

LTTE cadres blow themselves up after flying trawler with monitors on board. (2003, February 08). *Editorial.*

LTTE cadres blow themselves up after firing trawler with monitors on board

by Namini Wijedasa

Three LTTE cadres, on a fishing trawler, yesterday blew themselves up, after setting their vessel alight while Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) monitors were on board, Jaffna naval sources said. The trawler, which was intercepted by the navy, contained, among other items, an anti-aircraft gun.

The action was declared to be a clear violation of the cease-fire agreement which also placed in grave danger the monitors whom both parties are bound to protect.

The monitors and their translator survived by jumping into the sea and were subsequently fished out by the navy. The incident occurred 4.4 nautical miles south of Delft island. The destroyed trawler contained one 23 mm anti-aircraft gun, three hand grenades, several hundred rounds of ammunition for the anti-aircraft gun as well as bullets for AK47 rifles. The trawler was thought to be an Indian-registered vessel, possibly stolen from Indian fishermen.

"It is a very tragic thing to happen," said Teitur Torkelsson, SLMM spokesman. "There is no use sacrificing lives like this." He said that the monitors and translator were staff of the Jaffna SLMM office.

The navy first intercepted two vessels (a boat towing a trawler) on Thursday afternoon, a military official said. The occupants had refused a bid to investigate the vessels prompting the navy to call for SLMM intervention. One SLMM monitor arrived at the scene and first inspected the boat that was towing the trawler. He declared after his check-over that there were no weapons and recommended the boat's release. This suggestion was carried out by the navy.

When the navy wanted to join the monitor in his search of the bigger vessel, the three LTTE cadres on board had threatened to swallow cyanide.

"Although it is our right to search any vessel in these waters, we did not want to upset the peace process by causing a serious incident," said the navy official. "So, we

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agreed that the SLMM monitor would inspect the trawler by himself."

The monitor declared that the trawler was also clean. The navy, however, wanted a second check as they were not satisfied with the initial opinion. Another monitor arrived on scene towards evening and consultations were held about another inspection of the trawler.

"Late Thursday night, it was decided at the highest levels that the SLMM would inspect the trawler again," Torkelsson said. "Both the LTTE and government accepted. The SLMM intervened because there was a tense situation at hand and the cadres had threatened to swallow cyanide. Under normal circumstances, it is the navy which does these inspections."

The monitors and their translator boarded the vessel around 2 am yesterday for another investigation and found the gun and ammunition. The monitors and navy reported the matter to higher authorities and were waiting for further instructions when the LTTE cadres set the boat on fire.

"The monitors and the translator were on board," the navy official recounted. "They jumped out and we rescued them. The three cadres then blew themselves up." The explosion occurred around shortly after noon yesterday.

SLMM observed that the boat had violated the clause in the cease-fire agreement which prohibits either party from moving munitions, explosives or military equipment into the area controlled by the other party.

There is also an understanding between both parties that the navy would be given prior notice of any sea movement by the LTTE. This agreement was also breached.

Finally, both parties are responsible for the protection and security arrangements of all SLMM members.

The incident occurred a day before the government and LTTE were due to commemorate the first year of their cease-fire agreement. The anniversary of its signing is today. Political sources said that LTTE Chief Negotiator Anton Balasingham had been notified by SLMM chief Trond Furuhoide. Balasingham had reportedly declared that the incident will have no bearing on ongoing peace talks in Berlin.