

Embattled Chandrika battles for a united Lanka

By N Ram

We are willing to talk, I don't want to settle this by war'

They may dispute her ideas, her judgment, her approach, her political style. They may hate her guts. But not even her enemies will seriously deny that 53-year-old President Chandrika Kumaratunga of Sri Lanka is a strong, authoritative and charismatic leader with big ideas and the determination to shape directions.

In 1994, a watershed year, she was elected, first, Prime Minister and then President in a tidal wave of a popular victory under rules of the game fashioned by the conservative United National Party (UNP), under a Constitution the President herself characterises as "bizarre" and "fraudulent," as the head of a multi-party People's Alliance spearheaded by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) which her father founded and her mother, the battle-scarred and ailing octogenarian Sirimavo Bandaranaike led for decades.

When President Kumaratunga took over the reins from the UNP, which had gone through a prolonged decline related largely to the failure to solve Sri Lanka's principal national question - the long-festering and bloody ethnic crisis - there were huge expectations among all sections of the people, Tamil, Sinhala and the rest. "Never before," as she notes inter alia, "had the people of the North openly showed approbation of a 'Sinhala' leader like that."

A central part of the Chandrika Project was to function not as a Sinhala, but as a Sri Lankan, leader with a non-chauvinistic approach to (what she readily recognises as) the country's principal, national question and a determination to resolve it by breaking with the past. It is very much part of

her understanding, based on observed experience, that the tragic part of the history of independent Sri Lanka can be summed up in two phrases - the Sinhala Only trap and the Eelam trap. Only the Pol Potist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which has brought nothing but large-scale misery and "illfare," as Amartya Sen might characterise it, wherever it has been able to reign or reach, will deny the possibility of radical and genuine change offered by the Chandrika project.

The nature of the change can be expressed in the inter-play, and clear political distinction, between the words "unity" and "unitary" in the steadily deteriorating Sri Lankan national context. In an earlier era, on one parliamentary occasion relating to the Sinhala Only Bill which presaged ethnic tragedy, the inter-play and distinction were unforgettably expressed by a Sri Lankan politician from the Left, Colvin R. De Silva: "Two languages - one nation; one language - two nations."

For many years, Sri Lanka has had an active, progressive intelligentsia, men and women whose intellectual and enlightened political work has been characterised by the complete absence of chauvinism, and for whom the equality of different sections of the Sri Lankan people has been a social, political and moral given. There have also been small political parties, invariably on the Left, which have swum against the strong current of

majoritarianism. The early influence of the universalist and progressive values of this enlightenment is a part of Chandrika's political make-up; Chandrika, who began her political career in the grass-roots Left, is the first genuinely non-chauvinistic Prime Minister or President of her country.

No predecessor government was willing to consider giving up the confining constitutional-political framework of a unitary state - and to move in a federal direction (by whatever name called). But President Kumaratunga seems to have no conceptual inhibition on this score. "Yes, unity - not unitary. Quite different." This is the main reason why the constitutional devolution package for the North-East that is on offer from her Government must be recognised as the farthest-going and most progressive attempt in the history of independent Sri Lanka to find a just solution to the Tamil question.

It remains to be added that the Chandrika project has run into fierce trouble in the North, with the LTTE which is engaged in a deadly and punishing armed conflict, and political obstacles in the South, where the main Opposition party, the UNP, has rejected the constitutional proposals and called for unconditional talks with the LTTE.

President Kumaratunga dominates Sri Lankan politics and her political charisma and direct popular standing (as distinct from the parliamentary prospects of the People's Alliance) appear to remain sub-

stantially undiminished. Not surprisingly under the circumstances, sharp criticisms and misgivings are being freely voiced about the effectiveness of her governance. These include allegations that the President is imperious and strong-handed, although no one has suggested seriously that her Government has resorted to any violence outside the context of the war against the LTTE or, for that matter, to anti-democratic ways experienced under various predecessor regimes, both UNP and SLFP. Again, while few disinterested observers question the fact that the media function under a more liberal environment under her Presidency than at any time in recent memory, there is unhappiness in various quarters over the domestic censorship imposed by her Government on the coverage of the war in the North-East.

To gain an insight into the tangled situation in Sri Lanka today, to gauge the prospects of peace given an intransigent and resourceful killer politico-military organisation which is also expert at deceiving national political leaders, parties and governments, and to probe various facets of President Kumaratunga's perspective and practice, I sought an interview, which was given at Temple Trees in Colombo in the afternoon of December 7.

Of Chandrika's major or substantive predecessors as head of state and government who grappled with the ethnic issue in the recent period, President J.R. Jayewardene was fa-



Chandrika Kumaratunga

the Government can continue to respect democracy and govern efficiently.

The other great achievement is that, for the first time, the Sri Lankan Government has consciously and honestly accepted that Sri Lanka does not need to be a unitary state. It can be united, can be one country, but it can have substantial devolution of power in order to satisfy the minorities in the country. For both these achievements, especially for the second, we have had consciously to do a lot of political work, canvassing and campaigning. Convince the Sinhala majority, especially about the political solution, offered as a solution to the minorities' problem. And we have been able to do even that successfully in Sri Lanka.

We were sincere enough not only to promulgate this or to announce it and try to make it law, but also to go to the people constantly - village to village, area by area - convincing them. We had a huge programme, the Sudu Nelum movement, the White Lotus movement. Have you heard of that?

NR: Yes.

CK: These are the sea-changes we have been able to make. There were also smaller achievements such as - and I feel that it is also a very important one - the third achievement, the anti-corruption drive that we started. I won't say we have been able to wipe out corruption but we have certainly, at the top level, managed to ensure that all big Government development projects are not decided on criteria based on corruption. We have also been able to tighten systems and procedures and bring in new systems and procedures to plug loopholes to the maximum extent possible.

NR: In a sense, the tragic part of the history of independent Sri Lanka - there have been many achievements, but the tragic part - can be summed up in these phrases: the Sinhala Only trap and, in reaction to it, the Eelam trap. CK: (Nods in firm agreement.)

NR: You, President, won a tremendous mandate on the promise and programme of breaking with this history. How would you judge your project four years from the time it was launched?

CK: I was personally convinced that both traps are wrong for the country. Being a student of politics, I had studied the issue very closely and discussed it at length with friends who were interested and involved in the subject and who had suffered because of it. I was convinced beyond any doubt that we had to get out of both these traps.

They thought as all the Sinhala-based parties thought, including the Marxist parties. But I was so convinced of what the people thought because I had gone to the villages for twenty years before I became Prime Minister or President. I talked with them for hours. My style of politics was hands-on.

Courtesy: Frontline (Dec 19 1998 - Jan 1 1999), India

Tribal rebels bring the fear back to Assam tea gardens

By Syed Zarir Hussain

GUWAHATI: The gunning down of two managers and extortion notices from tribal rebels have sent shockwaves through the Rs. 200 billion tea industry in Assam.

Extremists seeking a separate homeland shot dead a senior tea executive in western Assam's Dhubri district last fortnight while unidentified gunmen killed a garden manager in the southern district of Cachar. Three members of the manager's family were also kidnapped for ransom.

The killings apart, guerrillas of the outlawed National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and the Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF) have stepped up their offensive against the tea industry, imposing heavy "tax" on gardens located in Assam's northern and western districts. The "tax" imposed is Rs. 2,000 per hectare of tea estate.

There is panic no doubt fol-

lowing extortion demands by militants on garden managers. But despite such threats tea production or its quality has not been affected, N.C. Baruah, secretary general of the Tea Association of India, Assam branch, told IANS. "The situation is not that bad compared to what was happening a few years back."

At least 300 of the state's 800-odd tea gardens are vulnerable to terrorist attacks. During the past five years, at least 20 tea executives were killed and more than 30 kidnapped by rebels for ransom. It was estimated that the tea industry has coughed up more than Rs. 20 billion to secure the release of its abducted executives during the last five years. However, officially the industry denies having paid ransom money to the extremists.

Following fresh attacks on the tea gardens and the renewed extortion drive, security

throughout northern and western Assam has been beefed-up, especially in areas where tea gardens are located. Assam accounts for nearly 55 per cent of India's total production of about 800 million kg of tea.

The police force has been alerted and we have increased patrolling and vigilance in areas where gardens are located. We are aware of the threat perception," Assam Police chief P.V. Suman said.

After the deployment of the Assam Tea Plantation Security Force (ATPSF), an elite police force raised exclusively to protect gardens from terrorist attacks, incidents of extortion and kidnapping have come down considerably. However, the special force is operating in only about 100 estates.

The morale of garden executives and workers got a boost after the deployment of the ATPSF and there were no reports of any threat from mili-

tant groups in gardens where the forces are operating. P.K. Roy, Commandant of the ATPSF, told IANS. "They possess automatic weapons and can meet any challenge posed by the rebels."

However, not all gardens can afford to utilise the services of the tea security forces as the expenses have to be borne by them. On an average, a garden needs to spend as much as a million rupees per year to maintain a company of the security force.

The tea gardens were really in a Catch-22 situation. "They didn't know what to do," Rabin Barthakur, Additional Secretary of the Assam Branch of Indian Tea Association, told IANS.

But the latest missives from the extremists appears to be pushing the situation back to the bad old days. — IANS

Women the winners in Lanka's ethnic war

COLOMBO

Sri Lanka's political and ethnic conflict may have traumatised the country's women, but it has also strengthened their position in society, a United Nations human rights award winner said on Monday.

Sunila Abeysekera told Reuters that a large number of women were now running their homes following the disappearance or death of their husbands. "This has meant for the first time that not only community and society, but state and bureaucratic structures have to deal with the fact that women are the heads of households," she said.

Human rights organisations have said some 60,000 Sri Lankan youths died or disappeared in a government crackdown on a radical youth uprising in 1988 and 1990.

Thousands more have died or have disappeared in the 15-year ethnic conflict in which the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels have been fighting for a separate homeland for minority Tamils in Sri Lanka's north and east since 1983.

In spite of all the trauma and all the terrible conditions, I still think that these factors have forced society to change the way they treat women," Abeysekera said.

She was one of five people along with former US President Jimmy Carter to receive the UN award earlier this month. The other winners were human rights activists from Uganda, Brazil and the Czech Republic.

Abeysekera also said the migration of Sri Lankan women as workers to the Middle East and their employment in hundreds of garments factories in free-trade zones in the country had given thousands of poor rural and urban women economic independence.

The economic independence has increased their bargaining position within the family," she said.

Nearly 800,000 Sri Lankan women work in the Middle East and 65 per cent of them are maids.

mously articulate, accessible but very different in style and content; and President R. Premadasa authoritative, organised and resourceful but virtually inaccessible to interviewers. President Kumaratunga comes out in a candid and honest way, bordering on somewhat may disinterestedness, which reflects both her politics and her personality.

Excerpts from the interview: N. Ram (NR): It has been four years since you became President of Sri Lanka. What do you perceive to be the most significant achievement of your Government over these four years?

President Chandrika Kumaratunga (CK): Well, do you want only one significant achievement or would you be satisfied with a few?

NR: With a few. CK: I think the most significant achievement of our rule is that after nearly two decades we have proved that even under great pressure, the Government in Sri Lanka can be democratic. For two decades people were made to believe that because there was an ongoing conflict and a civil war, governments couldn't help but be undemocratic and that they had to use a lot of terror at the state level to govern. Our greatest achievement is that we have proved that under all these pressures,

Maoist attacks rise in Nepal

By Prakash Khanal

MAOIST guerrillas in Nepal are intensifying their attacks, giving new life to their campaign to establish a republic and prompting fears of more violent clashes with police as elections approach.

Since the last week of October, Maoists have attacked police posts and patrols, international and national non-governmental organisations, banks, and government offices, killing at least 10 people. They also destroyed several telephone repeater stations in districts where they have influence, severing connections with the capital.

Around 40 people died in just one week in late October during bloody encounters between Maoists and police.

The Maoists' campaign has drawn strength from the growing anti-government sentiment among the general public in Nepal, a result of corruption by high officials, the rising price of daily commodities and the government's seeming inability to enforce law and order.

Now the Maoists and the police force seem to be on course for a head-on collision as the government has announced its intention of holding local elections on 18 December in four districts that are Maoist strongholds. Earlier elections were cancelled in these places as the Maoists either killed candidates or compelled them to withdraw.

The Maoists seem determined once again not to allow elections in these areas. Their underground leader Dr Baburam Bhattarai has already called on his supporters to boycott the vote or prevent it altogether. They have responded by abducting four potential candidates and killing two others.

The government seems to be determined to hold the election and has beefed up security in the districts. This has only increased the death toll among the Maoists.

Most of the information about casualties and armed encounters comes from police news bulletins, which the Maoists challenge. They say police have killed more than 100 during brutal torture or attacks on unarmed people since October.

Police officials deny killing or arresting any innocent persons. But different human rights organisations claim that police have used excessive force against the Maoists and killed them in cold blood.

"Police news bulletins claim that almost all the Maoists killed by them have died during encounters with them but it is difficult to believe that the poorly equipped Maoist guerrillas could last for hours in front of well-supplied police forces," said Ambar Bahadur Dangl, mayor of Tribhuvan Nagar municipality in western Nepal, one of the areas where Maoist activity has considerably increased over the last few months.

Additional General of Police Ram Kaze Bantawa denies charges that police abused their authority during a clash with Maoists in the district of Dang. He said that police recovered Maoist documents, banners and guns from those who were killed at that spot.

Bantawa said police now know the structure of their organisation very well. "That has made our operation successful in curbing the Maoist violence in many parts of previously problematic areas."

The government can claim some victories. It managed to conduct successful elections in parts of central Nepal where Maoist attacks were feared. A

number of their area commanders have been killed and their secret training grounds have been unveiled. Since the uprising began in April 1996, police have killed more than 400 Maoists, legal cases have been filed against 1600 suspects and another 400 are being held in custody for further questioning. But although the police have initiated three operations to tackle the Maoist guerrilla movement, they have only resulted in more casualties and no reduction in the Maoist attacks.

The Maoist movement has been successful in sensitizing the public about the problems in Nepal but has failed to create any substantial change except fear among the general public and the police.

Meanwhile, the government is not trying to find the cause for the rise in Maoist movement and people's hatred of the present political leadership, but is instead determined to wipe out the effect.

— Gemini News Nepalese journalist who has worked for papers including the Japan Times and The Economist.

Christians' rights to be protected, promoted: Sharif

ISLAMABAD, Dec 24: Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif used Christmas as an opportunity on Thursday to assure Pakistani Christians that their rights would be "preserved, protected and promoted," reports AP.

The reassurance comes as Christians and other minorities in Islamic Pakistan have expressed fears that attempts by Sharif's government to impose Islamic law will curtail their rights.

Sharif said that won't happen. "All those living in Pakistan, irrespective of their religion, colour or creed are one nation," Sharif said in his Christmas message. "We are equal nationals of our beloved country."

The Christian Liberation Front, established earlier this year in response to attacks by activists of radical Islamic groups, has vowed to launch a nationwide campaign to prevent the government's version of Islamic law in Pakistan.

On Tuesday a Roman Catholic church in the southern port city of Karachi was partially damaged when a bomb was thrown inside.

7 killed Indian army shells house in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, Dec 24: An overnight battle that ended with the army shelling a house in the capital of Indian-held Kashmir left seven people dead, police said on Thursday, reports AP.

The fighting began late Wednesday when police acting on a tip-off surrounded a house in a Srinagar neighbourhood in a search for anti-India guerrillas. Firing broke out from the house, killing two police officers. Police returned fire and called in army reinforcements. The gun battle lasted several hours, ending early Thursday when the army fired a shell, destroying the three-story house and damaging several neighbouring houses.

Five bodies were found inside. Police said two were identified as guerrillas, while three could not immediately be identified.

Ethnic violence casts shadow over Christmas festivities in India

By Taani Pande and Liz Mathew

NEW DELHI: It is festive time, especially for Christians, but the community in India is a worried lot.

Over the past year, at least 90 incidents of violence against the community have been reported, according to the United Christian Forum for Human Rights (UCFHR), an umbrella organisation of Christian groups.

If it was not a case of assault on missionaries, arson or ransacking of churches or burning of the Bible, it was something more gruesome like the desecration of graveyards or the rape of nuns. Most of these attacks are believed to be the handiwork of activists belonging to Hindu revivalist organisations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and the apparent motivation for the violence is said to be the alleged "forcible conversions" by Christian missionaries.

That is more worrying is the provocative statements made by some of the affiliates of the RSS, the ideological mentors of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that heads the coalition government at the centre, about the violence against the 23-million-strong community, the second-largest minority group in India after Muslims. Giriraj Kishore, general secretary of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, (VHP) another activist arm of the BJP, told reporters here that "foreign missionaries should leave India if they indulge in converting Hindus forcibly."

In fact, the organisation is reported to have initiated a "Ghar Wapasi" (return home) project to counter the conversions being carried out by the Christian missionaries. While the provocative statements may have abated, the violence against the community has not. The state of violence - which began in January this year with an attack on a Christian cleric in Bonasagaon, Bihar - continued right through the year.

In February, a graveyard in Hansi, Haryana, was ransacked and a grave desecrated. In March, alleged VHP activists reportedly disrupted a Christian convention in Vadodara, Gujarat. In July, alleged activists belonging to the Bajrang Dal, another RSS affiliate, entered a missionary school in Rajkot, Gujarat, and burned 300

"During the last nine months, there has been more violence against the Christian community than in 50 years of independence," Alan De Lastic, the Archbishop of Delhi and chairman of the UCFHR, told India Abroad News Service.

copies of the New Testament.

In November, a prayer service near Mangalore, Karnataka, was disrupted, the church ransacked and the priest beaten up. And earlier this month, a family in Goa, that had recently joined a revivalist Christian group, was forced to give up holding prayer meetings in their home.

"During the last nine months, there has been more violence against the Christian community than in 50 years of independence," Alan De Lastic, the Archbishop of Delhi and chairman of the UCFHR, told India Abroad News Service.

Not surprisingly, the increasing violence against the community is being attributed to the missionaries' alleged forcible conversions.

Conceding that there is a situation of "conflict," Kishore told IANS: "In the Northeast, the Christians are committing atrocities on Hindus. This should be stopped. These Christians and Muslims are basically converts... their parentage is Hinduism and if they stick to it there will be no conflict."

De Lastic, however, denied that conversions were being imposed forcibly. "But, if anybody wants to accept a particular religion, he cannot be prevented from doing so."

Most lawmakers tend to agree with the Archbishop and maintain that there are no forced conversions. "The allegations of the BJP and the RSS that Christians are indulging in forced conversions are totally baseless and false. Conversion is a voluntary action. Forced conversion is legally prevented. If something like this is happening, why don't they oppose it legally?" Congress Party spokesman Ajit Jogi, a Christian, told IANS.

The issue was also raised in Parliament, and presenting the government's case during a 10-hour debate, Home (Interior) Minister L.K. Advani said it would be the government's endeavor to protect the minority communities. "If my government is not able to alleviate this feeling of insecurity, we will not be able to govern successfully... It is our duty to insure the security of all people," he said.

According to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI), at present there are 3,164 health care facilities - including hospitals, dispensaries, shelters and rehabilitation centres - and 15,370,026 educational institutions - including kindergartens, schools, colleges and hostels - being run by missionaries in the country. Attempts are on to sort out the differences between the right-wing Hindu groups and the Christian community. Leaders of the two groups met in New Delhi last week to discuss the issue. A joint statement released after the discussions said: "The meeting covered a wide range of issues, including the current violence in several parts of the country against the Christian community."

Earlier, on December 4, the community had observed a nationwide protest day and a series of processions had been organised to draw the government's attention to the violence against the community.

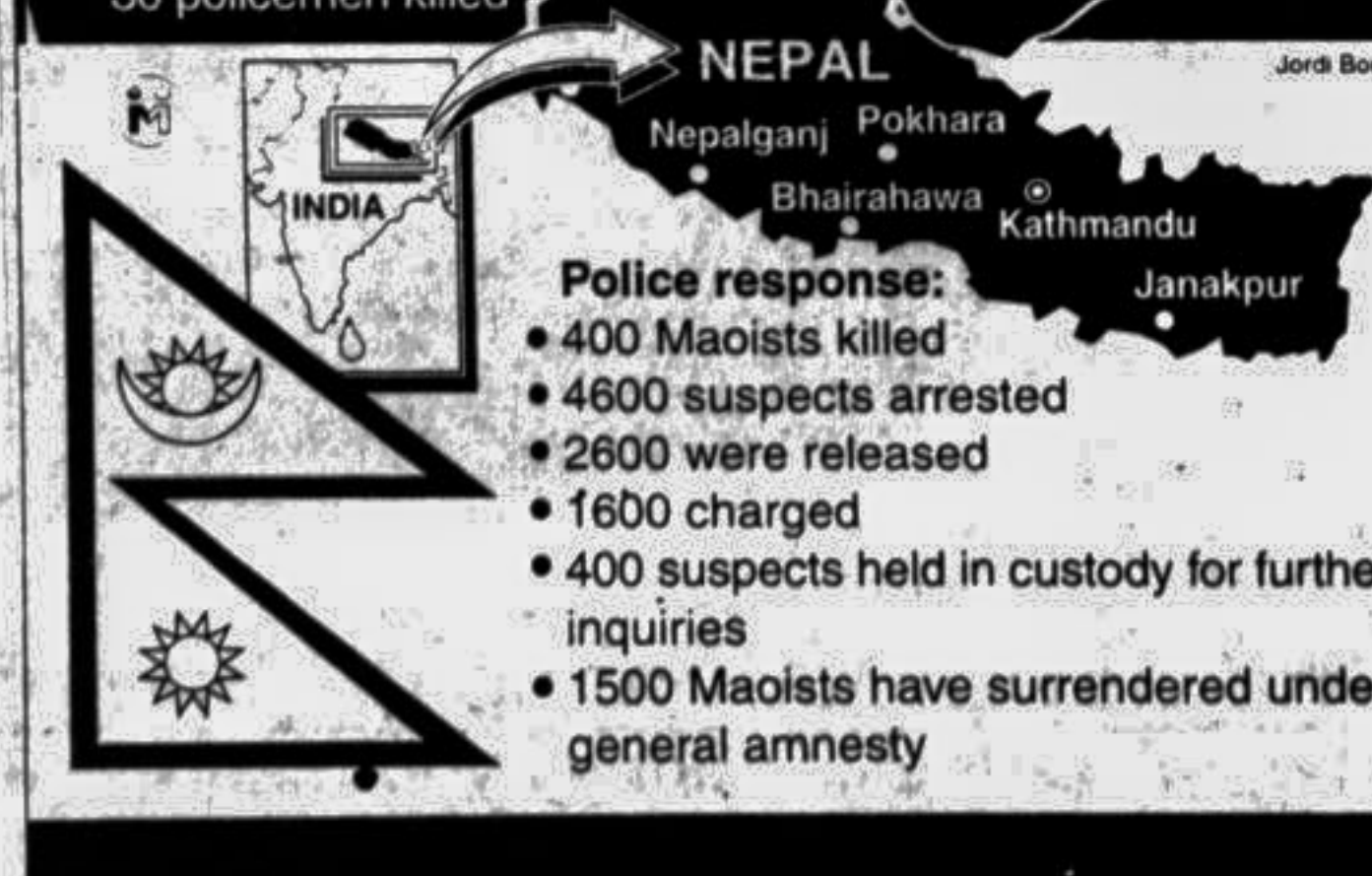
Whether the right-wing Hindu groups and the Christian community will be able to reach some sort of an understanding still remains to be seen. Says De Lastic: "I hope and pray, that this Christmas, they (those attacking the community) will realise their faults and decide to work for regaining the glory and the heritage of this great country."

Christmas like all other religious festivals is a time for universal brotherhood.

Nepal's Maoist uprising

Maoist opponents of Nepal's government and monarchy have stepped up a guerrilla campaign. Since the conflict began in April 1996:

- Maoist attacks:
- 45 police posts
- 10 international offices
- 60 government and non-government offices
- Destroyed 15 telecommunications repeater stations
- 130 people including 30 policemen killed



- Police response:
- 400 Maoists killed
- 4600 suspects arrested
- 2600 were released
- 1600 charged
- 400 suspects held in custody for further inquiries
- 1500 Maoists have surrendered under general amnesty