

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

The Buddhist factor in Sri Lanka

Monks have launched a campaign to sabotage talks between the government and the Tamils.

On Sept. 19, at a meeting of 5,000 monks in the holy city of Kandy, one of Sri Lanka's top-ranking Buddhist priests, Palipase Sri Chandananda, issued a call for a campaign against the peace proposals made by President J. R. Jayewardene's government to resolve the three-year-old Tamil insurgency which has taken thousands of lives and wrecked the economy.

The Buddhist high priest's call is ominous. The Sangha order is the main repository of Sinhala chauvinism, and for the past year has been the standard bearer for the "military solution" to the ethnic crisis. With its cadre of monks and extensive organization among the population, the Sangha is a potent force which no Sri Lankan government has been able to ignore. It is the Sangha which ultimately dictated the succession of cultural and other provocations against the Tamil minority that led to the 1983 crisis.

The venerable Chandananda issued the call to arms as head of the so-called *Jatika Peramuna* (National Front, NF) formed under his leadership to oppose Jayewardene's handling of the crisis and prevent a "sell-out" to the Tamils. The NF, inaugurated in the Asgiriya Temple in Kandy, where Chandananda is the chief monk, was floated in the wake of the May 1985 massacre of Sinhala civilians in the sacred city of Anuradhapura.

The NF's proposals include a vitriolic denunciation of Jayewardene for trampling on Sinhala sensitivities, and a harsh blast against India's efforts to

solve the problem. There should be no negotiations until terrorism is wiped out and all Sinhalese refugees are resettled, says the NF, and any negotiated settlement must be put to a referendum.

The NF includes a strange coalition of opposition parties, the most important of which is the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) of former prime minister Firimavo Bandaranaike. The NF is also supported by Prins Gunasekera, a recognized front-man for the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP), a Maoist sect that led an insurrection against Mrs. Bandaranaike in 1971. Lately the JVP has been working with one of the left-wing splinters of the Tamil movement, the so-called People's Liberation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), for the revolutionary overthrow of the government.

With the launching of the NF, Mrs. Bandaranaike gave up fence-sitting and threw her full weight on the side of communal chauvinism. The former prime minister, who headed a "united front" government of socialists, communists, and social democrats during the late 1960s and early 1970s, promptly began giving fiery speeches about the threat to the existence of the Sinhala race and Buddhism. It was under her regime, some Tamil leaders point out, that the constitution was written which eliminated Tamil as the second national language—one of the last straws for the Tamils.

At the moment, Mrs. Bandaranaike is trying to prevent the Sri Lankan

parliament from voting up the legislation to implement the government's proposals. In Kandy, recently, Mrs. Bandaranaike promised "full protection" to any government MP who rejects settlement-related legislation.

The negotiations between the government and the Tamils, meanwhile, the critical third round, in which an effort will be made to involve all the principal parties, are due to be held in India in the near future. The Sri Lankan government wants all the major Sinhala political parties invited to the talks, but acknowledges that Mrs. Bandaranaike is unlikely to cooperate. The Indian government is working to get the leaders of Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) and the various Tamil militant groups—the latter walked out of the first round and boycotted the second—to meet and work out a collective approach to the core issues. India had successfully prevented the militants from sabotaging the second round of talks. Now, although terrorist attacks and government reprisals continue unabated, the Sri Lankan cabinet vowed on Sept. 24 to continue the peace talks.

The TULF has rebutted President Jayewardene in his claim that "90% agreement" had been reached during the talks, but the government is apparently going ahead with legislation for setting up provincial councils with greater powers than the existing district councils. These are the crux of the plan for the "devolution" of power that stops short of destroying constitutional unity.

Jayewardene's announcement of the government's plan was greeted by new threats. In a press release, the Eelam Revolutionary Party said it would kill the President and his cabinet and blow up parliament if 5,500 Tamils jailed on the island were not released immediately.