

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Sri Lanka foils overthrow plot

For the new Premadasa government it was an important battle, but the war against the JVP has yet to be won.

A plot to unleash violence on the eve of the March 9 inaugural session of the new Sri Lankan parliament, hatched by extremists of the Janata Vimukti Peramuna (JVP), has been quashed by the government of President Premadasa and Prime Minister D.E. Wijetunge, elected in December. In a search-and-arrest operation during the first two weeks of March through the southern central and northern central provinces where the Maoist JVP has its strongholds, the Sri Lankan military has detained more than 1,500 JVP-linked youth and hindered a bloody uprising.

JVP had put up posters, noticed in southern Sri Lanka, announcing a "Killing Week" from March 5, and had called for an island-wide strike when the new Parliament opens. Letters were sent to transport workers ordering them to stay away from work.

The security forces' operation was to prevent a repetition of the 1971 situation when the JVP, led by its founder Rohana Wijeweera, a medical dropout from Moscow's Patrice Lumumba University, tried to seize state power through a 24-hour violent uprising in which police stations across the nation were attacked and arms were looted from military depots. Officially, the 1971 uprising cost 1,000 lives, but most estimates put the actual figure at over 10,000.

The government's timely intervention in 1989 has prevented such large-scale killing, but not JVP revenge killings. According to published estimates, since the time the India-Sri Lanka Accord was signed in July 1987, JVP violence has claimed more than 1,500 lives.

Following detention of the JVP-linked youth, the organization's militant arm, the Deshapremi Janata Vi-japaraya (DJV), went on a spree of revenge killing. Between March 17 and 19, 54 people, including five policemen and an urban council member and provincial counsellor from the ruling United National Party (UNP), were killed. According to reports, the DJV terrorists used land mines for the first time to ambush police jeeps. Subsequently, the JVP called for a general strike to be observed March 22—to protest the "fraudulent Parliament," the "genocide" carried out by the Indian Army peacekeeping Force and Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (a Tamil group supporting the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord) in the northeast, and the "killing of youth by the Premadasa-Wijetunge clique."

On March 22, JVP extremists forced buses to stop in the Sinhala majority areas of Sri Lanka and set fire to the vehicles. Bombs went off in many places, and others were defused by the army. Shops in many areas of Colombo, Sri Lanka's capital, remained closed, including the main wholesale trade center of Pettah. In the south, where the JVP terrorized residents for more than a year, the strike was "successful."

Though the government won an important battle in preempting the March 9 uprising, the war is yet to be won against the JVP terrorists. Security officials say that the number of "hard-core" JVP members is small. In the southern province, where the terrorists have claimed most lives, there are believed to be only 100-150 terrorists, divided into four- or five-man

hit squads. These hit squads are armed with automatic rifles and shotguns.

Reportedly, Wijeweera, who leads the killer gangs, has undergone guerilla training with George Habash's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and has developed links with North Korea.

Sri Lankan intelligence is heavily handicapped in its battle against the JVP since it is suspected that some in the Sri Lankan military are cooperating with the terrorists. It has been reported that Sinhala supremacy, the gospel of the JVP, has attracted a number of military personnel to the group. The JVP's Sinhala racism fuels the group's vicious anti-India, anti-Tamil campaign—a campaign that has also drawn the sympathy of some well-known politicians and Buddhist monks. It is also evident that despite the government's best efforts, the JVP is able to bring in arms from abroad.

Meanwhile, the corruption of military and political elements along with the Buddhist Sangha (a tightly knit organization of monks) and the terror tactics of the JVP have given birth to a new terror. On March 19, some 14 mutilated bodies were found in the Eppawela area following a land mine blast. Posters found near the corpses read: "Punishment to Wijeweera's executioners." On March 23, four terrorists belonging to the DJV were found in and around the southern town of Monargala. They had been stabbed and then shot.

It is widely believed that these killings were the handiwork of a local vigilante group, the Black Cats, to whom a number of killings had been attributed earlier. JVP supporters and human rights activists, reportedly heavily infiltrated by the JVP, have alleged that the police and security forces were behind the killings, and the opposition has demanded an inquiry.