

# Different goals



For decades, Sri Lanka's Air Force was involved in a civil war. But that ended in 2009 and today it has very different objectives, as **Stephan de Bruijn** reports

**T**he Sri Lankan Air Force (SLAF) was, for the best part of 30 years, shaped by the vicious Tamil War that erupted in 1983 and ended in 2009. Over that period, particularly in the 90s, the SLAF armed itself with offensive aircraft from all over the world. The likes of FMA Pucarás, IAI Kfir, MiG-27s, Chengdu F-7GS and Mi-24/35s were pushed into action (see Last days of war, p54-55). In 2004, during the war, Sri Lanka was also hit by a massive tsunami, forcing its airforce to carry out humanitarian aid missions.

When the conflict finally ended and the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) was defeated, the government's military budget

was exhausted and the main priority was to rebuild and stabilize the country. As a result of this the SLAF's capabilities were wound down. It reduced its strength by retiring the non-essential (combat) aircraft types like the MiG-27 and placing others in long-term storage when they were due for overhaul, including the Mi-24/-35 and Kfir.

The air force also needed help with maintenance costs and contracts so started peace time operations and international humanitarian operations to generate revenue. The SLAF initiated deployments as part of humanitarian and UN peacekeeping operations in the Central African Republic,



*New donated King Airs will replace this Beech 200 in its current role*

*The UN-helicopters rotate every now and then for maintenance. This Mi-8 just returned from a peacekeeping mission in Central Africa (MINUSCA) and will be overhauled*







Three An-32s were overhauled in Ukraine and returned to the SLAF in 2021

## United Nations

The focus of the SLAF is also on expanding its work with the UN peacekeeping mission, as the Air Marshal outlined. The Sri Lanka state has earned over US\$120m with these missions since 2014 and wants to increase its contribution to UN-peacekeeping duties.

“We deployed three Mi-17s and 110 military to the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA). Earlier, a United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) was completed and personnel involved in the mission were praised for their support in often complex missions in a hostile environment. Sri Lanka has been recognized internationally as a credible force fighting for world peace. The UN-mission experience gives SLAF personnel experience and credibility, improving post-service employment opportunities.”

However, as Rajapaksa explained: “We need more aircraft and helicopters for a solid continuation of the UN deployments. So the SLAF is trying to get more serviceable aircraft and bring them over to UN.”

In December 2023, a group of Sri Lankan peacekeepers deployed for the Central African Republic once again, the ninth rotation so far in which medical airlift, casualty evacuation (CASEVAC) and regular transport of men and materials missions will be carried out. “The helicopters are armed and can be used for reconnaissance and surveillance over contested areas too,” as the Rajapaksa added. Currently, a future UN peacekeeping mission to Yemen is being evaluated by the Sri Lankan Ministry of Foreign affairs and SLAF Command.

aircraft, like more basic trainers (AVIC PT-6), additional helicopters (Mi-171Sh, Mi-171E and Bell 206) and transport aircraft (Y-12-IVs), with foreign assistance. In late 2017, talks started with Israel Aircraft Industries (IAI) to overhaul and simultaneously upgrade the Kfirs used by the No. 10 Jet Squadron at Katunayake at Colombo-Bandaranaike International Airport. After reaching an agreement for five single and one dual-seater Kfirs, work commenced in 2021, during which the aircraft were fitted with modern avionics and structural modifications. In the meantime, the Kfir pilots stayed current with their colleagues of the No. 5 Jet Squadron, also based at Katunayake with the F-7. The first two should be ready to fly in early 2024, and will participate in the March 2024 national parade. The last five Kfirs are expected to enter service again by late 2024 and serve the SLAF for another 15 years.

In the summer of 2023, Air Marshal Udeni Rajapaksa took command of the SLAF. He said: “After the war, the SLAF had more troops than technicians and pilots. We’re now trying to get back to the unique role of the air force. We will change the composition and restructure of the SLAF but maintain its primary role to protect the airspace over Sri Lanka.”

Rajapaksa explained to *AirForces Monthly* that the SLAF will be reinforced with two Beechcraft products. The United States will donate a brand-new and missionized Textron Aviation 360ER King Air. The US\$3m aircraft is designated for the Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance mission and will be equipped with a belly radome and a lift kit for an electro-optical/infra-red sensor. The 360ER, also equipped with a Raytheon High-resolution Synthetic Aperture Radar (HISAR), is expected to be delivered by early 2024. The SLAF will use it for its medium to long range surveillance.

In addition, a second Beech will be donated



Mali and South Sudan and flew aid missions to the Maldives during drinking water shortages, and Nepal and Pakistan following earthquakes.

### Right-sizing the SLAF

Although the Sri Lanka defence budget reached historical lows, from 2011 onwards, the country’s government and Ministry of Defence managed to purchase essential

**“We will not downsize the air force, but actually right-size it,” Air Marshal Udeni Rajapaksa**



The PT-6 and the Ce150 are essential for the SLAF as they are the primary basic trainers. Only a few are operational





Soon, the K-8 Karakorum will fly again. Several are being overhauled while others await parts



Two additional Y-12s, locally designated as White Whales, will soon be added to the fleet of eight Y-12-1Is





The SLAF developed the Lihiniya unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) with a planned range of up to 150km. Two prototypes are currently flying



by the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF). The RAAF is retiring the Beech 350 King Air from 32 Squadron at East Sale (Victoria) and one of the surplus aircraft will be fully refurbished and delivered to Sri Lanka. This is also expected in early 2024. Both King Airs will be added to the No. 3 Maritime Squadron at Trincomalee-China Bay air base.

The AM continued: "The Beechcraft is easy to integrate in the SLAF as we already fly the Beech 200. By accepting both new aircraft, we [will] save a lot of costs which is in line with right-sizing the SLAF. The current Beech 200 of the No. 3(MR) Squadron will be used for multi-engine training as well as VIP transport."

The No. 3(MR) Squadron also operates a HAL-Do228 on 12-month lease stints from the Indian Navy. A second example will be joining the aircraft in 2024.

Rajapaksa explained that his air force and country are seeking to collaborate with strong allies. "The SLAF will not purchase new aircraft anymore but want a technology transfer to Sri Lanka and to develop this with

the support of an ally. We should [like to] collaborate with them and develop and invent techniques to help us in build our capacity for the future."

He said that they would like to prevent a situation where a selling country, manufacturer or supplier would not support the SLAF with hard- or software. "It is a lesson learned from the past. When such support stops, it will result in even more cost for the SLAF."

He continued: "In this case, the technology will stay inside our country. So currently, the focus is on overhauling the current aircraft. SLAF technicians are working on PT-6, K-8, Y-12 and F-7s, and brings several stored Bell 212/412s back in the air. Barring minor maintenance, the SLAF depends on foreign assistance for overhauls on Mi-17-variants. So they are looking for the right partners – and the right price – to get this job done. And from allies we learn!"

Rajapaksa also explained that bringing back the Mi-35 fleet in the air has less priority as these attack helicopters currently lack

## Unmanned development

Sri Lanka has been concentrating on the research and development of its own Unmanned Aerial System (UAS), the Lihiniya (a local bird) for some 15 years. The current SLAF UAS, the IAI Scout and IAI Searcher Mk-II (assigned to the No. 111 Air Surveillance Squadron, based at Vavuniya) need more capacity for the airforce's required mission.

Rajapaksa explained that the SLAF designed its own unarmed UAS. "The Lihiniya is well equipped for the ISR-mission, one ground control station (GCS) is operational and two prototypes are flying. Their range is currently some 20km, but this could be increased to 150km to fulfil the requested mission."

He continued: "The SLAF is in need of additional investments and technical assistance from abroad to realise the downlink [via a secured satellite] up to its maximal planned range. The Lihiniya will be produced in enough quantities. The UAS (with a wingspan and a length of some 10ft) will support the Sri Lanka armed forces and governmental departments so it can be used for mapping, weather information, and real-time observing of ships, drugs and human smuggling traffic. The type will be offered for sale to the international market from 2024."

a mission for the SLAF within Sri Lanka. The commander of the No. 9 Helicopter Attack Squadron at Hingurakgoda Air Base explained that his squadron was able to bring three Hinds back to life. This trio has a service life up to 2037. In the near past, an international tender was released for overhaul abroad, which appeared too costly. However, as Sri Lanka constantly supports United Nation missions in Africa, the Mi-35s may be refurbished for that purpose.

If good allies can be found for its future plans, and with an increased defence budget, a prosperous future for the SLAF could lie ahead – one that is no longer shaped by war. [afm](#)



There is no priority for Mi-24/35 fleet maintenance as there is no longer an in-country threat



Those were the days...

# Last days of war

**Alan Warnes**, AFM Group Editor at Large, was privileged to visit the Sri Lanka Air Force throughout the 90s and 00s at the height of Sri Lanka's civil war. He was there when, in February 2009, victory was being claimed against the Tamil Tigers and was fortunate enough to fly with most of the squadrons and their aircraft.

*A pair of Chengdu F-7BS acquired from China in 1991, at a time when the Sri Lankan government started to take the Tamil Tiger threat more seriously. They were operated by 5 Jet Squadron at Katunayake and by February 2009 were being used to support F-7 training*



*Left: The mighty MiG-27 played a big role in the bombing campaign after they were acquired in 2000. Ukraine mercenaries were flying the jets for the first few years, but were eventually replaced by SLAF crews. This aircraft is SFS-5301 now. Three aircraft were lost*

*Below: Two of the early Kfir C2s that were delivered in 1996. Both were lost in a tragic flying accident on March 1, 2011 when they collided during a flypast practice for the SLAF's 60th anniversary, with the loss of one of the pilots. The Israeli jets had then been re-serialised SFM 5201 (ex CF-711) and SFM 5202 (ex CF-713), in keeping with the new serialising system that had been applied to all the SLAF aircraft after the war. All photos, author*







*Above: A double-delta winged F-7GS sits on alert at Katunayake with two PL-5E air to air missiles. After the Tigers started flying Zlinns to attack facilities in early 2007, the SLAF decided to buy four F-7GS for air defence*



*Left: This Chengdu FT-7BS was being used in 2009 as a lead in fighter trainer. Newly qualified fast jet pilots switched to the FT-7 for fast jet experience before joining the SLAF's operational fighter force.*



*Bottom left: The SLAF showed they meant business when they started acquiring Mi-24/35s in 1995. They were operated by 9 Sqn from Vavuniya and later Minneriya. The unit lost seven Hinds in the war claiming 22 lives, including the well-liked Wg Cdr Rodrigo*

*Below: The Bell 212 (CH-565 seen here) along with the Bell 412s of 7 Sqn were among the busiest in the SLAF fleet, not only being used for casualty evacuation but as gun ships too. Until the Hinds' arrival the Bell gunships took the brunt of the casualties.*

