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(1993, May 3). *The Ottawa citizen*.

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By Edward Gargan
The New York Times

MADRAS, India — With the assassination of President Ranasinghe Premadasa on Saturday a week after the killing of the country's leading opposition politician, Sri Lanka has again stumbled in its search for political stability and ethnic peace.

Many Sri Lankans are now questioning whether these goals are attainable.

"It is of course one of the most serious political tragedies," said Neelan Tiruchelvam, a leading lawyer in Colombo, the Sri Lankan capital, "because in the span of one week, two of the most important political leaders in this country have been assassinated.

"This is a terrible setback to the political system's effort to resolve differences through democratic means."

While misty-eyed writers called it Serendip in 19th-century literature, the country's emerald forests, placid beaches and Buddhist traditions have long belied Sri Lanka's post-independence history of ethnic and political violence.

Ethnic rivalries between the island's dominant Sinhalese population and its Tamil minority have colored this country's politics and led to bloodshed for nearly four decades.

The Sinhalese, who are mostly Buddhists, make up about 75 per cent of the population of roughly 17 million; the Tamils, who are mostly Hindus, form about 18 per cent. The remaining seven per cent of the population are predominantly Tamil-speaking Arab Muslims.

From the mid-1950s, when fervent Sinhalese nationalists demanded that the Sinhalese language be the sole national tongue, Sri Lanka has seen a steadily mounting antagonism between Tamils and Sinhalese, animosities that finally erupted into civil war a decade ago.

Since then, a guerrilla force known as the Liberation Tigers of

Tamil Eelam has battled for an independent homeland in the island's north and east. More than 20,000 people have been killed in the war, including thousands of civilians. Many senior government and army officials have also been killed, often in suicide bomb attacks.

A senior police official, Lionel Gunatillake, said in Colombo on Sunday that the Tigers were "the prime suspects" in the killing of Premadasa, and that 24 people had died in the explosion. The group has denied involvement.

The official said a piece of a cyanide capsule had been found embedded in the neck of the bomber, who attacked the president during a May Day political rally in the capital. Many Tamil rebels wear cyanide capsules around their necks, to be swallowed if they are captured.

The Tamil rebellion has not been the only violent conflict in recent years. In the late 1980s, a militant Sinhalese movement called the People's Liberation Front began a campaign of terror and assassinations intended to topple the government and bring hard-line Sinhalese nationalists to power.

The government under Premadasa, who became president in 1989, responded with a ferocity that saw the army and death squads round up and execute thousands of front members. By the end of 1989, the government had essentially wiped out the movement.

But the forces and passions that gave rise to the liberation front, and the determination of the Tamils to secede from Sri Lanka, did not wane. The Tigers, despite some advances by the army, continued their war for independence, forcing Premadasa to search for a settlement that would not irredeemably offend Sinhalese sentiments while granting the Tamils some autonomy.

Like no other leader before him, Premadasa was thought to be the person who could tread that slippery path.