

# LTTE air raid on Sri Lankan capital

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An air attack by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on fuel facilities in the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo on Sunday produced a panicked response by the government and military. Flying under cover of darkness, two light aircraft dropped two small bombs on the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation's oil refinery installation at Kolonnawa and another two on Shell's LPG gas facility at Muthurajawela.

Damage to the installations was light but the military responded by shutting down the city's power supply and international airport. Many cricket fans had stayed up to the early hours of Sunday morning to watch the Sri Lankan team play in the World Cup final. Around 5,000, who had gathered at a ground in the Colombo suburbs, fled as the city was plunged into darkness and the military blazed away with anti-aircraft guns and small arms fire.

Unable to locate the small planes, much of the firing was random. Falling shrapnel damaged three houses in Kalubowila and five in Kolonnawa. Eight civilians were hospitalised in Wellawatte—more than 10 kilometres from the fuel facilities. Several others were injured in Kolonnawa and Mirihana. In the mayhem, three soldiers and two security guards were wounded in crossfire at the Kelanitissa Power Plant in Colombo.

Air force spokesman Group Captain Ajantha Silva was unapologetic, telling the media that the same chaotic "air defence system" would be used in the future. The LTTE has now launched three air attacks. The first on March 26 killed three air force personnel at the Katunayake military airbase north of Colombo. The second on April 26 hit an army detachment near the main northern military base at Palaly, killing six soldiers.

LTTE military spokesman Rasiah Ilanthirayan said the latest raid was in retaliation for an air force attack just hours before on Visvamadu near the northern LTTE stronghold of Kilinochchi. The LTTE had

previously indicated that it would observe a ceasefire during the World Cup cricket final.

Since President Mahinda Rajapakse gave the green light for offensive operations last July, in breach of the 2002 ceasefire agreement, the LTTE has lost most of its territory in the east of the island. The military has declared that it will also seize LTTE areas in the north and has begun probing attacks.

In response to the LTTE's most recent air attack, the security forces launched a major search operation in and around Colombo. Even before the air attack, on Saturday military personnel checked 5,000 vehicles and 15,000 civilians, arresting 16. Virtually every vehicle entering the city is now being inspected.

Sections of business have expressed concerns over the impact of the LTTE's air attacks, particularly on tourism, which earned \$US410 million last year. Tourist arrivals dropped 36 percent last year and are expected to fall further. Australia and some European countries have issued travel cautions. Two of the major airlines flying into Sri Lanka—Cathay Pacific and the Emirates—temporarily suspended flights.

The government is under pressure to purchase new military hardware to counter the LTTE's air raids. *Sunday Times* defence columnist Iqbal Athas commented last weekend: "Although the LTTE's [aircraft] acquisitions appear primitive, they have clearly demonstrated through their last four sorties the helplessness of the government to protect its own airspace."

Military spokesman Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe told the media the security forces were trying to get more advanced systems. The Ministry of Defence web site cited their analysts as saying, "proactive measures are needed from the military to meet the new threat effectively" and overcome "lapses in the national air defence system".

The Rajapakse government has already massively

increased defence spending to pay for its escalating war. The budget allocation this year is 139 billion rupees or \$US1.25 billion—28 percent higher than last year. Former air force commander Harry Gunatilleke told the *Hindustan Times* that this year's spending would soon reach \$1.8 billion.

The burden has fallen heavily on working people as prices have soared. The inflation rate was 17 percent last year, causing real wages to fall by 10 percent for agricultural workers and 12 percent in the services sector.

Clashes between the military and the LTTE are ongoing. On Sunday, security forces killed five LTTE fighters and a Hindu priest at Velanai on Kayts island. On Wednesday, the military announced it had killed 13 LTTE fighters near LTTE front lines in the northern Vanni area.

On Thursday about 300 soldiers launched an attack on LTTE positions in the northern Mannar-Vavuniya area then withdrew, according to the pro-LTTE *Tamilnet*. One LTTE cadre and two soldiers were killed in the encounter, the article claimed. Army commander Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka admitted to the *Island* that the military had been engaged in “clearing operations” in the region over the past few weeks.

The military is also preparing for an assault on Thoppigala, the LTTE's last major stronghold in the East. Even though the government continues to deny any collaboration with various anti-LTTE paramilitaries, *Irida Lakkima* reported on Sunday that about 500 fighters from the Karuna group are training to assist the army in the assault.

The military and associated paramilitary groups are also terrorising the local population. Hundreds of civilians, mainly Tamils, have been abducted or killed over the past year. Last Saturday a young reporter for the Jaffna-based *Uthayan* newspaper, Selvarajah Rajivarman, was shot dead by “unidentified gunmen” riding a motorbike. Journalists in Jaffna have accused the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP) of being responsible.

Since Rajapakse came to power in November 2005, about 4,000 people have died in the renewed war and 300,000, mostly Tamils, have been displaced. The government will undoubtedly seize on the panic created by the latest LTTE air raid on Colombo to intensify its military operations and further crack down on any

opposition to its communal war.



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