

Attack on major Sri Lankan airforce base as civil war continues to escalate

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Three Sri Lankan airforce personnel were killed and 16 wounded in an attack by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the early hours of Monday morning on the main airforce base at Katunayake, north of Colombo. The LTTE used light aircraft for the first time in more than two decades of civil war to drop several bombs on the base, which is adjacent to the country's only international airport.

While the LTTE caught the Sri Lankan military by surprise, the attack failed to disable or destroy the airforce's jet fighters and helicopters. Airforce spokesman Ajantha Silva said the damage had been minor and that the bombs hit engineering facilities. Other defence sources indicated that two parked military helicopters may have been damaged.

An attack on the same facilities in July 2001 was far more devastating. LTTE fighters managed to penetrate the heavy security surrounding the international airport and airforce base to destroy parked military and civilian aircraft. The assault had a serious impact on the tourist industry and the country's national airline, which lost half its fleet.

Following Monday's attack, the government issued a jingoistic statement demanding an end to all opposition to its renewed war against the LTTE. It called on all parties "to rise above narrow political differences" and to refrain from discrediting the security forces and "strengthening the LTTE terrorists". The statement declared: "The nation is supreme and no political ambitions should supercede the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka."

Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse also issued an appeal for international support to eliminate what he called a "sinister" new trend. Absurdly he declared that the LTTE's rudimentary air attack posed "a global threat" which would encourage other "international terrorist organisations" to follow suit. The airforce retaliated by striking LTTE areas in the northern district of Mannar.

In Colombo, the security forces used the air raid as a pretext to conduct an arbitrary cordon-and-search operation in parts of the capital and detain 40 "suspects". None of the detainees had anything to do with the air raid—they were Tamils from plantation areas who could not prove their

identity. The purpose of such sweeps is to intimidate and terrorise the country's Tamil minority.

On the part of the LTTE, the air raid was an act of desperation, designed to bolster the flagging morale of its fighters. Since President Mahinda Rajapakse ordered the army onto the offensive last July, the LTTE has suffered a series of defeats, losing the eastern areas of Mavilaru, Sampur and Vaharai. The US and other major powers, in which the LTTE had placed so much faith, have tacitly supported the government's actions, which are in clear breach of the 2002 ceasefire.

The LTTE has triumphantly displayed photographs of its Tamileelam Air Force (TAF). The aircraft are believed to be light, single-engine planes that have been smuggled into Sri Lanka in parts and reassembled. The photos show small, improvised bombs fitted to the underside of the fuselage. LTTE military spokesman Rasiah Ilanthirayan announced that the "mission was undertaken to reduce the air capability of the Sri Lankan air force" and warned of more air attacks.

LTTE political wing leader S.P. Thamilchelvan tried to allay concerns expressed in India. He said the LTTE's air capability was "not in any way a threat to any other country in general, particularly India" but was "aimed at protecting our people".

The TAF is in no position to challenge the Sri Lankan airforce, which is equipped with Israeli-built Kfir fighters and Ukrainian MiG-27 jets. Over the past year, the military has frequently used these warplanes to strafe and bomb LTTE-held areas, inflicting casualties on civilians and LTTE fighters alike. These air attacks have been a serious military setback to the LTTE and contributed to the panic that has created a wave of refugees from LTTE-held areas.

The military is continuing to escalate its offensive operations.

A major army push has been underway since March 6 to seize one of the LTTE's last major strongholds in the east of the island. Thoppigala, 40 kilometres south-west of the town of Batticaloa, is an extensive, mainly jungle-covered area between the districts of Trincomalee and Ampara. The

military believes that many LTTE fighters fled there after losing the eastern town of Vaharai in January.

The offensive, named Operation Human Shield 2, is another breach of the 2002 ceasefire. President Rajapakse and his government claim that the army is “liberating Tamils” and preventing the LTTE using civilians as “human shields”. In fact, the military is deliberately using indiscriminate aerial bombing and artillery shelling to stampede the local population and isolate the LTTE.

The latest operation is part of a broad strategy of driving the LTTE out of the east, before focussing on its strongholds in the north. President Rajapakse told a delegation from the Sinhala extremist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) last week that the military intends to control the entire east by the New Year (Sinhala-Tamil) in mid-April.

Tens of thousands of refugees have poured into Batticaloa since the offensive began. On March 19, the World Food Program (WFP) reported that 60,000 civilians fled to Batticaloa during the earlier operations. Now another 95,000 men, women and children have arrived in the area. WFP official Tony Banbury warned: “Unless we receive new funding very soon, we will run out of food supplies by the end of April.”

According to *Reliefweb*, schools have been turned into makeshift refugee camps. Many refugees are living in the open or under the trees. There are shortages of food, water, sanitation and other basic facilities. According to UNICEF, refugees looking for accommodation have been forced to move from camp to camp. Human Rights Watch and the Amnesty International have accused the government of pressuring displaced persons back to Vaharai to make way for the new influx.

Even though the main focus of the military’s operations has been in the east, fighting has also taken place in several northern areas over the past fortnight. Five soldiers were killed and 23 injured in clashes on March 16 at Omanthai on the edge of the LTTE-controlled Wannai area. Last Friday another clash in the same area resulted in the deaths of nine soldiers. Once again, the military took the offensive in what it described as a “pre-emptive strike”.

Fighting has also taken place in the north-western district of Mannar. According to the LTTE, about 300 soldiers entered its territory last Thursday and tried to use local civilians as “human shields” during fierce artillery and mortar exchanges. Military spokesman Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe denied the claims but did admit that the army was trying “to neutralise the terrorists’ artillery and mortar positions in the area”.

President Rajapakse continues to maintain the fraud that his government abides by the 2002 ceasefire agreement even as the military attacks new areas. Earlier this month, a top

Sri Lankan defence “source” told the AFP news agency that the war would continue for the “next two to three years”. According to the *Sunday Leader*, the source was the president’s brother—Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse.

The Rajapakse government is heavily dependent on the support of the Bush administration, which nominally supports the so-called international peace process but has been tacitly backing the new war. Close relations between the two countries led to the signing of an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) in early March, which provides the US military with extensive logistical support in Sri Lanka. Washington has been pressing for some time for such a deal with Sri Lanka, which is a strategic access point to the Middle East, as well as South Asia.

Two days after the deal was signed, US Deputy Assistant Secretary Steve Mann visited Sri Lanka and met Rajapakse and other Sri Lankan officials. He repeated Washington’s stock phrases about “protecting human rights” and the need for “a political solution”. At a press conference in Colombo, however, Mann also expressed his support for Rajapakse’s “war against terrorism” and declared there was a “strong military element” within the LTTE that should be defeated.

After narrowly winning the presidential election in November 2005, Rajapakse allowed the military to wage a dirty covert war to undermine and provoke the LTTE, then ordered a military offensive last July. Since the end of 2005, more than 4,000 people have died—military personnel, LTTE fighters and civilians—and 200,000 have been displaced. Hundreds of people, many of them young Tamils, have been abducted or killed by military-backed death squads. These terrible tolls will continue to rise as the government pursues its communalist war.



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