



N Manoharan
Senior Fellow, IPCS

Air Tigers' Maiden Attack

Motives and Implications

Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies

The Attack

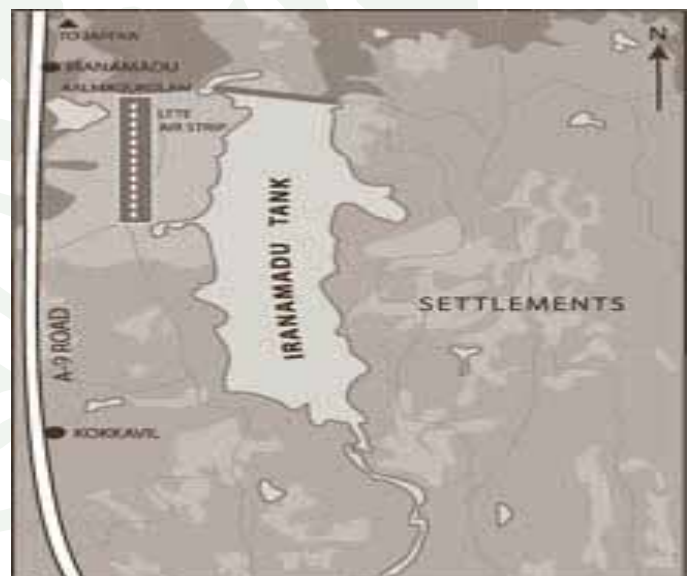
The cat is out of the bag. The hitherto invisible 'Air Tigers' launched their maiden attack on the Kattunayake air base of the Sri Lankan Air Force (SLAF) at around 0045 hrs on 26 March 2007. The attack, carried out by two light aircraft¹ of the LTTE, killed three and caused some damage to the fighter fleet of the SLAF comprising Kfirs and MiGs. It is not clear whether the casualties were due to LTTE bombing or due to indiscriminate shooting by the airmen out of panic. Given the risk involved, it can be termed a great suicidal attack by the LTTE. There was a risk of both aircraft being shot down by the security personnel guarding the air base or in midway flight. It is not yet clear how the LTTE could attack the airbase with such precision, that too at night, and how they could have escaped detection during the operation.

The Indian radar system at the air base was initially blamed for this lapse. The fact, however, is that, all except one of the radars, were under maintenance at the airbase. So was the case with the airbase in Vavuniya. Did the LTTE have this information in advance and choose to strike at this time? Who was responsible for providing this information to the Tigers? However, it is also not clear why no action was taken by the airmen guarding the base to act swiftly on a warning provided earlier by the Special Task Force (STF) personnel posted in Vavuniya district, and later by the radars located at the nearby civilian airport. It is said that air defence systems were activated soon after the warning from the civilian airport radars. However, if those defence systems were effective, how could they miss even the retreating aircraft. Why did the SLAF not launch

fighters in exercise of their option of "hot pursuit"? What was the extent of damage to the fighter fleet of the SLAF? Two separate committees set up to enquire into the attack will be able to answer these questions. But will those reports ever be made public?

Motives

First, according to the LTTE, "The attack is not only pre-emptive but also to safeguard our people from indiscriminate bombing by the SLAF. Other Sri Lanka military installations will also be targets of our future attacks."² SLAF has been indulging in indiscriminate bombing of the LTTE-controlled territories inflicting heavy losses upon the LTTE infrastructure and people. The Tigers wanted to avenge this destruction by striking back. For over a year the LTTE has been vocally threatening "strong retaliation" to



LTTE Air strip

1. The two light aircraft were Czech-made Zlin Z-143, allegedly smuggled from Indonesia by the Sea Tigers and later assembled by the LTTE locally.

2. Statement by LTTE military spokesperson Rasaiah Ilanthirayan, www.tamilnet.com, 26 March 2007.

"provocative aerial bombing and artillery fire towards LTTE territory."

Second, the SLAF was instrumental in inflicting



Air Tigers with their light aircraft

heavy losses on the LTTE in the east of the Island. The LTTE lost one base after another, especially in the districts of Trincomalee and Batticaloa. Now Tigers control less than 20 percent of the Tamil areas in the east. Neutralizing the SLAF, therefore, has been a primary military objective of the LTTE, to convey a message to the government of Sri Lanka that it could strike any target in the island at will. It was looking for an opportunity to neutralise the military victories achieved by the government in the past one year. There was also a message that the LTTE might use its airpower to support its ground troops, both on land and over sea. Use of its aircraft to gather aerial intelligence is also possible. The LTTE is now in a position to rapidly move its cadres, fresh or injured, and key equipment across the island and even outside. Then there is also the possibility of "immediate retaliation" to any kind of operations by the Sri Lankan armed forces.

Third, the Tiger chief, Velupillai Prabhakaran, has been under tremendous pressure from his second rung leaders to do "something spectacular" and boost the dwindling morale of his cadre. The LTTE had undertaken no major "morale boosting" operation since the capture of Elephant Pass in April 2000. At this juncture, there was nothing more daring than to use its Vaanodis (aircraft).

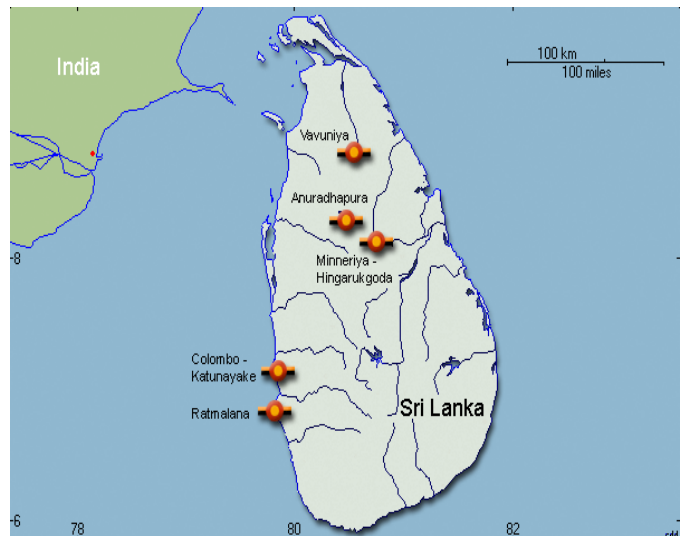
Fourth, the LTTE also wished to prove to the Tamil community that its strength had not waned due to

reverses in the East. It wanted to demonstrate that it was equally capable of countering Sri Lankan government forces on land, sea or air. It also wanted to demonstrate its "statist" capabilities. In its statement after the attack, the LTTE said, "Our military infrastructure operates in the very same way as any other conventional military infrastructure of a state."³ At the same time, by attacking only the air base and not the adjacent civil airport, the Tigers wanted to signal to the international community that they were not a "terrorist" organization, but well organized "freedom fighters."

Implications for Sri Lanka

Although the Sri Lankan government has played down the attack, its implications are wide ranging for the island state.

The economic implications are the most important. The tourism industry will be the first victim. Many international airlines have already minimized their services to or via the Colombo international airport. In case airlines include war risk insurance, their air ticket prices might skyrocket affecting Sri Lanka's advantage as one of the cheapest destinations for tourists. Australia has already issued a travel advisory against traveling



Sri Lankan Air Bases

to Sri Lanka. Many countries are likely to follow if the LTTE indulges in follow-on suicide attacks as they did in Batticaloa on 27 March, killing seven. The attack also shook investor confidence in the Sri Lankan economy. For instance, the Colombo

3. Statement to the media by the LTTE political wing chief, S P Tamilselvan, on 29 March 2007 in Kilinochchi. Quoted in Tamilnet, 30 March 2007.

stock exchange plunged on the same day due to panic selling, leading to capital losses of about SLR12 billion. Significantly, foreigners were net sellers. However, it was not as bad as it was in the aftermath of the first attack in July 2001. If the violent trend continues, short and medium term investments might dry up. New investors may invest elsewhere. The government will also be forced now to strengthen its air defence systems in a comprehensive manner. Securing the land perimeters of its key installations on the ground is no longer adequate. The extent of damage to the SLAF due to the present attack is still not clear. While the LTTE claims that the damage to the SLAF fleet is 40 percent, the government puts it at zero. The truth should lie in between. In that case, the government will need to invest more in strengthening its Air Force. All these will create a dent in the Sri Lankan economy. Overall, the cost of both defence and offense measures will go up.

Politically, the attack changed the equation between the two parties marginally, but not significantly. The LTTE has always wanted to enter into negotiations from a position of military strength. The Mahinda Rajapakse Government did not wish to provide any such scenario. It was with this intent that Colombo renewed its "war for peace" programme – "taming the Tigers" and at the same time working on a devolution package for the Tamils.⁴ Aably assisted by the Karuna group, the government forces could almost drive the LTTE out of the eastern region. It was thought that it was just a matter of time before Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu were captured, both presently under the tight control of the LTTE. The Sri Lankan forces were about to launch their ground offensive on Mullaitivu, when the Tigers struck at Kattunayake. The government has tried to project the air attack as a "threat to the region" to further isolate the LTTE internationally.⁵ Colombo was, however, disappointed by the muted reaction by the international community to the air attack. India

4. The government-appointed All Party Representative Committee (APRC) recently submitted its report to the President. The report, however, was divided in its recommendations. Even if there is a consensus, the devolution package seems far more diluted than the 2000 devolution proposals tabled by Chandrika Kumaratunga, which was rejected by the LTTE.

5. The Minister for Highways Jeyaraj Fernandopulle said, "This is a threatening situation, not only to Sri Lanka, but also to the entire region. India should be on alert about the situation since there are possibilities the LTTE may help other terror organisations too." Quoted in Daily News, 27 March 2007.

situated the air attack within the context of the general escalation of violence in Sri Lanka. New Delhi did not officially condemn the attack, but called for a solution to the ethnic issue.⁶ On its part the United States, while expressing its concern regarding the air capability of the LTTE, observed that Sri Lanka now has an important opportunity to achieve peace."⁷ The first attack on the same airport in 2001 and its wide-ranging implications



LTTE Aircraft with Bombs at their Base

turned public opinion in favour of talks with the LTTE. One has to wait and see whether history will repeat itself. Given the events following the attack – the SLAF continued its aerial bombing of LTTE controlled areas – the government's strategy now seems to be to "strike at the roots" of TTE air power. One has to assess the technological capability of the LTTE at this juncture. Even if their present fleet of aircraft is destroyed, will they be able to acquire new ones? How many LTTE cadre are trained in aeronautics? Is it possible to wipe out this human capital to totally root out the LTTE's air power?

India's Concerns

As far as India is concerned, the attack was viewed with concern though there was no official reaction. Indian borders fall within the range of

6. During his briefing to the media on the 14th SAARC summit the Indian Foreign Secretary said, "To pick on individual incidents of violence, I do not think helps to solve the root cause of the problem. The cause of the problem is the conflict which has escalated terribly in the last few weeks and that does cause us great concern." For the full text of the briefing see <http://meaindia.nic.in/pbhome.htm>

7. Interview with Robert O Blake, US Ambassador to Sri Lanka, Daily News, 2 April 2007.

Evolution of LTTE Air Power

1991-95: Use of anti-aircraft guns as chief mode of attacking oncoming SLAF bombers

1995: 'Col' Shankar, once an aeronautical engineer with Air Canada, establishes the LTTE Air Force. He acts as the chief of the Vaanpuligal ('Air Tigers').

1998: The LTTE displays its airpower by sprinkling rose petals on its "martyr's tombs" in Killinochchi on the eve of "Hero's Week".

2000: LTTE declares "Year of Air Tigers".

2001: LTTE makes a ground attack on the Kattunayake air base and Bandaranaike International airport.

2001: 'Col' Shankar, Chief of the 'Air Tigers,' assassinated.

2004: The LTTE once again displays its aircraft at its "Hero's Week".

2005: Sri Lankan UAVs spot a large airstrip near Iranamadu lake deep within the LTTE controlled area. The world notices the possibility of an air force being available to a militant group, a first in the history of guerilla warfare, and this despite no external state support.

2006: SLAF bombs and damages the airstrip.

2007: Maiden air attack on the Kattunayake air base by the Tiger air force.

LTTE aircraft.⁸ Although the LTTE have no reason to attack India at this juncture, a contingency plan of action is required to counter any threat from the 'Air Tigers'. The Indian security establishment should address the following questions:

- What if Indian militant groups already having "working relations" with the LTTE try and acquire their air power? Will Tigers say no to these "friendly" militant groups when asked to help develop an air wing or at least provide anti-aircraft guns and surface-to-air missiles (SAMs)? Will the LTTE, for example, refuse to provide landing facilities to a plane hijacked by any of the Indian militant groups?
- What is the contingency plan in case the LTTE decides to attack oil refineries in Tuticorin or the nuclear power plant at Kalpakkam that are within range of the 'Air Tigers,' or any other high-risk targets in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh or Karnataka?

8. LTTE political wing leader SP Tamilchelvan said: "Our struggle is aimed at achieving our own freedom, and we are no threat to anyone else other than the oppressive Sri Lankan state we are fighting against." "Air Strike, a warning to SLAF – Tamilchelvan," www.tamilnet.com, 30 March 2007.



**INSTITUTE OF PEACE
AND
CONFLICT STUDIES**

B 7/3 Safdarjung Enclave,
New Delhi 110029 INDIA