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ATTEMPT TO KILL SRI LANKA 'S DEFENCE SECRETARY INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM MONITOR---PAPER NO.159

by B. Raman

Lt. Col.(retd) Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the younger brother of the Sri Lankan President Mr. Mahinda Rajapakse, who serves as his Defence Secretary, escaped unhurt on December 1,2006, when a suspected suicide bomber blew himself up in the vicinity of the convoy in which the Defence Secretary was going to attend a meeting convened by the President. Two members of his security group were killed and a passer-by was also killed when his security guards opened fire after the explosion, apparently in an attempt to help his car, which remained unaffected by the explosion, get away from the scene.

2. According to the DPA, a German Press agency, the Police said that the male suicide bomber had fitted the explosives in a three-wheeler taxi and was riding parallel to the convoy of the Defence Secretary. Army outriders had attempted to prevent the bomber's vehicle moving when the explosion was triggered. The suicide bomber's headless body was thrown on to the rear of the vehicle. At least 10 civilian vehicles were also caught in the blast with at least one of them completely burnt out in the fire that erupted after the blast. The Defence Secretary's bulletproof BMW had come to a halt about three metres away from where the suicide bomber triggered the explosion. The vehicle was hit by shrapnel but none penetrated the auto. The explosion occurred at Dharmapala road, about one kilometer away from the President's office cum residence. The President's other official residence and the Presidential Secretariat are located about three kilometers away from the scene of the blast. Seven members of the Defence Secretary's backup security team were injured in the blast.

3. The Associated Press of the US gave the following additional details: Military spokesman Brig. Prasad Samarasinghe said the bomber triggered the explosives as the five-car convoy of vehicles was passing. The military said two soldiers died; nine soldiers and five civilians were hospitalized. The suicide bomber apparently

approached on a motorized rickshaw from the opposite direction and targeted the convoy, said Deputy Inspector General of Police, Jayantha Wickremeratne.

4. The AFP, the French news agency, reported the following additional details :Police said the suicide bomber rammed a three-wheel rickshaw taxi into the convoy of some eight vehicles at the tightly-guarded Dharmapala Mawatha road leading to Temple Trees. The Defence Secretary was inside a bullet-proof vehicle, one of four identical grey limousines in the convoy, police said.

5. The Defence Secretary has been accused by the Sri Lankan Tamils of being the architect of the tough counter-terrorism policy being followed since his brother became the President in November, 2005.

6. The attempt to kill him has the definite signature of the LTTE (the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), which specialises in acts of suicide terrorism. Since the beginning of this year, the LTTE has carried out or attempted to carry out 12 acts of suicide terrorism, including the failed attack on the Defence Secretary. Seven of these involved the Sea Tigers of the LTTE Navy. The remaining five were on land--- four of them in Colombo or its suburbs and the fifth at Digampatana in the Habarana area of the Matale district. Two of these attacks were successful in killing the intended target or targets. The remaining three were only partially successful. In these three incidents, while the LTTE successfully carried out the attacks, the targets escaped.

7. The successful attacks were the following:

- June 26, 2006: A suicide bomber killed the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Sri Lankan Army,, Major General Parami Kulathunge, the third highest appointment in the SLA, and three others at Pannipitiya, a suburb of Colombo. Eight others were injured.
- October 16, 2006: At least 98 sailors of the Sri Lankan Navy were killed and 100 injured as suspected LTTE suicide bombers rammed an explosive-laden vehicle into a naval convoy at Digampatana in the Habarana area of the Matale district.

8. The partially successful attacks were the following:

- April 25, 2006: Army Commander Lt. General Sarath Fonseka was seriously injured and eight others were killed when a female suicide bomber, disguised as a pregnant woman, blew herself up in front of the military hospital inside the Colombo Army headquarters. Twenty-seven persons were injured . The Army chief has since recovered from his injuries and resumed his work.

- August 14, 2006: At least seven persons, including four soldiers of the Sri Lankan Army, were killed and 17 others injured in a suicide attack targeting the then Pakistani High Commissioner, Col. (retd) Bashir Wali Mohammad in Colombo. He was returning home after attending the Pakistan Independence day function at the mission. He escaped unhurt though his vehicle suffered minor damage. He is a former officer of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence and retired as the Director (chief) of Pakistan's Intelligence Bureau. There was an element of doubt whether the attack was carried out by a suicide bomber or through remote control.
- December 1, 2006: The attack on the Defence Secretary.

9. A study of the suicide attacks carried out by the LTTE on land this year indicate the following:

- The LTTE's suicide bombers have been more successful when attacking large groups than when attacking individuals. Suicide attacks on individuals require greater precision in the timing of the detonation. It would seem that the attack on the Pakistani High Commissioner failed to kill the target due to a split second delay in the detonation. The failure in the case of the Defence Secretary was probably due to a split second premature detonation.
- The LTTE's intelligence collection capability in Colombo and elsewhere continues to be very good. It is able to collect fairly precise information about the movements of the security convoys of its targets and the route they would be taking. It would seem the Sri Lankan security agencies have not been strictly following the normal precautions such as not following the same route for movement every time, keeping the route to be taken secret etc. The LTTE is able to get advance information of not only the route, but also the time of movement.
- Access control of the Government's security agencies is weak. The ease with which the woman suicide bomber penetrated the highly guarded Army headquarters in her attempt to kill the Army chief indicated the poor state of access control.
- Like the Maoists in India and Nepal and the ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam), the LTTE continues to depend on conventional explosives and has not been using self-fabricated explosives made out of commonly available materials and chemicals like the jihadi terrorists have been increasingly doing.

10. The LTTE's use of the Internet for operational purposes has till now been not as sophisticated as that of Al Qaeda and other jihadi terrorist organisations. It had been using the Internet mainly for

propaganda and PSYWAR purposes and for motivating its overseas supporters. It now seems to be paying more attention to exploiting the operational potential of the Internet. One noticed in some of the chat groups suspected to be of LTTE sympathisers/supporters visual observations of the scene after the attack on the Defence Secretary being exchanged. Those reporting the visual observations were apparently based in or near the area where the attack was carried out and could watch what was going on. (3-12-06)

(The writer is Additional Secretary (retd), Cabinet Secretariat, Govt. of India, New Delhi, and, presently, Director, Institute For Topical Studies, Chennai. E-mail: itschen36@gmail.com)

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