

Sri Lanka Air Force base attacked, five killed

Five Air Force personnel were killed and 18 injured in predawn air and ground attacks by guerrillas of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on Sri Lanka's north central Anuradhapura air base Monday, officials said.

An official statement quoting defence sources said: 'A group of LTTE terrorists infiltrated into the air base around 200 km north of the capital Colombo and launched an attack at around 3 a.m. Monday.'

While the ground attack was on, the a light aircraft of the Tamil Tiger rebels dropped one or two bombs at the airbase around 4 a.m., the statement added, without any details about the casualties.

However, the Chinese news agency Xinhua quoting defence officials said five Air Force personnel including two pilots were killed in the attack.

Two MI-24 helicopters were damaged in the battle.

Two pilots and two gunners were killed when they tried to crash-land an Air Force Bell-212 helicopter at Doramadawala in Mihintale area on their way to reinforce other fighting aircraft.

This is the first major attack launched by the LTTE militants on government targets after the military claimed in Mid-July that the eastern province had been free of rebels.

Rebels used light aircraft to carry two separate attacks earlier this year on an airbase adjoining Sri Lanka's only international airport at Katunayaka, 35 km north of the capital, and thereafter on two oil installations. Three deaths were caused in the air strikes and the oil installations were damaged.

Claiming discrimination at the hands of the Sinhala majority, the LTTE has been fighting the government since the mid-1980s to establish a separate homeland for the minority Tamils in the north and east.

More than 5,000 people have been killed in the new wave of violence since the end of 2005, making the Norwegian brokered ceasefire agreement exist only on paper.

Meanwhile, a statement from the Sri Lanka tourism department clarified that engagements between the terrorists and the military were limited to the country's perimeters and that there was no direct impact on tourists or tourism operations.

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