

LTTE attack on Sri Lankan air force base

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The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) carried out a major assault on a key Sri Lankan air base at Anuradhapura, 210 kilometres north of Colombo, on Monday. The attack left at least 13 military personnel dead, as well as 21 LTTE fighters, thought to be members of a suicide commando squad, and destroyed or damaged a number of aircraft and helicopters.

The assault is one of the few offensive operations carried out by the LTTE over the past year in response to the government's repeated breaches of the 2002 ceasefire. Since July last year, the military has driven the LTTE out of all its main sanctuaries in the east of the island and has recently begun probing operations against the LTTE's northern strongholds.

The government and the military were obviously taken by surprise by Monday's attack. LTTE cadres infiltrated the heavily-fortified camp at about 3.20 a.m. and took control of guard posts and anti-aircraft gun positions before destroying several aircraft. The base was then bombed from the air about an hour later by two of the LTTE's light aircraft. The LTTE was effectively in control of the base for several hours.

The training and logistics base is deep inside government-held territory on the main supply route from the capital to the northern town of Vavuniya. The raid has triggered bitter recriminations in Colombo. As well as inflicting costly damage on the air force, the attack has dented government propaganda that a military victory over the LTTE is possible and can be achieved relatively quickly.

Defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella claimed on Monday that only two MI-24 helicopters and a training aircraft had been damaged. Another helicopter "crashed" as it flew from Vavuniya to support government forces at the base. However, the government quickly came under criticism for covering up the scale of losses.

Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake admitted

in the parliament yesterday that three helicopters, four training planes and a sophisticated Beechcraft spy plane were destroyed at the base—apart from the downed helicopter. Several news reports suggest that the military's own anti-aircraft crews panicked and shot down the "crashed" helicopter, thinking it was another LTTE aircraft.

Wickramanayake defensively declared that the government was not hiding the truth. But he did not explain why the number of damaged aircraft had jumped from Monday. He called on all parties to support the government's war effort, saying: "There must be a country for us to do politics."

Well-connected defence analyst Iqbal Athas told the *Hindustan Times* that the damage done at the base could be higher. He stated that 12 to 18 aircraft were destroyed, including a key naval reconnaissance plane. The British-based *Telegraph* estimated the damage at more than \$US40 million—a huge sum for the Colombo government, which is already short of funds as a result of military spending.

Nine military personnel were killed at the base and 20 wounded in the attack. Four airmen were died in the helicopter crash. All the members of the LTTE suicide squad, including three female cadres, died. The LTTE's two light aircraft returned to the bases. It is the fourth time that the LTTE has used single-engine light aircraft in attacks on government and military targets.

While condemning the LTTE, the opposition United National Party (UNP) said the "negligence of the government has put the security forces personnel in the danger". The UNP criticised the government for not supplying the military with the hardware needed to counter the LTTE's aircraft and demanded the resignation of Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse and Air Force Chief Roshan Gunathilake.

The UNP's criticisms mark a certain shift in rhetoric. As the party that signed the 2002 ceasefire with the

LTTE, the UNP, while supporting the renewed war, has urged caution and a return to peace negotiations. More recently, however, it has quietly dropped its support for the existing ceasefire agreement and is adopting a more pro-war tone in its criticisms of the government.

At the same time, the UNP still reflects the concerns of sections of Sri Lankan business that are deeply concerned that the return to war will produce an economic and possibly military disaster. Defence analyst Athas in particular has been warning for over a year that the government's triumphalism over its military victories underestimated the LTTE's ability to strike back.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) latched onto the attack to reiterate its demand for an all-out war against the LTTE. JVP parliamentary leader Wimal Weerawansa called on the military to immediately launch offensives against LTTE strongholds in the northern Mullaithivu and Killinochchi districts. He also demanded further money be spent on strengthening the military's defences.

The LTTE attack has not altered the government's determination to intensify the war. Just two days before, President Mahinda Rajapakse reiterated in a television interview that the government would not tolerate "terrorism" and would fight it "until total elimination".

After the LTTE raid, Rajapakse placed security for Anuradhapura under the overall command of General Sanath Karunaratne. He will be in charge of the overall operations of the Sri Lankan army, navy, air force, police, civil security department, commercial security agencies and intelligence agencies in Anuradhapura. In effect, the city and surrounding areas have been placed under military control.

Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president's brother, rejected the UNP's call for his resignation. In a statement on the government's information department web site, he assured the public that the "attack on the Anuradhapura Camp would not in any way upset planned military operations against the LTTE terrorists and their bases in the Vanni." He menacingly warned the opposition "not to play politics at the expense of the security forces".

The military has responded to the LTTE attack by pounding LTTE-held areas in northern Sri Lanka from the air. The air force attacked Iranamadu in Vanni,

where the military claims the LTTE bases its light aircraft. On Tuesday, the military reported 12 LTTE fighters had been killed at several places in Vavuniya. On Wednesday, air force jets bombed what the military claimed was an LTTE training camp in the Mullaithivu area.

The attack on Monday demonstrates, however, that the LTTE still has the capacity to strike at military and government targets throughout the country. The government has recklessly plunged the country back into a war that has already lasted more than two decades and will inevitably result in further death, destruction and hardship for working people throughout the island.



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