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SRI LANKA: Revelations of the former president J.R. Jayawardene's liability for Black July 1983**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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A Statement by the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC)**SRI LANKA: Revelations of the former president J.R. Jayawardene's liability for Black July 1983**

This year is the 23rd anniversary of the Black July of 1983. In a book published in June 2002, Sirisena Cooray, very much an insider to the regime in power in 1983 gives the story of the manner in which the racial riots in Colombo broke out and the responsibility of president Jayawardene for not preventing them. The death of 13 soldiers in the North had provoked a natural reaction from the military and some sections of the armed forces wanted to bring the bodies to Colombo. The purpose was clearly to express the military's frustration. The president was made aware of this plan. According to Sirisena Cooray there were protests from the Prime Minister who saw that this would lead to serious trouble. However, Jayawardene, known to be a Machiavellian politician, knew that if he stopped this move there would be a conflict with the military and ultimately there might be some challenge to him personally. Instead of letting that happen he allowed a situation to occur that was bound to provoke a terrible riot. By now his regime was already illegitimate politically since the members the parliament held their power only due to a referendum for an extension of their term of office for a further six years.

The essential aspects of Jayawardene's policy throughout his regime were to divert challenges to his regime by the creation of other forms of social unrest through which the focus on the protests against the regime was lost. And this was what Jayawardene did on this occasion.

To view the ethnic conflict purely on racial terms is to ignore the politics of this conflict which go far beyond racial parameters. The power crises in the regimes that have been in power have much more to do with the present 'ethnic crisis' than ethnicity. This is an issue that the AHRC has highlighted regularly in its statements. This insider story helps to look into this same issue once again during the month that marks a historically black period which took a decisive turn for the worst in 1983.

An excerpt from President Premadasa and I - our Story (pp 60-63)

ERRORS AND MISTAKES

The day we heard about the killing of the 13 soldiers in Jaffna I went to see Mr. Premadasa. He was on the phone to the President. There was a lot of tension in the country and we were extremely worried about the way things were moving. Mr. Premadasa turned to me and informed me that the President is planning to bring the bodies of the dead soldiers to Colombo, to be cremated at Kanatte. Mr. Premadasa had been trying to get

the President to change his mind when I walked in. When he saw me Mr. Premadasa said: "Sir, Sirisena is here; you ask him". And he put me on. The President told me: "Cooray, these people want to bring these bodies to Colombo and cremate them at Kanatte. What do you think?" I said: "Sir why do you want to bring these bodies to Colombo? These are not people from Colombo. If you bring the bodies here there will be problems". This was precisely what Mr. Premadasa had been telling the President before I walked in. Afterwards Mr. Premadasa told me that they had decided against bringing the bodies to Colombo; I remember we were both extremely relieved.

That afternoon I went for a wedding at the Shalika Hall in Narahenpita. Mrs. Jayawardene was also there. I was talking to her when she suddenly said: "Mr. Cooray, you know that they are bringing those 13 bodies to Colombo today". I was thunderstruck. I said: "Madam, the President promised the Prime Minister only a little while ago that the bodies will not be brought to Colombo". She responded: "No, no they are going to go ahead and bring the bodies here. I do not know whose idea it is". I had the impression she too was unhappy about it.

This was madness. Like Mr. Premadasa I knew that all hell was likely to break loose when those bodies are brought to Colombo. I just got up and walked to my car. But I had no clear idea about where I wanted to go. I couldn't think clearly. I didn't want to go home and I didn't want to go to the CMC. Finally I went to the Sugathadasa stadium. That was the time we were reconstructing the Stadium. I walked into the middle of the grounds and just stood there. That was when SP Ariyaratne came to me and told me that there was a radio message from the PM asking me to contact him urgently. When I called Mr. Premadasa he too was extremely upset and worried. He told me about the new decision to bring the bodies to Colombo that evening and asked me to make the necessary arrangements. He told me that the President is planning to attend the cremations and he too was expected to be there. He knew full well there would be problems but he had no choice in the matter. The decisions were made elsewhere and he was just informed of them. If the President listened to Mr. Premadasa, the '83 July riots could have been avoided and the history of this country would have been different.

Like Mr. Premadasa I too had no choice but to do what had to be done, given the situation. The Kanatte is owned and managed by the CMC and as Mayor my tasks were clear. So I went to the Municipal Workshop and made all the arrangements. I also phoned the Municipal Commissioners and told them to come to the cemetery. After that I went to the cemetery. As soon as I entered I could feel the tension. There was an organized crowd present, making a huge show of grief, weeping hysterically. I walked up to DIG Edward Gunawardane and I asked him why they allowed this madness. He and the other senior police officers present told me that they had nothing to do with the decision, that they were just following orders. I warned them that this drama would end with a riot. Though the bodies were not brought yet, the crowd was organized and ready. I realized that if I stayed here I too would be thrashed. Gamani Jayasuriya was also there waiting for the bodies to be brought. I went up to him and said: "Sir, what are you doing here? Don't wait here. There is going to be trouble". Then I called Mr. Premadasa's security personnel who were waiting for his arrival and told them: "Tell the PM that there is going to be trouble; tell him not to come here and tell him I

said so". I told the same thing to the President's bodyguard. I explained that amidst the inevitable disturbance even if a stone hits the President it will be humiliating and therefore he should stay away. I was able to issue orders since the General Cemetery came under the CMC and I was the Mayor.

Fortunately the President decided to heed my warning; this enabled Mr. Premadasa also to stay away (he would have been forced to attend, even though he was not happy about the whole thing, if the President attended). Once I got confirmation that neither the President nor the PM would be attending the cremations I informed the Municipal Commissioners who were present that I will go and change and come back. Of course I did not go back. And as Mr. Premadasa and I predicted, rioting started immediately afterwards. I later heard that the Army wanted the bodies to be brought to Kanatte and that the President succumbed to their pressure.

It was a terrible time and the worst part was that we were almost powerless. We could do nothing to stop the killing, the destruction. The President made a mistake in putting the Army in charge of restoring law and order. After the killing of the 13 soldiers the mood in the military was a very dangerous one and they were not really motivated in stopping the violence. If the Police had been given a free hand they would have done a better job. During this period President Jayawardene was reduced to a state of helplessness. Mr. Premadasa and I used to visit him every day. That was the only time I saw IRJ being speechless. The Army was not taking orders and I think we were very close to a state of mutiny. That was why the Air Force was called in eventually and they quelled the riot.

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