

US envoy escapes LTTE attack on diplomats

US ambassador to Sri Lanka Robert Blake Tuesday narrowly escaped a Tamil Tiger attack when the military tried to show Western diplomats a part of the island's east captured from the rebels. Indian diplomats were invited to the tour but they politely declined.

Italian ambassador Pio Mariani suffered head injuries when the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) slammed artillery shells into the Batticaloa military airstrip after one of the two helicopters landed and some of the diplomats along with Sri Lankan officials started to walk.

Ambassadors Blake and Juergen Weerth of Germany also reportedly suffered injuries, the former on the shoulder, but there was no official confirmation of this. The Italian envoy was warded in the main hospital at Batticaloa, some 300 km east of Colombo, for around two hours and discharged.

India's envoy to Colombo, Alok Prasad, was also reportedly invited to join the group of diplomats that was to be shown the area of Vaharai, which the military captured from the Tigers in January. But Indian diplomats, who normally do not join group tours of this sort, preferred to opt out.

The LTTE later apologized for the incident, blaming Sri Lankan authorities for having ferried the diplomats to a war zone without informing it in advance.

Only on Friday, Blake, who moved into Sri Lanka in September 2006 after serving as the number two in the US embassy in New Delhi, told IANS in a telephonic interview that his country 'respectfully disagreed' with those in Sri Lanka who thought a military approach would end the separatist conflict.

'We had only the Italian ambassador coming here,' a Batticaloa hospital spokesman told IANS on telephone. 'We have no idea if other ambassadors too were injured. They may have been but they did come to the hospital.'

A spokesman for the US embassy in Colombo told IANS: '(Blake) called the embassy and said he was all right.'

Military officials said four shells hit the area where the first helicopter landed and a second helicopter did not touch down there. A fixed-wing aircraft parked at the nearby military airfield was damaged.

The LTTE admitted firing the artillery but said it had no advance information about the aircraft that it added landed in the Batticaloa military airstrip and inside the military head office premises around 9.30 a.m.

LTTE military spokesman S. Ilanthirayan expressed 'shock and sadness that the government exposed senior diplomats to danger by allowing aircraft carrying them into an area where they have declared military operations without informing LTTE in advance'.

According to a statement by LTTE, he called it 'criminal negligence on the part of the Sri Lankan government. Simple diplomacy could have avoided the unfortunate incident'.

The statement quoted UN official Marian Din Kajdomcaj as saying that the LTTE stopped the

shelling immediately after it was alerted about the occupants of the helicopters, which could then take off safely. 'Kajdomcaj thanked LTTE for the prompt action and acknowledged their failure to warn LTTE about the flight.'

It was the first attack by the LTTE on Western diplomats in Sri Lanka since a Tamil separatist campaign broke out in 1983. A suicide bomber targeted the Pakistani envoy in Colombo in August last year but he survived though some of his bodyguards were killed. That attack was not claimed by anyone.

Other countries whose diplomats were in the Tuesday tour included those of Canada and France, besides the European Union.

Earlier, Human Rights Minister Mahinda Samarasinghe, who was accompanying the diplomats, told AFP that the attack took place shortly after one of two helicopters landed at a public playground.

'The ambassadors are slightly hurt,' Samarasinghe said earlier. 'I was not injured. A shell fell a short distance away from where we were.'

The Italian ambassador was put under intensive care. 'The diplomat has a foreign object embedded inside his head,' hospital director Muruganathan Moorthy said. 'We had a total of 11 people admitted after the attack.'

Four policemen, three Special Task Force commandos, two air force men and a child were among the wounded.

The diplomats were to join discussions with Batticaloa officials about the situation in the area in the wake of the recent military successes against the LTTE, which has suffered a string of reverses since last year.

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