

Tamil Information Centre

News - Bulletin

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200 Sri Lankan soldiers killed in Train blow-up: Another 40 killed in ambush

Not less than 200 soldiers of the Sri Lankan Army are believed killed when Tamil militants blew up the Colombo-bound Yarl Devi express train at about 8.30 on the night of Saturday 19th January. The incident occurred at Murikandy in the northern Tamil area about 70 km. from Jaffna.

The militants who belong to the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO) led by Sri Sabaratnam, had set up explosives along the rail track blowing up all twelve bogies of the train simultaneously and followed it up with an attack with hand grenades and gun fire. This is the biggest single loss suffered by government forces in their 'War against terrorism'.

According to information received at the Tamil Information Centre, Besant Nagar, Madras, militants had timed the attack for a day on which troop movements take place, The train was almost entirely occupied by army men, after militants had earlier prevented civilian passengers from boarding the train.

A large haul of weapons including AK 47 guns, and weapons with American, Singaporean, Belgian and Chinese markings, were recovered by the militants following the attack.

Meanwhile, two hours later, an army convoy from Elephant Pass on a more northern point, which tried to reach the area of the attack was ambushed on the road between Paranthan and Kilinochchi by militanta belonging to the same group. The convoy which ran into road mines was simultaneously attacked with hand grenades and gun fire and an estimated forty soldiers were killed. This incident occurred at Umayalpuram.

In Colombo, the government, while suppressing information about the second incident has also under-played the first, for fear of backlash and loss of morale in the Sinhala south. It is feared that the explosion was so severe and the damage to the train carriages so devastating that a good percentage of the bodies may not be recovered in an identifiable condition. Nearly 1100 feet of rail track was completely destroyed.

The reported outrage against 150 Tamil girls kept in army custody in three camps Elephant Pass, Vavuniya and Palaly was the immediate provocation for the attack on the soldiers, according to TELO sources.

Wednesday January 23, 1985

6 p.m. Flash!

A Sri Lankan Air Force plane was shot down by Tamil militants at 3.30 p.m. today when it was about to land at Palaly military airport in Jaffna. It is believed that a rocket launcher might have been used to down the plane. No information is known about the passengers but it is believed that VIPs or important government officials might have been in it.

Following this incident, constant gunfire has been heard in areas surrounding the airport - Palaly, Vasavilan, Kadduvan, Kurumbacitty and Tellipallai. The fate of over 500 students and teachers at Vasavilan Maha Vidyalayam, believed to be trapped in the school premises is not known. But tension prevails throughout Jaffna and residents are living within closed doors, fearing massive retaliation by armed forces.

Army authorities later contacted by a Jaffna newspaper denied however that a plane was shot down. They said a helicopter was shot at, and was slightly damaged but landed safely. They also volunteered the information that a private Upali flight was turned back from Palaly Airport by authorities.

A later report said that government had ordered all troops to be confined to barracks following the earlier train-blast incident.