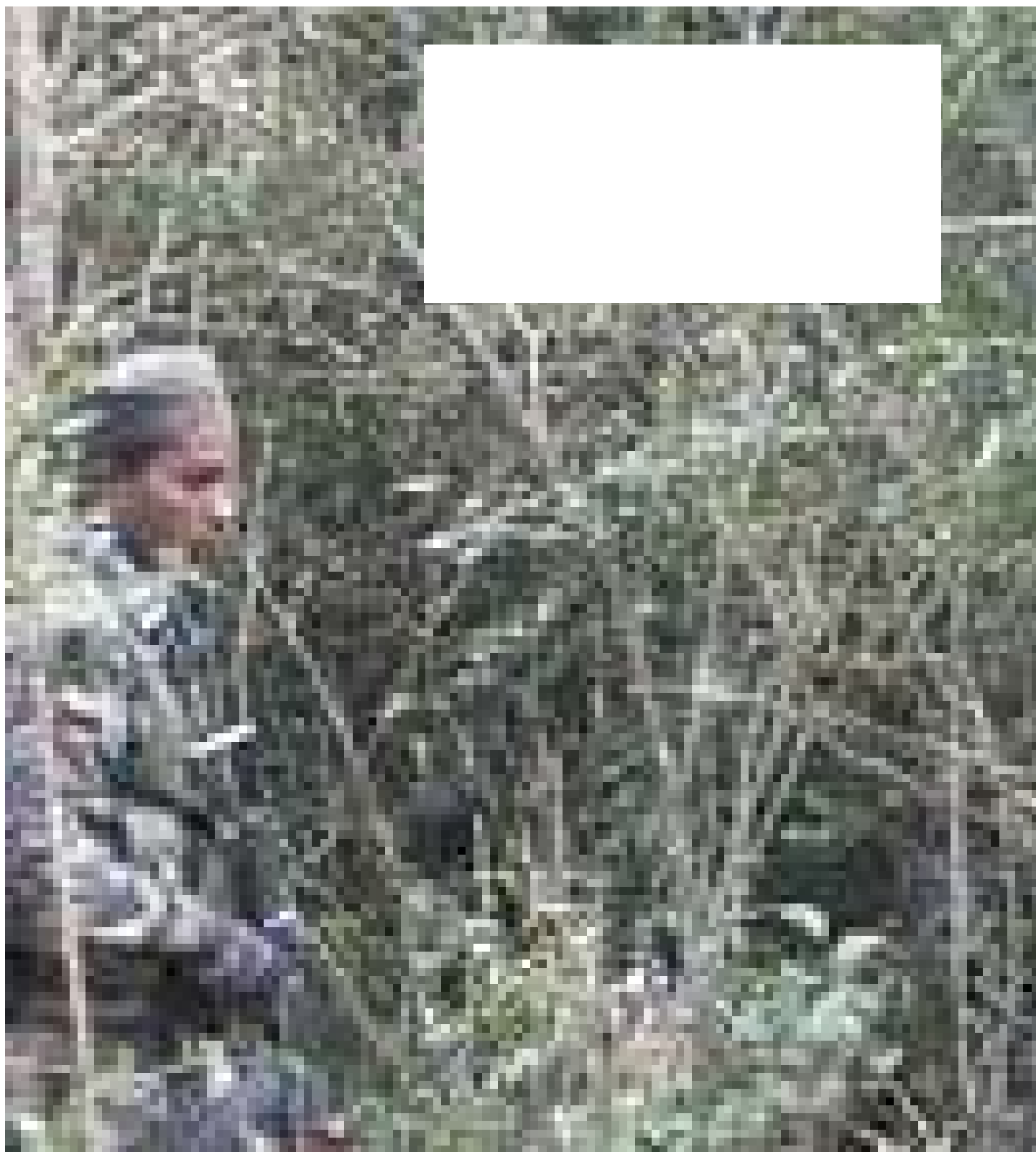


# The Guardian

## Tamil Tigers attack airforce base



The Tamil Tigers (LTTE) today launched a coordinated ground and air attack on an airforce base in northern Sri Lanka, killing five servicemen and wounding 22 others, the military said. The rebel group said the ground assault on the base in the north-central district of Anuradhapura by the Black Tigers was the biggest since the unit of suicide fighters was formed 20 years ago.

Another four soldiers on board a helicopter gunship, sent to search the area, were killed when it crash-landed several kilometres away, the military said.

The Tigers' aircraft escaped but 20 of its fighters were killed during a gun battle at the base, the government said.

"We have found 20 bodies of LTTE cadres inside the base and we are doing a search operation to see if there are any more," the government defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella said. "This will not deviate us from the fight against terrorism."

An airforce spokesman said two MI-24 helicopters and a training aircraft parked at the base had been damaged in the attack.

A search operation was under way around the airforce base, one of Sri Lanka's largest.

The rebel air strike in Anuradhapura comes months after the Tigers' first ever air attacks using light aircraft smuggled into the country in pieces.

Land, air and sea clashes are occurring almost on a daily basis.

The Tigers' air wing bombed oil installations and an airbase adjacent to the island's only international airport earlier this year and the group has warned that more attacks could follow.

"It was a combined operation of our airforce and land troops and the target was the Anuradhapura airbase, which functions as the logistics (base for the north)," the rebel military spokesman Rasiah Ilanthiraiyan said. "We have not ruled out the potential of more similar attacks in the future."

He said 21 Black Tiger suicide fighters had taken part in the ground assault and were still in control of some parts of the base, which the military denied.

"It is the biggest operation of the Black Tigers since 1987," he added. "We damaged eight of their aircraft at the base."

The Tigers emailed photographs of the suicide fighters, dressed in trademark black and grey tiger-stripe fatigues, pictured with the organisation's leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran.

The renewed civil war has become focused in the north after troops drove the Tigers from bastions in the east of the island.

The military has said dozens of Tigers were killed in heavy fighting in the region last week.

An estimated 5,000 people have been killed since early last year, taking the death toll since the conflict erupted in 1983 to around 70,000.

The Tigers want to carve out an independent state in the north and east, but the government has ruled that out and vowed to evict the rebels from all territory they control.

Analysts fear the conflict could rumble on for years and counter-terrorism experts say the only hope is for both sides to reach a long-elusive political settlement.

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