

Sri Lanka braces for leader's funeral

Fear of violence clouds Colombo

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COLOMBO — Security forces in Sri Lanka's capital are bracing for a funeral procession today of as many as 500,000 people mourning president Ranasinghe Premadasa, who was assassinated last Saturday by a suicide bomber.

Although Colombo appeared calm last night, army troops with automatic weapons moved into Wellawatta, a Tamil-dominated district nicknamed Little Jaffna after the northern headquarters of the separatist movement, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Police have blamed the Tigers for Mr. Premadasa's death.

As many as 5,000 Tamils are estimated to have left Colombo this week to avoid possible ethnic clashes with Sinhalese extremists, although many more Tamils moved about calmly in Wellawatta yesterday.

Diplomats in three Western embassies, who asked not to be identified, said they had been warned about possible violence during the funeral ceremony. "We have told the government how important it is to not have a repeat of 1983," a senior diplomat said.

During ethnic riots that year, as many as 4,000 Tamils were killed in Colombo while security forces and government officials stood by.

Yesterday, thousands of Sri Lankans could be seen moving into the capital, many of them ethnic Sinhalese brought from rural villages by the ruling United National Party.

Most shops and businesses in Sri Lanka were closed for the Buddhist Vesak Poya festival. The Tamil-dominated gold market also was closed.

The UNP has used the mourning period as a chance to lionize Mr. Premadasa in advance of the scheduled May 17 provincial elections. At many points yesterday party workers stopped cars to slap pictures of Mr. Premadasa on windshields and distribute campaign literature.

All week, through the day and night, tens of thousands of Sri Lankans have lined up for as long as five hours in sweltering heat to view Mr. Premadasa's closed coffin in the presidential residence, while loudspeakers filled central Colombo with taped recordings of his speeches.

For the UNP, which currently controls all six provinces, an electoral defeat in two weeks would deal a serious blow to the party.

Already, it appears divided over how to approach the post-Premadasa era. D. B. Wijetunga, who was Mr. Premadasa's prime minister, has become interim President and is expected to be confirmed in the position by parliament in the next week.

A power struggle is emerging for the vacant post of prime minister.

At least two senior cabinet ministers, Ranil Wickremasinghe and Sirisena Cooray, are said to be serious contenders for the post. A senior opposition member of parliament, Gamini Dissanayake, who once served as a cabinet minister in Mr. Premadasa's government, also has been touted as a possible prime minister in order to reconcile the divided UNP.

Whoever becomes prime minister would be the leading candidate for president should the aging Mr. Wijetunga, if confirmed, not seek re-election when his term expires in late 1994.