

Sri Lankan soldiers die as plane crashes. (1995, September 14). *The Gazette*.

## Sri Lankan soldiers die as plane crashes

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COLOMBO, Sri Lanka - Eighty-one soldiers, sailors and crew were feared dead after their military transport aircraft plummeted into the sea yesterday off the west coast of Sri Lanka.

The AN-32, bound for the Palali military base in northern Sri Lanka, had just taken off from Ratmalana airport, 11 kilometres south of Colombo, in driving rain when it disappeared from radar screens, said Brig. Sarath Munasinghe, a military spokesman.

The plane was carrying troops for a planned offensive against Tamil guerrillas, officials said. It was also carrying cigarettes for troops in

Palali. The military had launched its biggest anti-rebel offensive in eight years from the base in July.

The aircraft fell 2,500 metres into the sea 37 kilometres off the coast. The cause of the crash was not immediately known.

Military officials did not immediately blame Tamil rebels.

Sri Lanka asked India to use its satellites to help track the wreckage. Helicopters and navy gunboats were searching for survivors.

Nearly four hours after the plane disappeared, rescue aircraft and ships sighted an oil slick and floating cigarette cartons, but no wreckage was seen.

No distress radio message was received from the pilot, Squadron

Leader Ranjan Pakyanathan.

The aircraft was carrying soldiers, sailors and other personnel to the Palali base, the biggest military camp on the front line. Palali is 300 kilometres north of Colombo.

Tamil separatist rebels are fighting government troops in the north to win a separate homeland for minority Tamils. More than 36,000 people have been killed in the war since 1983.

Since fighting erupted on April 19 after peace talks broke down, rebels have shot down three military aircraft in the north with missiles, severely depleting the strength of the country's small air force and affecting troop movements to the war zone.