

Tigers' prey

By Manik de Silva in Colombo

Sri Lanka and its armed forces took what was publicly described as a "devastating blow" when a pressure mine exploded at Araly Point on Kayts Island off the Jaffna Peninsula on 8 August, killing 10 army and navy officers.

The dead included Maj.-Gen. Denzil Kobbekaduwa, commander of operations against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and Brig. Vijaya Vimalaratne, the security forces commander in Jaffna.

Kobbekaduwa was due to assume the position of army chief-of-staff in January next year and was widely expected to be

the next army commander. The general was known for his sensitivity to civilian concerns in directing military operations in the war-torn north.

Much of the cream of the officer corps of the security forces fighting the LTTE were lost in the single blast which ripped through the Landrover the officers were riding in. The victims had flown to Kayts from the nearby Karainagar naval base as part of a reconnaissance mission preceding a new military offensive against the Tigers.

There was no clear indication whether the Araly mine was an old one, as initially claimed by the military, or whether the LTTE had been able to infiltrate Kayts

Island which had long been under army control. There had been regular vehicle movements along the track where the explosion occurred.

For President Ranasinghe Premadasa, the highest priority following the blast was to ensure the safety of minority Tamils living among the majority Sinhalese in Colombo and elsewhere in the southern and central parts of the country. On the day after the blast, 22 people were killed in a Tamil village in the eastern district of Batticaloa. The army has denied any involvement in the Batticaloa attack which remains unexplained.

While the government is anxious to avoid any backlash against the Tamils, it has also sought to stress that the war against the LTTE will continue as before. In a speech delivered one day after the catastrophe Premadasa once again ruled out separation as a solution to the insur-

gency problem. The loss of the 10 officers will certainly affect forces morale. But the government intends to keep up the pressure while continuing the slow search for a negotiated settlement.

The Araly blast has stirred memories of the bloody anti-Tamil rioting that occurred in July 1983 when the bodies of 13 soldiers killed by the LTTE were cremated in Colombo. The rioting blackened Sri Lanka's image internationally, and caused enormous economic damage from which tourism is only now recovering.

Kobbekaduwa's funeral in Colombo, which attracted a crowd estimated at over 100,000, passed off without serious violence but there was stone throwing, hooting and jeering and a steel picket fence at the cemetery was toppled. Riot police who were brought in had to use teargas shells and fire in the air to quell the mob. ■