

Tigers' deep sea mines pose new threat to Sri Lanka

The Tamil Tigers' deep sea underwater capability demonstrated off the eastern Sri Lankan coast Saturday might have added a new dimension to the military conflict, The Sunday Times said.

The navy could be facing a new challenge in the coming months if the Tamil guerrillas continue to attack Sri Lankan vessels with sea mines or human torpedoes, the weekly paper said.

A sea mine sunk a Sri Lankan naval Fast Attack Craft (FAC) off Nayaruru on the Mullaitivu coast at about 2.25 a.m. Saturday. And although six men were rescued in the vicinity, the fate of 10 others was not known, it added.

Survivors said that they saw no Tiger vessel in the vicinity either with the naked eye or electronically and that there was no confrontation or firing. Hence the suspicion about a sea mine being the cause of the deadly explosion.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), however, gave a different version of the incident. The LTTE said there was a confrontation between the Sri Lankan Navy and a suicide squad of the Sea Tigers in which 14 navy men were killed and one FAC was sunk.

The LTTE further said that three Tigers, including a 'Lt. Colonel' and two women cadres, all members of the Black Tiger suicide squad, were killed. The names of the dead were announced.

The Sunday Times, quoting unnamed defence officials, said the Sri Lankan gun boat might have been destroyed by a human torpedo.

The other speculation is that LTTE suicide divers might have fixed a mine on the hull of the ill-fated vessel.

It was possible that an LTTE boat had dropped off the suicide squad and the latter, armed with the right underwater equipment, could have been lying low for hours waiting for an opportunity to strike, a military expert told IANS.

Assuming a sea mine sunk the FAC, The Sunday Times said: 'The extensive use of such mines can impede naval movement in the high seas. This is not only confined to patrolling the seas. More importantly, the navy provides the bulk of the security cover for movement of food and military supplies to some 40,000 troops and policemen deployed in the government-controlled Jaffna peninsula. They are transported from Trincomalee to Kankesanthurai.

'In addition, the vast majority of troops and police personnel are also escorted at sea by the navy.'

The exact location of the incident had not been given by any of the parties but the paper said that it was clearly in the deep sea, which is worrying. The LTTE might have learnt to carry on such covert operations in the deep sea, generally considered safe for shipping.

The Sri Lankan navy too had recently laid mines to deter LTTE ships. The chief of the Chennai-based Indian Coast Guard had warned Indian fishermen that if they strayed into Sri Lankan waters, they could be hit by sea mines.

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