

Armaments and food to the North

By Our Defence Correspondent

Caught flatfooted at the start of Eelam War III by the LTTE's acquisition of surface to air missiles, the air force has now taken the threat of the Tigers having obtained ultra light aircraft very seriously indeed.

Shortly after dawn on Tuesday, a pair of F-7 Chinese-built jet fighters took off from China Bay airbase in Trincomalee and headed northwest.

Within a few minutes, they had reached their target, a secret jungle airstrip near the fanamadu tank, south of Kilinochchi on the mainland in the Vanni area.

The warplanes quickly got down to their task, and bombed the runway, scoring several hits, and severely damaging it.

This was not the first time that the air force had bombed this Tiger airfield, the only one known to have been built so far by the LTTE.

As far back as 1992, the LTTE cleared the strip of land, and levelled out the airstrip, with the obvious intention of using to launch aircraft, which army intelligence said they may have acquired even then.

At that time, Sia Marretti aircraft were used to bomb the airfield, and put it out of commission. The LTTE was never able to use it to fly their planes, and there has been no evidence that the Tigers have flown any aircraft.

However, ever since Eelam War II broke out and intelligence warned that there was a high probability that the Tigers had acquired several aircraft, together with the missiles which have so far shot down three air force aircraft, the army and air force have kept a close watch on the fanamadu airfield.

This alertness was rewarded last week when intelligence reported that the Tigers were definitely working on the airfield once again, and were preparing it for use.

The runway was not clearly visible from the air since it was hidden by jungle overgrowth, so the extent of the damage by the bombing was not known.

However, the bombing of the airfield will not forever prevent the Tigers from flying their aircraft, since they can, merely build another secret airfield somewhere else.

Although initially there were fears that sensitive places in Colombo such as parliament and Temple Trees would be targeted by the Tiger aircraft, they are more likely to select targets closer to the north, such as air force airfields, since fanamadu is 165 miles away from Colombo.

The threat posed by the Tiger aircraft is a serious one. Although they would not be of a type able to carry much in the way of bombs, there is

little to stop them from flying wherever they wish.

The air force also bombed a Sea Tiger base at Verugal in the Batticaloa district on Tuesday.

Radio intercepts later indicated that three Tigers had been killed, and another two injured.

With the Tigers having rejected the government's devolution package, plans for a massive assault on Jaffna town are going ahead.

The Tigers themselves

Although there were no major battles this week, the number of people killed on all sides since April 19 crossed the two thousand mark this week with several minor skirmishes in the east. Of these, more than nine hundred are LTTE cadres, with nearly seven hundred from the armed forces and police, and almost 400 civilians.

seen highly worried about such an attack, and they said this week that they are ready to negotiate once again, despite President Chandrika

Kumaratunga's insistence that she will not talk to the LTTE again until they lay down their arms.

However, the armed forces problems in supplying tens of thousands of troops in the massive Palali-Kankesanthurai base for such an operation, continue.

Although the three new Russian built Antonov AN-32 transport planes have solved the problem of getting emergency supplies to coastal stocks of ammunition for tanks, mortars and artillery guns, which have to be sent by sea, are still insufficient for the weeks of fighting with such an offensive would entail.

During Operation Leap Forward in July, shells for some types of heavy guns ran out, and the army was unable to

bring as much firepower against the LTTE's counter attack. Operation Tiger Leap, as it is wanted to, resulting in higher casualties to the forces.

The need to clear Kankesanthurai harbour of shipwrecks has assumed critical importance. At present the remains of two sunken ships, the transport ship A-516 which was sunk on August 15, 1994, and the command ship Edithara, which was sunk a month ago, both of them by Sea Tiger

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frogmen, are in the harbour.

Although these wrecks do not completely block cargo ships from coming in and unloading their supplies, the LTTE would surely know that sinking another ship inside KKS would block the harbour entirely, and it is highly likely that such a raid would be launched by the Sea Tigers as soon as the army moves towards Jaffna.

By cutting off the supply line, the Tigers would force the operation to be abandoned.

Despite the large number of ships sunk in recent years, the navy has still not developed its underwater salvage capabilities, and thus has been unable to do anything about the KKS wrecks.

It is high time that serious thought be given to doing so, since there are few private diving and salvage companies in Sri Lanka which have the capability, and none are willing to send their people to the northern war zone.

The lethargy in clearing the wreck of A-516 is strange, considering the strategic importance of KKS to the war effort.

Meanwhile, in the Jaffna Peninsula, more than 300,000 people are facing a severe food shortage, as negotiations drag on between the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the defence ministry, and the ministry of shipping, ports, reconstruction and rehabilitation, over the escorting of food ships.

The government agent in Jaffna, K Ponnambalam, has warned that the baking of bread stopped this week with flour supplies running out. No food ships have reached the peninsula since Operation Leap Forward started on July 9. Almost all stocks of food will be exhausted by mid-September.

The ICRC, which used to escort the government's five food ships which are used to carry a monthly requirement of nearly 10,000 tons of supplies, stopped its service last month when the LTTE withdrew a guarantee that they would not attack the vessels.

In June, an ICRC ship, the "Sea Dancer," was sunk by an LTTE sea mine off Kankesanthurai, and one Indonesian sailor was killed.

The Tigers had objected to the ships unloading part of their cargo at Kankesanthurai, saying that the supplies are used by the forces.

Meanwhile, three ships loaded with supplies, are waiting in Colombo for orders to sail.

The scandal over the methods used by the Commissioner-General of Essential Services (CGES) in hiring ships used to take supplies and people to Jaffna grew this week, with shipping authorities refusing to allow a barge, newly hired by the CGES, to sail since it was unseaworthy.

Although the barge is flying a Sri Lankan flag, apparently with the necessary shipping certificates, when it arrived in Trincomalee from Bombay two weeks ago, officials who inspected it found a large number of holes in the hull.

Strangely, the CGES appears to have awarded preferential treatment to this barge and its agents, since tenders closed in January, with advertisements specifying that the vessel was to be for immediate use. How it was allowed to take seven months to get to Sri Lanka is a mystery.

This barge is a replacement for the MV "Tara," another vessel of the same shipping company, which sank due to holes in its hull last year. Shipping officials fear that the same fate may befall the replacement barge.

Despite having lost three gunboats within hours of Eelam War III having broken out, the navy has turned in a credible performance at sea in the past month, and a large number of Sea Tiger craft off the coasts of the Mullaitivu and Jaffna districts.

However, due to the reactivity between the defence ministry and the navy, a large number of incidents in which Sea Tiger boats have been sunk

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have gone unreported in the media, which is disconcerting to sailors at sea.

Shortly after dawn on Wednesday a Dvora classed and sank a Sea Tiger boat off Chundikkulam in the Kilinochchi district. The boat's four occupants are believed to have been killed.

The reshuffling of officers in key command positions, and the creation of more command positions which has been so frequent in recent months, continues.

Major General Srilal Weerasinghe, who distinguished himself with his quiet but capable leadership in Operation Leap Forward, has been made Deputy Overall Operations Commander, to work with Maj. Gen. Rohan Daluwatte, the Overall Operations Commander.

Brigadier Janaka Perera, who passed up for promotion two months ago, has been given back command of the Independent Brigade in the Welioya region, after the spectacular success three weeks ago, in which at least 180 Tigers were killed for the loss of only two soldiers.

Maj. Gen. Siri Peiris, who was commanding the Independent Brigade, which includes the elite Special Forces, and the Air Mobile Brigade, has been posted to headquarters as director general of general staff.

Brig. Devinda Kalapahana has been given the command of the second division in the east, succeeding the late Brig. Nalin Angamanna who was killed by a Landmine two weeks ago.

Maj. Gen. Somadatta Hapuarachchi has been given command of Task Force One in Palali, replacing Maj. Gen. Weerasinghe.

Brig. Asoka Silva has been given the First Division in Panagoda.

Meanwhile, the navy's northern commander, Commodore H. R. Anuraagera, is to take over as southern commander, based in Galle, next month, swapping places with Commodore A. H. M. Razeek, the present southern commander.

The navy's third-most senior officer, Rear Admiral T. K. Dasanayake, who is in New Delhi attending a one-year course at the National Defence College, will return in December and take over the eastern command.

Current eastern commander, Commodore D. W. K. Sandagin, will then move to the western area, based in Colombo.

The second in command of the east, Captain S. P. E. Wijeratne, will take over the number two position in the west next month.

Capt. D. S. M. Wijesekera, the second in command of the north, becomes director of welfare, swapping places with present welfare director, Capt. H. S. Ratnakeerthi.

The second in command of the west, Capt. W. K. J. Karanagoda, will become director of personnel and training.

The director of personnel and training, and policy and planning, Capt. P. A. S. Rajaratne, who was a member of the government team to the peace talks, moves to second in command of the east.

Capt. S. B. Weerasekera, commanding the "Tissa" base in Trincomalee, will become the director of policy and planning.

The commandant of the naval academy in Trincomalee,

Capt. C. N. Tudlowewatte, will take over command of the "Gemini" base in Welisara, swapping places with the present Welisara commander, Capt. L. D. Dharmapriya.

Commander J. H. U. Ranawera will take charge of the "Elara" base at Karanagar, whose present CO, Commander T. M. W. K. Tennakoon, will take over the Trincomalee base.

The air force's Director of Operations, Air Commodore Jayalath Weerakody, is leaving for New Delhi in December to attend a one year course at the National Defence College.

Wing Commander Lakshman Salgado, presently commanding the east, is tipped to take over as director of operations. He is due for promotion to the rank of group captain.

This week saw an ugly incident by the forces in the Ampara district, which went largely unreported in the press. On Sunday, LTTE cadres shot and killed a homeguard in

the area. Other homeguards and policemen retaliated by attacking a Tamil village named "Fourth Colony" in the area, burning down 75 houses, and attacking villagers.

Two people were killed, and 17 were missing after the attack on Fourth Colony. Strangely, there had been no protest from MPs of the area, including Muslim and Tamil parties. This is the second such incident in the east in Eelam War III. In May, policemen burned down 90 houses in the "Inspector Ettim" village after two policemen had been killed by the Tigers. This atrocity also received little publicity.

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