

## Features

### **Human-capital in knowledge-based societies Technology and the LTTE**

*by Kumar David*



It is understandable that the first response of most people to the LTTE's aerial attack on Katunayake has been panic, confusion and fear. This however is not what is really significant about the event; far from it. The imperative question relates to the degree of technological advancement that the LTTE may, or may not, have achieved prior to this demonstration. In a modern knowledge-based world the true measure of progress is the sophistication of human resources capital; technology is not things, not machines, gadgets and electronics, rather technology is the knowledge and ability inside people's heads.

#### **Shock and awe**

It is natural that initially people ask the obvious questions. "This time it was a remote military airbase but what if next time they dropped a large bomb on Borella Junction during rush hour? Imagine the carnage!" some wail. Logically speaking, those who define the LTTE as a purely terrorist outfit are inviting just this type of escalation.

BBC Breaking News showed people on the streets asking: "What's the use of roadblocks every 100 yards, and searching every van and three wheeler, if they are going to come at us from the sky?" Newspaper columnists seem concerned about sensitive targets, bridges, railway stations, military installations and even Temple Trees. But this is all knee-jerk shock and awe response, simple soda bottle talk.

This way of looking at things misleads people because the natural "solution" that they envisage is to go after the LTTE's light aircraft, hangars and runways. If these facilities are tracked down and destroyed, people legitimately imagine, the trouble will be nipped in the bud, rooted out, if you forgive an inelegant mixed metaphor. All will be well thereafter! This completely misses the point; it misses the wood for the trees.

#### **Technological advancement as human-capital**

Technology is something that resides within people's heads; it is to do with acquired human abilities, knowledge. Information Technology, for example, is not something that is contained on microelectronic chips and inside rectangular boxes called computers; it is contained in the heads of people who know how to design and fabricate these chips and

program these computers. If you have the people but not the hardware, they will acquire it from somewhere, or improvise, or put together a rudimentary program that runs even on a discarded old 8-bit Apple. Then they will rapidly sophisticate their crude contraptions because they know how to do so. Know is the all-important word. Knowledge is the supreme form of capital and somewhere I found the quotation: "Learning is the only sustainable competitive advantage". Learning in the environment of today's knowledge explosion requires global access. Obviously, the LTTE's deep links with the Tamil diaspora ensures funding, but it provides something far more important, access to skills and technology.

This incident indicates a quantum leap in the LTTE's technological base. True the LTTE's aviation technology is far behind that of the Sri Lanka Airforce, but that it has taken the first step is quite telling. You see its not just a matter of smuggling in a light aircraft kit or two and assembling them in the jungle. They have to be test flown; they have to take-off and land; be maintained and serviced, the bomb bays loaded and the frame structurally balanced. To fly from some god-forsaken part of the Vanni over Katunayake, drop a payload and get back safely in the dead of night needs some minimal avionics and navigational tools and the ability to use them.

But most important of all it needs the flight crews, the engineering personnel and the ground crews to carry out the operation. More than forty years ago I started off as an engineering student and recently finished off as Dean of Hong Kong's largest and best known engineering school, so I guess I should know a thing or two about technology. Make no mistake about it, if every LTTE aircraft, runway and hanger is destroyed but the skilled personnel remain, then the battle has only just begun.

Furthermore, skills sets are not confined to one dimension; people who can project minimal air power are bound to possess other technical skills. The superiority of the Tamilnet web-site, compared to anything GoSL can put out, illustrates my point. Don't get me wrong, I am no LTTE admirer or Tamil nationalist, in truth I am an opponent of all nationalisms; but I do want people to be free from illusions about the hard facts.

### **The only way out**

The way to remain mired in illusions is to imagine that a military solution is possible. What balderdash! Today one side acquires MBRLs, Kfirs and MIGs and kicks the hell out of the other, the next day the other side acquires the ability to drop ordnance on Katunayake, and god forbid, Borella Junction, if it so chooses. Do we, on both sides of the ethnic divide, have the world's most shortsighted political leaders? For thirty years it has happened, over and over again; each time one side thinks it has the upper hand, promptly the other side ups the ante - Vadamarachchi, Elephant Pass and Vaharai to name a few.

President Rajapakse must silence the war party in his administration, however close to him personally, he must squash the immature warmongers he has sent off as

plenipotentiaries, and he must take charge of the peace process. A political solution lies at hand if only he has the courage to grasp it. The APRC Expert Committee Majority Report is a fitting starting point for negotiations. If once again, Government and LTTE leaders let an opportunity for peace slip by, the imprecations of future generations will be on their heads.