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Sundaytimes

Tigers go kamikaze but attacks fail

By Asif Fuard

Tiger guerrillas for the first time tried out a kamikaze-style suicide bomb attack in Colombo by packing the two light aircraft with more than 200 kilograms of explosives each, investigators reported yesterday. Police and the Government Analyst's Department officials who held forensic investigations on the debris of the two LTTE aircraft discovered that for the first time the Tiger planes had not carried bombs but were packed with explosives.

Military spokesman Udaya Nanayakara said yesterday this was the first time the LTTE had attempted a suicide attack using its planes.



“In previous instances, the LTTE just dropped bombs. But this time the aircraft did not carry bombs. The LTTE planes were packed with 215 kg of C-4 explosives. The mission was unsuccessful. If the aircraft had hit their intended targets, the devastation would have been severe,” he said.

Brigadier Nanayakkara said the Czech-built Zlin-Z143 light aircraft which had taken off from the LTTE's final stronghold of Puthukkudiyiruppu in Mullaitivu had targeted the Sri Lanka Air Force headquarters and the Sri Lanka Air Force base hangars adjoining the international airport in Katunayake.

The Seeduwa Police are conducting investigations on the wreckage of the Tiger plane which was shot down outside the Katunayake Air Force base while the Kompannaveediya police are carrying out the probe on the wreckage of the plane which crashed onto the Inland Revenue Department building at Sir Chittampalam Gardiner Mawatha.

Earlier, there were reports that the pilot of the Tiger plane shot down at Katunayake was a foreigner. But police now say the pilot was an LTTE member. However a DNA test is to be carried out on the body. According to evidence, the two LTTE planes had taken off from Puthukkudiyiruppu around 8.45 p.m.

They flew over Mankulam and Silavaturai and made a turn at Mannar on their way to Colombo. The two aircraft were said to have been flying at low altitude and were first heard by ground troops operating in the areas surrounding Puthukkudiyiruppu West. The Tiger planes are said to have switched off their lights to avoid being detected.

Minutes after the first alert, the Sri Lanka Air Force radar in Vavuniya picked up the signs of aircraft coming from Mullaitivu and heading towards the northwestern coastal area. Soon after that the radar in Palavi also picked up signals of two aircraft heading towards the western coast.

Immediately electricity in Colombo city was switched off and the Air Defence system fully activated. Simultaneously, a number of F-7 jets took off from the Katunayake Air Force base to intercept the LTTE

planes.

The night sky was illuminated by flares and anti-aircraft fire which made it almost impossible for the LTTE planes to hit their intended targets. Troops at checkpoints were also reported to have frantically shot at the night sky to bring down the planes.

One of the planes was said to have been circling around the city and was seen passing the Colombo harbour and taking a turn over Galle Face before it was eventually shot down over Kompanneveediya. Highly placed military sources told The Sunday Times the LTTE pilot was said to have lost control over the plane when it was shot at, resulting in the plane crashing into the IRD building. The impact triggered the blast of the explosives that were packed in the plane.

Some 58 people were injured due to the explosion, while two deaths were reported – one of them was a 14-year-old child from Obeysekarapura. She was hit by a stray bullet when the security forces activated their defence systems.

The plane which crashed at the IRD building was completely destroyed with fragments of the plane and body parts of the pilot all over the place. Part of the engine of the plane is reported to be in the 12th floor of the building.

Around 10.45 pm it was reported that the second LTTE plane had been shot down by anti-aircraft fire over Katunayake. The pilot carried a picture of the Air Tiger Wing members with LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran seated in the middle. He also had two cyanide capsules around his neck and a hand grenade.

The attack came after troops who had entered Puthukkudiyiruppu North on Thursday discovered partially-burnt remnants of two aircraft believed to have been in the process of being assembled. One was a small aircraft and the other an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV).

Defence Spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella said yesterday the government had been expecting such an attack in the aftermath of the LTTE's debacles in the north.

He said it was a desperate attack by the LTTE to bring it into the limelight at a time when it was facing a disgraceful defeat.