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Did Caasl Mislead SLAF? Landing and take off of private aircraft from China Bay Air Force airstrip

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Controversy surrounds how a foreign private aircraft, said to be carrying

'investors' to the country, was granted permission to land and takeoff from China Bay Air Force airstrip early this month. This happened despite the fact that there are no



provisions to grant such approvals because this airport has not been gazetted as an international airport.

Foreign aircraft can be allowed to land and takeoff only using an international airport, but not through a non-gazetted airport according to the Civil Aviation Act. China Bay airstrip has not been gazetted as an international airport.

According to Immigrant and Emigrant Act No: 20 of 1948 as amended, the Minister may, by order publish in the gazette, and declare any place in Sri Lanka to be an approved port of entry or departure. Part VII, Section 34 of this act further states, 'No person to whom this part applies shall leave Sri Lanka from any place other than an approved port of departure'.

- **The controversial private had landed at (BIA)**
- **No objection letter was sent after these institutions granted their respective approvals**
- **SLAF flight operation officers had been instructed to facilitate the landing and departure of the aircraft**
- **China Bay airstrip has not been gazetted as an international airport**
- **No person to whom this part applies shall leave Sri Lanka from any place other than an approved port of departure**
- **It is reported that former Governor Eastern Province Rohitha Bogollagama had requested the Ministry of Defence, to grant permission to facilitate the private jet carrying Hong Kong based investors**

- **The Deputy Director General CAASL had misled the Air Force Commander that the necessary approvals had been granted by the Defence Ministry**
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Hence, following the arrival of a private jet to China Bay Air Force airstrip Trincomalee on January 5, which had taken off to Singapore the following day, it had now come to light how the Civil Aviation Authority of Sri Lanka (CAASL) has misled the Air Force to obtain approval to land this private aircraft. Meanwhile questions have been raised as to why permission was granted by the Ministry of Defence and the CAASL to a request made by the then Governor Eastern Province, though it is a violation of the country's Civil Aviation rules and regulations.

Facilitate landing and departure

The controversial private jet said to be carrying 'investors' -two from Hong Kong and three from Singapore- had landed at the Bandaranaike International Airport (BIA) on January 3, 2019 together with the three crew members, two from United States and one from Hong Kong. It had departed BIA on January 5, and landed at the China Bay airstrip. It had taken off from China Bay to Seletar Airport Singapore the following day.

Meanwhile, CAASL had come under severe criticism for misleading Sri Lanka Air Force to seek facilitation for a smooth and efficient landing and take-off of this particular aircraft claiming that the Ministry of Defence had granted permission to make an international departure from China Bay.

When contacted Rohan Manukulasooriya, Deputy Director General (Aeronautical Services) of the CAASL, he told this newspaper that based on the approvals received from the Ministry of Defence, the CAASL granted its approval.

However although Manukulasooriya's letter to the Air Force Commander dated December 29, 2018 says that Ministry of Defence (MoD) had given its approval for an international departure for the said aircraft, this newspaper is in possession of evidence to show to that the MoD has not given approvals either to land or take off at China Bay, except for a no objection letter that had been given four days after the CAASL's letter to the Commander Air Force.

Be that as it may, it is reported that former Governor Eastern Province Rohitha Bogollagama had requested the Ministry of Defence, to grant permission to facilitate the private jet carrying Hong Kong based investors to land and take off from China Bay claiming that it would directly 'enhance' investments in the country by the high end foreign investors.

By his letter dated December 7, 2018 addressed to Hemasiri Fernando, Secretary Ministry of Defence, Rohitha Bogollagama under the heading 'Quest for Landing and Takeoff flight at Trincomalee domestic airport' has stated further, 'I have extended an official invitation to leading Hong Kong based investors to visit Sri Lanka on January 3, 2019. They have indicated that they will be arriving in their own private aircrafts on January 3, 2019, and will be landing at Katunayake International Airport.

'I have also invited them to fly to Trincomalee on January 5, and seek your approval for the two private aircrafts to land at the Katunayake International Airport on January 3, 2019 and to land at China Bay airstrip on January 5, and to take off from China Bay to Hong Kong on January 6, 2019.

'I would emphasize, if they are being facilitated to fly out of Trincomalee it would greatly enhance the potential of Eastern Province of Sri Lanka for direct connectivity for high end foreign investors.

'I thank you for your approval in this connection. Yours sincerely, Rohitha Bogollagama, Governor, Eastern Province.

According to the documents this newspaper is in possession, upon receiving this letter to the Ministry of Defence, it had been forwarded to the Military Liaison Officer (MLO) for Secretary Ministry of Defence for necessary action.

By letter dated December 27, 2018 (Ref: MOD/MLO/22/2 NI-2 (05), MLO, Major General D.A.R. Ranawaka to Governor Eastern Province has stated that international arrivals and departures can be facilitated only at Katunayake, Mattala and Ratmalana airports and to further communicate with the Civil Aviation Authority in this regard.

The letter further states, 'Reference to your letter dated December 7, 2018. Please be noted that as per the existing infrastructure availability at the airfields in Sri Lanka, international arrivals and departures can be facilitated at Bandaranaike International Airport (BIA) Katunayake, Mahinda Rajapaksa International Airport (MRIA) Mattala and Ratmalana Airports only.

'Intended domestic movement of the two private aircrafts from BIA to domestic airfield at China Bay would have to be conducted in accordance with the procedure established by the Civil Aviation Authority of Sri Lanka.

'It is kindly informed to liaise with Civil Aviation Authority in this regard please'.



Although Ministry of Defence has stated as thus on December 27, Rohan Manukulasooriya Deputy Director General (Aeronautical Services) for Director General Civil Aviation Authority by letter dated December 29, 2018 (Ref: AS/21/12) addressed to the Commander of the Sri Lanka Air Force states that approval from the Ministry of Defence had been granted to make an international departure from China Bay to Seletar Airport, Singapore on completion of its itinerary in Sri Lanka.

“How can the Deputy Director General CAASL, say so when the Ministry of Defence in its letter to Bogollagama on December 27 says that only an international aircraft could land and take off through an international airport. This shows how the CAASL violated their own rules and regulations,” a highly reliable Defence Ministry source told the .

The CAASL letter to the Commander Air Force further states, ‘MoD and DGCA Approval for International Departure from China Bay (VCCT) Airport. This is to inform you that the approvals of the Secretary/ Ministry of Defence and the Director General of Civil Aviation have been granted for the undermentioned flight to make an international departure

from China Bay Airport (VCCT), Trincomalee for Seletar Airport in Singapore (WSSL) on completion of its itinerary in Sri Lanka that includes meetings with H.E. President and Hon. Prime Minister by its occupants being a team of potential investors focusing tourism development in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka.

‘This visit is coordinated by the Office of the Governor Eastern Province under the personal supervision of Hon. Rohitha Bogollagama, who has undertaken to obtain the necessary approvals from the Ministries in-charge of Immigration and Emigration and Sri Lanka Customs and also to provide necessary logistics including expenses to perform the Immigration and Emigration and Customs formalities for this international departure flight at China bay airport through the immigration and customs offices posted at Trincomalee harbour.

‘Details of the flight-

- Type of aircraft- GLF-5 (MTOW-41200kg)
- Call-sign/ Registration of aircraft- VP-CPY
- Name of Operator- Century Ocean Ltd
- International Handling Agent for Billing- HADID International Services, PO Box 54508, Dubai, UAE
- Local handling Agent –CMB Flight Services, 24 2/1 Lake Crescent, Hunupitiya Road, Colombo 2.
- Flight itinerary – January 3- landing at BIA, January 5- departing BIA and landing at VCCT, January 6- departing VCCT and landing at Seletar Airport, Singapore.
- Chief Coordinator/ Eastern Province Governor’s Office – Dakshitha Bogollagama.

‘This office shall be thankful if you could inform the relevant officers of Sri Lanka Air Force (SLAF) responsible for flight operations at China Bay of this arrangement in order to facilitate same smoothly and efficiently’.

Verbal instructions

Questions have been raised as to why the Deputy Director General CAASL in his letter to the Air Force Commander has stated that the Ministry of Defence had granted approval for the said international departure from China Bay. It is learnt that based on the assurance given to the Commander Air Force, the SLAF flight operation officers at China Bay had been instructed to facilitate the landing and departure of the said aircraft.

“If not for the assurance given we wouldn’t have facilitated any foreign aircraft to be landed or taken off from China Bay,” a senior SLAF officer told this newspaper.

However, it was only four days later – on January 2, 2019 that the Defence Ministry wrote to Bogollagama that they have no objection for the said aircraft movement subjected to clearance from other departments.

The Deputy Director General CAASL had misled the Air Force Commander that the necessary approvals had been granted by the Defence Ministry whereas the no objection letter had been sent on January 2, 2019 subject to air defence clearance from Air Force, and clearance from CAASL, Immigration and Emigration and Sri Lanka Customs.

The Defence Ministry letter dated January 2, 2019 (Ref: MOD/MLO/22/2 TI-01 (03) to the Governor Eastern Province further states, ‘Reference to your letter dated December 7, 2018 and MOD/ MLO/22/2 (05) letter dated December 27, 2018.

‘Further to above reference MOD/MLO/22/2 (05), this Ministry has no objections for the said aircraft movement subject to air defence clearance from the Air Force, and clearance from CAASL, Immigration and Emigration and Sri Lanka Customs.

‘Intended domestic movement of the two private aircraft from BIA to domestic airfield at China Bay would be conducted in

accordance with the procedure established by the CAASL. For appropriate action please. Major General D.A.R. Ranawaka, MLO, for Secretary Ministry of Defence’.

When contacted the Chief Coordinator of this visit, Dhakshitha Bogollagama, the son of the then Governor Rohitha Bogollagama, as to why such a request was made to allow the private jet to be landed and take off to Singapore from a domestic airport which is not gazetted as an international airport, Junior Bogollagama said that the passengers being senior investors could not be allowed to travel to Trincomalee by road as it takes six hours from Colombo. “They are senior investors and they did not have enough time to spend for their trip to the Eastern Province by road. According to the Ministry of Defence any airport can facilitate landing or taking off any international aircraft. That was why the necessary approvals were granted,” he added.

When asked as to why the Governor’s office could not hire an Air Force aircraft to take the investors to Trincomalee without violating the CAASL rules, Junior Bogollagama said that when the investors had their own jet to fly in, they would not like to hire another aircraft. “I am not an expert to answer your questions, but know for sure that we did not violate any regulation as the MoD and the CAASL granted their approvals. If these two departments grant their respective permissions, any aircraft, be it international or domestic can be landed and taken off from any airport in Sri Lanka,” Bogollagama said.

Meanwhile, an official from the CAASL on condition of anonymity said that there were times when the government gave approvals to land or takeoff aircraft from non gazetted airports which were of national interest. “During the war, there were instances that approvals had to be granted to land and take off aircraft, but if the CAASL gives approvals for minor matters as this, each and every time when a politician

or any other investor requests the CAASL to grant permission to use such an airstrip to leave the country in a private aircraft, they will have to grant permission. It is up to the newly appointed Minister Arjuna Ranatunge to conduct an inquiry and take stern action against those who have violated the CAASL rules and to find out on whose advice and permissions were granted during the 52-day Maithripala Sirisena – Mahinda Rajapaksa Government,” the sources added.

Meanwhile, Manukulasooriya further said that there are provisions for the Director General CAASL to authorise any aircraft to land or take-off from any airport.

“On the merit of the evaluation, the DG CAASL can give the approval. This request came from the Governor Eastern Province who is the representative of the Head of State in the province. The CAASL cannot grant permission unless the approval comes from the MoD. Since this is a foreign aircraft, the request is referred to the Foreign Ministry. The MoD must have consulted the Foreign Ministry before the permission was granted,” he added.

When asked as to why he wrote to Commander SLAF that the MoD had granted permission, Manukulasooriya said that the said letter was written based on a telephone call the DG CAASL received from the Ministry of Defence.

“The DG told me that he received a call from the MoD and that they would grant permission. Based on what the DG told me I wrote to the Air Force Commander,” Manukulasooriya added.

When asked whether the CAASL accepts permissions given verbally, Manukulasooriya said that since the officials in the two institutions know each other well, there is nothing wrong to accept the instructions given verbally.



was asked to contact Director Media (Military) Brig. Sumith Atapattu.

When contacted Brig. Atapattu, after consulting MLO, Maj. Gen. Ranawaka, the Director Media (Military) told this newspaper that the Ministry of Defence has given the no objection letter after the approvals were given by the Department of Immigration and Emigration and the Civil Aviation Authority.

“The Defence Secretary does not have the mandate to ask the Department of Immigration and Emigration or the CAASL to grant permissions. The no objection letter was sent after these institutions granted their respective approvals,” Brig. Atapattu said.

When informed about the letter sent to Commander Air Force by the CAASL on December 29, 2018 claiming that the MoD has granted permission for an international departure from China Bay, although the no objection letter by the MoD has been sent four days later- January 2, 2019, and what action the MoD can take against the CAASL for the aforesaid misleading letter, Brig. Atapattu said that he is not in a position to make a statement on this sensitive issue but would talk to the Secretary MoD and make a comment. However, till the paper went for publication, there wasn't a response from the MoD.

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