

STOP PRESS

## Opposition election triumph

AFTER 17 years of opposition the Sri Lanka Freedom Party's (SLFP) People's Alliance (PA) snatched the narrowest of victories in Sri Lanka's general elections held on 16 August.

The PA won 105 seats, eight short of an outright majority in the 225-seat Parliament but is backed by the seven seats of allies, the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC) and one Independent, P Chandrasekaran of the Upcountry People's Front (UPF).

Their major opponents, the United National Party (UNP) won 94 seats and their allies Tamil group EPDP secured nine after a pantomime poll in Jaffna where only a few thousand voted.

Two other Tamil parties TULF with five seats and DPLF the political arm of the militant group PLOTE with four, remain neutral. They pledge to support the new government on an issue-by-issue basis.

Results from the north were strategically withheld while Elections Commissioner Chandrananda de Silva unsuccessfully bartered with the Tamil parties to form a minority government with the UNP. Further attempts by party heavyweight Gamini Dissanayake were vetoed by outgoing Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe in a series of last minute manoeuvres.

New Prime Minister, Mrs Chandrika Kumaranatunge, 48, daughter of the world's first woman Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike was sworn in at the auspicious time of 10.14am on 19 August announcing a 22-strong cabinet including her ailing mother as minister without portfolio. Prominent Colombo Tamil lawyer Lakshman Kadirgamar's appointment as Foreign minister may echo Chandrika's election promise to open talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and end the 11-year war in the north. Muslim Congress leader MHM Ashraff is Shipping and Rehabilitation minister and Srimani Athulathmudali widow of the former leading UNP politician Lalith Athulathmudali is made Transport and Women Affairs minister.

Chandrika's streamlined cabinet - the previous UNP government had 86 ministers - is part of her campaign commitment to stamp out corruption and "crony capitalism". But her new administration with its fragile majority will find it doubly difficult to force through legislation with a UNP President who retains executive powers and the Defence portfolio under the present Gaullist constitution.

The new regime's first crisis was averted when President Wijetunge agreed to relinquish the Finance ministry and let State Defence minister Col. Anurudha Ratwatte effectively run the Defence ministry. There may be more constitutional wrangling to come.

Despite 20 pre-election murders and over 1,000 incidents reported, much of the traditional post-election violence has been curtailed by three days of curfew. Chandrika's new government has promised "capitalism with a human face" and to create a million jobs in two years.