

## This week in history: February 3-9

This column profiles important historical events which took place during this week, 25 years ago, 50 years ago, 75 years ago and 100 years ago

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### 25 years ago: Sri Lankan Independence Day overshadowed by civil war against Tamil minority

On February 4, 2000, the official commemoration of the 52nd anniversary of Sri Lankan independence from British colonial rule was a gloomy affair dominated by the failure of the Sri Lankan capitalist class to deal with the immense political, economic, and social problems confronting the Sri Lankan people, particularly the ongoing 17-year civil war in the north and east of the country.

Neither President Chandrika Kumaratunga nor Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike attended in person. Instead, the population had to watch a pre-recorded address by Kumaratunga, in which she referred to the war and oppression against the island's minority Tamil population as an "ethnic problem."

Despite running for office on a pledge to end the war, Kumaratunga had encouraged and intensified it under the slogan "war for peace." The Sri Lankan government had recently signed an agreement with the US for military equipment, including helicopters, radar devices, and ammunition; and the military had launched a recruitment campaign to replenish the depleted ranks of the army by 15,000 new soldiers and officers.

Yet in her Independence Day speech, Kumaratunga placed blame for the war's continuation on the right-wing opposition United National Party (UNP) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the separatist group that had taken up arms against the Sri Lankan military. "Since August 1994, I personally, and my government have worked unceasingly to seek a negotiated political settlement to the conflict and to end the war," she said. "The major opposition group and one militant group, remain constant in their refusal to constructively participate in that process."

While Kumaratunga continued to posture as a fighter for peace, she branded LTTE a terrorist organization. "The LTTE must also recognise that assassinating Sinhala and Tamil leaders and innocent citizens can never resolve the problems of the Tamil people or minorities," she said. "It is urgent that we end the heartless violence of terror and its result—the war." It was, not however, "terror" that started the war but discrimination against the Tamil minority by successive governments in Colombo during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s.

There was no parade. The whole "celebration" lasted less than 30 minutes. Kumaratunga captured the mood of despondency in ruling circles when she conceded in her speech that "[s]ince independence we have not seriously engaged in the task of nation building."

### 50 years ago: More than 100,000 lives saved by earthquake evacuation in Haicheng, China

On February 4, 1975, a massive earthquake registering 7.5 on the Richter scale hit Haicheng, a city of over 1 million in China's Liaoning province. In what might have otherwise been a historic catastrophe, the death toll was limited by prompt evacuation recommended by scientists and acted upon by government officials.

The earthquake killed 1,328, and about 90 percent of all structures in the quake zone were destroyed, along with roads, bridges, oil pipelines and other infrastructure.

Without the evacuation order, it is estimated that the death toll might have been 150,000 or more. In the hours leading up to the quake scientists monitoring seismic activity in the region at the Shipengyu Earthquake Observatory began detecting significant signs that a large earthquake was imminent. After being alerted to substantial foreshocks the observatory sent out warnings to officials in Haicheng and other areas. The Yingkou County Party Committee, the local government, took heed of the warnings, issued evacuation orders, and began organizing efforts to move the population out of the city.

If the early warning and rapid evacuation of Haicheng demonstrated the lifesaving potential of advanced environmental science, the events that immediately followed the earthquake demonstrated that the Stalinist political structure of the Chinese Communist Party handicapped its potential.

Few preparations were made to support the evacuees. Forced to scramble for shelter in harsh winter conditions, an additional 713 would die in the days after. Makeshift efforts to create heat caused fires that killed scores. Many more froze to death or died from

hypothermia.

### **75 years ago: Joseph McCarthy delivers anti-communist speech in West Virginia**

On February 9, 1950, the US Senator from Wisconsin Joseph McCarthy delivered a speech at the McClure Hotel, in Wheeling, West Virginia, which put him at the forefront of the anti-communist witch-hunt that came to be named after him.

The speech to the Ohio County Republican Women's Club as part of a Lincoln Day celebration resulted in a major boost in the political profile of the Republican senator. No audio recording of McCarthy's remarks was saved, but reporting of the event indicated that they centered around the supposed infestation of the State Department with Communists, and scaremongering about the "enemy within" which would jeopardize US national security in relation to the Soviet Union.

"The reason why we find ourselves in a position of impotency is not because our only powerful potential enemy has sent men to invade our shores," McCarthy claimed, "but rather because of the traitorous actions of those who have been treated so well by this Nation."

At one point, McCarthy held up a piece of paper and told the audience that it contained a list of "card carrying members or certainly loyal to the Communist Party, but who nevertheless are still helping to shape our foreign policy."

The political witch-hunts during the opening years of the Cold War, though they came to be referred to as "McCarthyism," predate the anti-communist ravings of McCarthy himself. The Democratic administration of President Harry S. Truman, only a few months earlier, had prosecuted, convicted and imprisoned Communist Party leaders on fraudulent charges of an attempt to overthrow the American government.

Moreover, McCarthyism was bound up with the considerations of the US ruling class as a whole, which sought to suppress any form of political radicalization, above all in the working class, after the powerful eruption of the class struggle over the previous decade, including a series of general strikes in 1934, the mass sitdown strikes of 1936-37, and the even larger postwar strike wave of 1946-47. This domestic crackdown was critical for the US drive to establish untrammelled hegemony worldwide, particularly through confrontation with the Soviet Union and anti-colonial revolutions that swept Asia and Africa.

### **100 years ago: Slavery abolished in Nepal**

On February 6, 1925, reports reached world wire services that the Himalayan kingdom of Nepal had abolished slavery.

A speech by the hereditary prime minister, Chandra Shamsheer Rana, who ruled the country from 1901 to his death in 1929, had

announced the edict that freed all slaves in Nepal. In a speech, according to the *New York Times*:

The Maharaja exempted from all blame those whose slaves were their inheritance whom they treated in a patriarchal manner, and those who kept slaves for labor purposes. He appealed for the aid of both these classes.

Slave traders, however, he described in biting terms as "those who do not scruple to separate husband from wife's mother from child, who do not scruple to resort to base methods to circumvent the law, who hope to become rich by a trade upon which rests the curse of heaven, a trade which is overloaded with leaden tears of parents and children. This aspect of it is the most reprehensible the most revolting of all."

The *Times* noted that there were 51,419 slaves in Nepal.

Chandra was the first Nepalese ruler to have been educated in India. Historians have noted that his abolition of slavery, as well as of sati, the ritual custom of immolating widows, were at least partly brought about after Chandra visited Europe and came to believe that his country was tremendously backward.

Chandra also brought Nepal into the orbit of British imperialism, which continued despite formal independence in 1923. He supplied troops for the Allied powers in World War I and supported Britain's imperialist maneuvers in Tibet against Russian Tsarist imperialism before the war.

Nepal (today the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal) is a landlocked South Asian state located between India and China, including much of the Himalayan mountain range. In 1925, China was divided among rival warlords and a nationalist government in the east, and had little influence in Tibet, the region bordering Nepal. India was a colonial possession of British imperialism.



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