

Sri Lanka seeks foreign help to find plane debris. (1995, September 15). *The Gazette*.

09/15 0446 Sri Lanka seeks foreign help to find plane debris

By Jawed Naqvi

COLOMBO, Sept 15 (Reuter) - Sri Lanka has asked some unidentified foreign governments to help retrieve the remains of an air force plane that plunged into the sea off Colombo killing all 75 people on board, an air force spokesman said on Friday.

Military sources said the crash in bad weather on Wednesday had caused a temporary setback to the army's ongoing Operation

Handshake-2 aimed at securing a key air base in the rebel held north against guerrilla mortar attacks.

Air Force Commodore Jayalath Weerakkody told reporters that a ban on domestic flights was not linked with the crash, but apparently stemmed from a "realistic" plan by Tamil guerrillas to bomb parliament.

"Our government has approached some foreign governments for help in locating the wreckage of the plane and salvaging it,"

Weerakkody said. He declined to name the foreign governments whose expertise Colombo is seeking.

The sea where the plane disappeared from the radar 10 minutes after taking off from Colombo's domestic Ratmalana airport was estimated to be 1,000 metres (yards) deep, he said.

The air force has grounded its remaining two Antonov-32s.

The air force displayed a clutch of articles from the ill-fated plane to journalists, including some belongings of the passengers, mostly soldiers.

"We are testing them for traces of explosives," Weerakkody said, stressing that there was no evidence so far to indicate sabotage.

But he said police were investigating the background of two policemen who boarded the plane with 75 kg (165 lbs) of cigarette cartons meant for troops battling the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on the northern Jaffna Peninsula.

"The name of one of the policemen indicates he was a Tamil,"

Weerakkody said.

Rescue teams had found part of the remains of one crew member which had been identified by his family, he said.

State-run radio said late on Thursday the army, moving south from Palaly air base on the Jaffna Peninsula, had killed 23 LTTE guerrillas in two days.

The army's drive in the north coincided with the suspension of all domestic civilian flights over fears the LTTE planned to bomb parliament from a hijacked or hired private plane.

The Tigers are known to have acquired microlight aircraft for suicide attacks on key government targets and have built an airstrip in the northern jungle which was bombed by the air force two months ago.

"We know they were trying to buy the microlight aircraft, but we have no information whether they have got them,"

Weerakkody said.

Military sources said the rebels planned to board an aircraft at the Ratmalana domestic airport, about 12 miles (20 km) from parliament.

"I would not rule that out," Weerakkody said. "If you fly two-seater Cessna aircraft, you can squeeze in a hundred pounds of baggage. That's lethal if it is explosive."

The Tigers have been fighting since 1983 for an independent homeland for minority Tamils in the north and east. The government says more than 50,000 people have been killed in the war.