

In a swift move, Premadasa dispatched three ministers—Foreign Minister Wijeratne, Plantations Minister Gamini Dissanayake and Rural Industries Minister S. Thondaman—to Trincomalee to talk to the Chief Minister of the Provincial Council, Varadaraja Perumal, about the devolution package. The ostensible reason for this mission was the argument advanced by some members of the ruling United National Party (UNP) that the EPRLF was feeling neglected due to Colombo's talks with the LTTE. Indian diplomats call this a clever ploy to keep a line open to the EPRLF if reports about Pirabhakaran's death and the disarray of the LTTE prove true. In any case, Perumal chose this moment to thumb his nose at the sudden waving of an olive branch by telling Premadasa's emissaries that the devolution package as adopted by the Sri Lankan Parliament was inadequate.

But the fact that the ministerial team urged Perumal to draw up draft proposals,

of the kind of devolution he wanted, indicated that Premadasa was keen on projecting himself as a peace-maker who was trying to unite the country against Big Daddy India. Significantly, former President Jayewardene, who had earlier favoured restraining the aggressive Premadasa, declared that the IPKF must return if President Premadasa wanted it to (see box). He also rejected India's contention that the IPKF's withdrawal was linked to its commitment to safeguard the security and interests of the Tamils.

**B**y last week, Premadasa's efforts to hustle Indian troops out of Sri Lanka were finding support among a broad spectrum of the country's political parties. Said Ossie Abeygunasekera, national organiser of the Sri Lanka Mahajana Party: "The demand for withdrawal of the IPKF has almost unanimous support although there are reasonable fears about security considerations among sections of

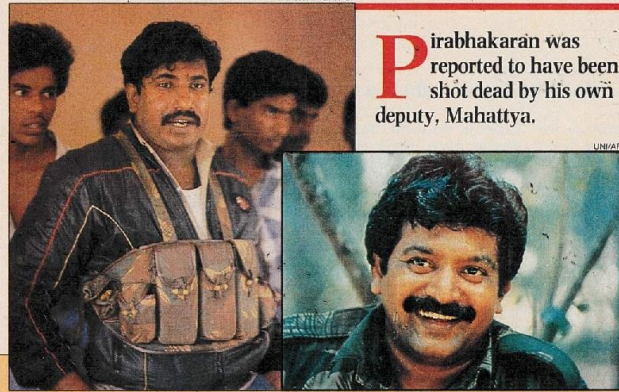
Tamils and about law and order in their areas after a total pull out." Abeygunasekera also came up with a suggestion which other well-wishers of both countries have advocated—that India announce the withdrawal of a substantial number of troops by August, and that the defence ministers—of both countries finalise a phased withdrawal which could be announced simultaneously.

But before July 28, the situation indeed seemed quite hopeless. Premadasa's sharply-worded, six-page letter had resulted in a hardening of attitudes on both sides. Premadasa reminded Rajiv that the IPKF, two years after its arrival, had not been able to ensure a cessation of hostilities and the disarming of militants, though "at the time of the signing of the agreement it was envisaged that this process would not take more than five days". Premadasa also "informed Rajiv that he had always held the view that the problems of the Tamil groups in Sri Lanka

should be resolved not by the use of force, but by the process of consultation, compromise and consensus. "The events of the past months have proved the wisdom of my approach as the LTTE, once the most intractable of groups, have now agreed to eschew violence and join the mainstream of political democracy," he wrote in the letter.

Premadasa also threatened to internationalise the issue and abrogate the Indo-Sri Lanka treaty. The last paragraph of his letter read, "If it is your view that the agreement

**P**irabhakaran was reported to have been shot dead by his own deputy, Mahattya.



Mahattya; and (left) Pirabhakaran

V. PIRABHAKARAN

## Dead or Alive?

**I**T is a death that has been reported at least half a dozen times. During his turbulent career as a militant leader, LTTE supremo Velupillai Pirabhakaran has been 'killed' by rivals, by colleagues, by Sri Lankan forces and by the IPKF.

But last week, there were the strongest indications yet that the LTTE leader had been killed, somewhere in the impenetrable jungle between the northern and eastern province. The assailant: his deputy Mahattya alias Mahendra Raja. What apparently triggered off the killing

was an altercation over the assassination of Tamil moderate leader, Amirthalingam, that Pirabhakaran had been opposed to. Mahattya was also said to have shot dead Kittu, former area commander of Jaffna.

While the reports of his death could not be fully confirmed, other reports from the northern province spoke of a public mourning in several places—Pirabhakaran's photographs were placed in public squares and garlanded. An audio cassette in which Mahattya announced the death of his "dear

brother" and the fact of his having taken over the LTTE leadership was apparently circulating in the north. Mahattya had also called a conference of area commanders of the northern province.

The IPKF believes that something calamitous has taken place in the LTTE camp. Said a top IPKF officer: "Everything points to Pirabhakaran's death." However, the fact that there was no word yet of Pirabhakaran's death on LTTE's commonly used means of communication, wireless radio, was reason for cautious drawing of conclusions.

The ethnic strife scenario in the north-east will alter dramatically if

known to be a hawk who will never entertain the thought of a negotiated settlement outside the demand for an independent Eelam.

The LTTE, however, denies reports of the death. It accuses the Indian intelligence agency, RAW, of spreading the rumours to create confusion among their cadres and to sabotage the peace talks between them and the Sri Lankan Government. If that was New Delhi's intention, then it appeared to have scored a hit as a Sri Lankan ministerial delegation quickly began negotiations with the EPRLF on a devolution package.

—CHIDANAND RAJGIHATA