesday was also due to the inexperience of the Govt. in parliamentary practice. If the premier was late and her immediate presence was called for, tactics could have been adopted for the sittings to be delayed by a few minutes till her arrival.

The Prime Minister's statement that she was delayed because of a traffic jam caused apprehension among her supporters. Some said that it was an indicator of bad security precautions. They pointed out former Navy Commander Clancey Fernando being killed by a motor cycle bomb.

Certainly Ms Kumaratunga should take far better precautions particularly in view of the demonstration of savagery on Tuesday in the sinking of the ship. At Mr. Gamini Disanayake's party referred to later in this column a UNPer was saying that anyone travelling on the highway to Parliament was

a sitting duck for an assassin.

Meanwhile questions are being asked what made the LTTE go ahead with the sinking of the ship after they agreed to negotiate. Some claimed that Prabakaran was insisting on a ceasefire and this was his way of saying it. If it be so it would make it much more difficult for the Government after this tragedy. Officers and particularly the rank and file who have become deeply suspect of such ceasefires and peace moves would certainly disapprove of any ceasefire now coming into effect.

The decision of the government to lift the ban on 28 items going to the North has also come under fire from many quarters. Besides Ms. Kumaratunga will be launching her presidential campaign in the coming weeks and that her peace moves may not win approval in the Sinhala-speaking areas after this event. Nevertheless the government appears to be going ahead with the peace moves. As Minister Mr. Dharmasiri Senanayake said at a press briefing, the government would go ahead "at any cost". Such a statement would certainly be made use of by hard Sinhala hardliners such as Dinesh Gunawardene, who is

likely to run as presidential candidate on the MEP ticket.

Meanwhile questions are also being raised by the public why the Defence Ministry has not issued a statement on this major disaster. How come the ship was stationary? Did the radar fail? Was there a watch on the ship? These are questions being raised by the man-on-the-street which has still not been answered.