

Tigers attack ship in international waters. (1995, September 10). The Island.

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TIGERS ATTACK SHIP IN INTERNATIONAL WATERS

by Our Defence Correspondent

The Panamanian flagged cargo ship "MV Shun Ting" was sailing along the northeastern coast of Sri Lanka, on the night of Friday, September 1. Bound for Colombo from Calcutta, the Chinese-owned ship, which was registered in Panama due to that country's low taxes on shipping, it was carrying a cargo of rice and other dry rations.

The ship was in international waters, about 25 miles from Mullaitivu. It was keeping well away from the coast where its master knew, the drama of the LTTE's hijacking of the ferry "Iris Moana" was continuing into its fifth day, with the fate of 144 passengers and crew still unknown.

Suddenly, a sailor on board the Shun Ting noticed a boat moving at high speed towards it in the darkness. Within minutes it was close alongside and they saw that it carried a machine-gun mounted in front. The sailors weren't too worried, since they were in international waters, and believed themselves sufficiently far away from the Sri Lankan conflict. Besides, the Shun Ting was a foreign vessel, one of dozens which pass the northeastern coast every day and the LTTE had never attacked a foreign ship.

But suddenly the boat swung its gun towards the cargo ship and opened fire.

As bullets from the five-zero machine gun tore through the hull, the Shun Ting's captain ordered the engines to be stopped.

As the ship slowed and came to a halt the boat stopped firing and moved closer.

Several armed men from the boat then boarded the Shun Ting and searched the vessel. After satisfying themselves that it was in fact a cargo ship, they returned to the boat and raced away into the night towards the shore.

When the Shun Ting docked in Colombo harbour on Saturday, September 2, its captain hastened to make a complaint to the authorities.

Within an hour port officials, along with senior navy officers from the Kochchikade base in the harbour, had come aboard and taken the captain's statement and inspected the bullet

holes on the ship's side.

But shortly afterwards the Defence Ministry ordered that the attack was to be hushed up to prevent further bad publicity to the government, which was already red-faced over the hijacking of the Iris Moana and the sinking of two Dvora gunboats that week.

The local agents for the ship, Sea Consortium (Pvt) Ltd, were told to impress upon the Shun Ting's captain, the urgency of getting his ship unloaded as fast as possible and out of the harbour.

Baffled

The attack baffled the government, but what was most embarrassing was that this had occurred off Mullaitivu, only a few miles from where a strong fleet of gunboats had assembled to keep watch on the Iris Moana.

The possibility of an LTTE attempt to hijack a second ship was not something the Defence Ministry was happy about.

Ministry officials believe the attack was

ing a beeline for the Dvora. When the boat was only about 10 yards from the Dvora, it exploded in a huge ball of fire which lit up the night and was clearly visible on shore.

The navy craft was undamaged, although one sailor had been wounded and the crew knew that they had had the narrowest of escapes. One more second and the Sea Tiger suicide boat would have rammed them and the navy would have lost its sixth vessel in Eelam War III.

The gunboat then fired on the other two boats but they managed to escape in the darkness towards the shore. The next morning soldiers patrolling the beach at Kuchchaveli found a third boat, heavily damaged, with no-one on board. It was packed with rocket-propelled grenades, another favourite Tigers weapon against navy craft at close range.

Radio intercepts later indicated that 12 Sea Tigers including two officers had been killed.

Clearly the LTTE is making a determined effort to disrupt the supply lines to Kank-

built Y-8 transport touched down at Palaly airbase with 60 soldiers on board together with a large amount of supplies from Colombo having left Ratmalana 50 minutes earlier.

But as the plane taxied towards the control tower, seven mortar shells exploded nearby landing among the crowd of soldiers, airmen, sailors and policemen who were waiting to board the plane and go on leave.

A soldier and a policeman were killed and eight soldiers, three sailors, two policemen and three airmen wounded. The pilot quickly taxied the Y-8 to the other side of the airfield, while the army launched a massive hunt for the Tigers believed to have infiltrated the base's defences.

The Tigers had picked their target well. Had the Y-8 been destroyed, the government would have been forced to consider postponing its much-talked about offensive even further, since it is the Air Force's largest transport aircraft.

The runaway was littered with holes but planes are still able to

Veyangoda, carrying hundreds of people returning home from work, when the mine went off at 7.40 p.m. near the Orugodawatte railgate, only seconds after the train had passed. One passenger in the last carriage was slightly wounded, and a small section of track destroyed, with a foot-deep crater being created. This type of attack is impossible for the police to defend against since hundreds of miles of track cannot be patrolled, and only public vigilance can prevent a disaster should another attempt be made.

Arrested

Police scored a major success on Tuesday when five LTTE intelligence men were arrested in Colombo, while on a mission to gather information on ways and means to assassinate President Chandrika Kumaratunga.

The suspects, one of whom had confessed under interrogation, had been picked up at lodging houses in the north of the city. They had not been armed and Crime Detective Bureau officers handling the case believe they were on a reconnaissance mission. Police are searching for four more suspects still at large in Colombo, including one who had received training in Singapore in the art of assassination.

The drama of the Iris Moana continued this week with 121 passengers being taken to Jaffna and being released. They are now free to move about in the Peninsula and are being looked after by the Government Agent until the ICRC arranged for transport to the islands where they live.

The fate of the eight-man crew is uncertain. Four of them are Tamil, while the others are Sinhalese. The Tigers have demanded that the government release two Sea Tiger women captured during an attack on KKS harbour on July 23 in which the "Edithara" was sunk.

However, this demand is most unlikely to be met and the crew may languish in LTTE custody for quite a while.

The LTTE would like to have these two women back since they had been part of the crew of an inshore patrol craft sunk in the KKS attack. The craft had been cap-

tured from the navy at Pooneryn in November of 1993. Since the Tigers are known to possess at least three more such craft, the two women would be invaluable to the LTTE.

But there is even less chance that the Tigers will release the 15 passengers they still hold. They are believed to be cadres of the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) and the Tigers have shown no mercy in dealing with rival groups in the past. It is not even known whether these 15 are still alive, since the LTTE could have executed them.

Executed?

Meanwhile, the LTTE denied a report by international news agencies which was carried by Rupavahini, SLBC and newspapers, that two of the crew, named the captain and first officer had been executed. Another report that three babies had been born on board the hijacked ferry, was also proved false when the 121 passengers were released.

Another, rather comical battle is going on over the Iris Moana, this time a legal one.

T. Talagala, the General Manager of the Ceylon Shipping Corporation which is in charge of bringing ships for the Commissioner General of Essential Services had written to the local agents of the ferry, Neucco Shipping Ltd., saying that the charter had been terminated as of August 31, when the ship was in LTTE custody.

The Managing Director of Neucco Shipping, S. Balamoorthy, has written back saying that the charter cannot be terminated until the ship is delivered safely back to Neucco Shipping.

Both sides are now assembling their lawyers, to fight over the ferry in court while the ship is still in LTTE custody.

The food shortage in the Jaffna peninsula eased considerably this week with two ships, the Mercs Maho and the Kalyani, unloading their cargo at Point Pedro after differences between the government and the ICRC were sorted out. No food had been sent to Jaffna since August 9 and the GA's three month stock had been dwindling fast.

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a case of mistaken identity with the Tigers believing that the Shun Ting was a navy ship. Or perhaps, it was an attempt by the LTTE to show that they could venture out around the coasts at will.

Whatever the reason, as far as the government is concerned the incident is closed.

But less than two days after the attack on the Shun Ting, the Sea Tigers went on the offensive once again off the coast of Kuchchaveli, in the Trincomalee district.

An Israeli-built Dvora fast attack craft, similar to the two sunk off Mullaitivu, was on patrol shortly before midnight on Sunday when it spotted four fast Sea Tiger boats moving in towards it.

The Dvora opened fire and succeeded in sinking the leading boat.

The navy gunboat then turned its attention towards a second boat, which was mak-

esanthurai and Palaly, starting with the blowing up of two gunboats and damaging a third in Trincomalee on April 19.

Less than two months ago, the navy's largest transport ship "Edithara" was sunk in KKS harbour.

But most attacks have focused on the Dvora fast attack craft, which patrol the coast in search of Sea Tiger boats, and are used to escort supply vessels and in shore bombardment.

Interestingly, the Sea Tigers have virtually ignored the far more heavily armed Chinese-built gunboats, which are directly involved in escorting supply convoys from Trincomalee to KKS.

But it isn't just at sea that the LTTE is trying to cripple the build up of war material by the forces for an expected major operation in the Jaffna peninsula.

Fired on
At 9.25 a.m. on Monday, a Chinese-