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Air Support for Internal Security Operations What India can Learn from Trinidad and Tobago

*Sanjay Badri-Maharaj**

Air power has long been recognised as a useful asset in internal security operations, running the full gamut from militarised counter-insurgency (CI) and counter-terrorist (CT) operations to the mundane task of crowd control. In the last 15 years, the archipelagic state of Trinidad and Tobago has made extensive use of air assets for internal security operations, with mixed results. In the process, some lessons have been learnt and some serious mistakes made that can be instructive for even large countries such as India.

India's experiences in CI operations in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), the North-East and left-wing extremist (LWE)-affected areas have also involved the use of Indian Army Aviation and Indian Air Force helicopters. However, in contrast to India's military and coast guard, its Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs) and state police forces have made little use of helicopters. Only the Border Security Force (BSF) operates a small fleet of aircraft and helicopters on behalf of the Ministry of Home Affairs, and its Dhruv and Mi-17 helicopters have been deployed in anti-LWE operations, essentially in a support role.

Trinidad, on the other hand, has extensively used helicopters, airships and light aircraft in support of urban law enforcement operations and

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for undertaking deterrent patrols during important conferences. The country, however, faces certain challenges that it has to overcome, such as the poor serviceability of its helicopter fleet as well as a shortage of pilots.

In contrast, India's police forces have made next to no use of aviation assets in support of their regular or even special operations in urban areas. In this sphere, Trinidad offers some lessons which can be gainfully employed to facilitate the employment of such resources by the Indian police forces.

The method by which Trinidad went about developing its law enforcement aerial component in a cost-effective manner, ensuring a reasonable degree of aircraft availability while maintaining a relatively high tempo of operations, is exemplary. However, the actual operational use of the assets has proven to be only partially successful for reasons which will be detailed later in this article.

Trinidad's main security challenge has been from the related activities of narcotics and weapons smuggling and heavily armed criminal gangs, which vie for control of urban centres and which have contributed to the country's high murder rate. In addition, some of these criminal gangs have links to avowed jihadi groups, one of which—the still extant and active *Jamaat-al-Muslimeen*—staged a violent uprising in 1990 that left 24 dead and the capital city of Port of Spain in flames. As criminal gangs became better armed and organised, ground-based operations required air support, leading Trinidad to deploy assets accordingly.

MILITARY AND LAW ENFORCEMENT AVIATION IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

There are two agencies in Trinidad that possess aviation assets that are employed for internal security operations: the Trinidad and Tobago Air Guard (TTAG) of the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force (TTDF); and the Air Division of the National Operations Centre (NOC) which is supported by the National Helicopters Services Limited (NHSL). Unfortunately, there is a considerable degree of overlap in the operations of these agencies which leads to inefficient duplication of effort as well as unhealthy rivalry between them. The NHSL is a state enterprise with a largely civilian role. However, until 2004, it operated helicopters in support of law enforcement efforts.

Available Assets: TTDF

The TTDF has had a military aviation component since 1966 when the Air Wing of the Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard (TTCG) was formed with a single Cessna 337 which served from 1966 to 1972 when it was replaced with a Cessna 402 Utiliner and later augmented with a single Cessna 310 in 1985. The Air Wing of the coast guard stagnated for decades with capabilities being severely limited and aircraft being procured second-hand rather than new. These aircraft have now all been removed from service.

In the 1990s, at a time of enhanced counter-narcotics cooperation between the United States (US) and Trinidad, the former transferred two seized PA-31 Piper Navajos and two Swearingen C-26A Metro aircraft (serials 215 and 216) to the Trinidadian Air Wing's. The Navajos, after becoming unserviceable, were phased out in 2009–10 but the C-26As still form the most potent fixed-wing assets of the force, renamed the Air Guard in 2005. One C-26A (serial 216) has been fitted with maritime surveillance radar and forward-looking infrared (FLIR), while the other C-26A (serial 215) serves in the transport role and is capable of carrying 14 troops as far as Puerto Rico.

The formation of the Rotary Wing Flight in 1973, with the first of three Aerospatiale SA-341 G/H Gazelles (serials 9Y-TFN, 9Y-TFO, 9Y-TFU) introduced a military helicopter presence to Trinidad. However, by 1976, these were transferred to the Air Division of the Ministry of National Security, which was turned into the quasi-commercial NHSL in 1990. With two of the three Gazelles being lost in accidents, the type was not popular in Trinidadian service.

The TTAG received its rotary-wing assets in the form of four AW-139 (9Y-AG311, 9Y-AG312, 9Y-AG313 and 9Y-AG314) helicopters which were delivered between 2011 and 2012. With a cost of USD 348 million the four helicopters were plagued by a series of problems, including structural cracks in their tail booms, and required very delicate handling in air-conditioned hangars, thus placing a heavy strain on the TTAG's limited infrastructure. Exacerbating the problem was the fact that the TTAG had no trained helicopter pilots and was forced to employ foreign civilian pilots on contract, and under some very generous terms and conditions. To date, the TTAG has not built up an independent cadre of local military pilots and remains heavily dependent on foreign assistance. The net result is that the helicopters remain severely restricted operationally, even five years after induction. In 2017, a decision was

made to cancel an annual maintenance contract worth USD 30 million with a consortium involving Agusta Westland, Bristow Caribbean, FB Heliservices of the UK and Helidex of the USA which had been managing the AW139 programme in Trinidad. This has now raised the spectre of the entire fleet being grounded and possibly sold.

The TTDF fixed-wing assets, while generally used for maritime surveillance, have also been used for terrestrial reconnaissance and support of law enforcement agencies, particularly during the time when Cessna sub-types predominated. This was particularly true in the years 1970–72 when Trinidad faced the dual challenge of the so-called ‘Black Power’ movement and a violent offshoot there from which styled itself as the National Union of Freedom Fighters (NUFF). During this time, the TTCG Air Wing used its Cessna 337, and later its Cessna 402, for conducting over flights of the islands and liaised with law enforcement agencies. Presently, one of the two C-26 aircraft is equipped with a limited communications intercept suite and has been deployed in support of law enforcement agencies.

NOC Air Division

The NOC Air Division has its genesis in a strange multi-agency entity termed the Special Anti-Crime Unit of Trinidad and Tobago (SAUTT), which was created with personnel seconded from TTDF and the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service (TTPS) as well as diverse agencies such as customs and excise and immigration services. Its air division pioneered the development of air operations in support of law enforcement and when it was at its peak, operated four helicopters—one S-76A+, one AS.355 and two BO-105 CBS-4—and a Westinghouse Skyship 600 airship. The latter was the source of much amusement due to its low operating altitude and massive size. Its efficacy was always in doubt and it was eventually sold.

It is interesting to note that all the helicopters were procured second-hand and had been manufactured between 1982 and 1986. Maintenance of these assets was undertaken by NHSL, which was the legal owner of the aircraft. Given NHSL’s long experience with the S-76 and BO-105, being operated in support of Trinidad’s offshore oil and gas facilities, these two types of aircraft were the workhorses of the air division, though the smaller AS.355 proved to be very useful in urban environments. The BO-105s and AS.355 were equipped with Nightsun searchlights and FLIR turrets for surveillance operations, while the S.76A+ was used in

support of SAUTT's commando unit, the Direct Action Team (DAT). The SAUTT operated from 2004 to 2010 and was a high-profile unit that achieved some tangible successes, particularly against kidnapping for ransom, but was generally regarded as an expensive political experiment.

Following a change of government in 2010, SAUTT came under intense scrutiny for its high operating cost, dubious efficacy and questionable legal status. A combination of legal and political factors led to the agency being disbanded. In its stead, a new coordinating agency—the NOC—came into being. The SAUTT's air division was left in limbo and was briefly allocated to the newly created TTPS Air Support Unit before being incorporated into the NOC, although the Air Support Unit continued to function as a liaison unit to direct the NOC Air Division in support of TTPS operations.

In 2016, the NOC Air Division was placed under the control of Trinidad's main intelligence agency – the SSA (Strategic Services Agency) which also assumed control of all other assets of the Air Division's parent agency but between 2011 and 2015, the NOC and its Air Division were favoured institutions although they too lacked supporting legislation. The Air Division used assets inherited from the defunct SAUTT, being the only component of that entity to survive somewhat unscathed during the disbandment process of the SAUTT.

Controversy has plagued efforts at fleet augmentation and replacement in the NOC Air Division. In 2012, the NOC decided to lease a second-hand Eurocopter AS.355F2 at a cost that exceeded the purchase value of a similar, used helicopter. This was followed in 2015 with a contract for the purchase of four Bell 429 helicopters and one Bell 412EPI helicopter. This made no sense from a logistical standpoint. Neither the TTAG nor the NHSL operate a single Bell helicopter. This would impose an unnecessary burden on the already overstretched training system that is unable to meet the current requirements. Furthermore, given the fact that NHSL will have to undertake the maintenance of the aircraft, its lack of familiarity with the type will prove to be a challenge.

It is important to mention here the brief experiment of using a light sport aircraft (LSA) in support of the TTPS. For a three-month period, the TTPS, through its Air Support Unit, deployed a leased Zenith CH 750 Air Scout. Though the experiment proved successful, the lease contract proved to be controversial, costing more than the purchase of the aircraft, leading to the project being discontinued. Yet, the potential of the LSA was undeniable with the Zenith CH 750 being developed into

the 'Guardian' with FLIR and searchlight turrets, having an operating cost purportedly much lower than that of a helicopter.

EXPERIENCE OF LAW ENFORCEMENT AIR SUPPORT
OPERATIONS IN TRINIDAD

Whether consciously or not, SAUTT's air division borrowed some of its functioning concepts from the US where more than 300 law enforcement air support units are operational. When the NOC Air Division replaced SAUTT, it continued in this vein and its operations could be divided into: (1) Air Support to Regular Operations (ASTRO); and (2) Special Operations Support (SOpS).

The SAUTT honed its skills in SOpS and its helicopters, in conjunction with TTDF special forces and SAUTT's own DAT unit, provided security at several high-profile events, such as the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting and the Summit of the Americas in 2009. A nucleus of airborne snipers was created to conduct CT operations and these were extensively deployed to serve as a deterrent to disruptive elements. This nominally continued under the NOC Air Division but there was a significant reduction in priority given to SOpS.

At the time of its disbandment, SAUTT's air division had logged no fewer than 14,400 accident-free hours. While its elite DAT team was seldom employed in aggressive anti-crime operations, it regularly displayed its potential for rapid insertion of special operations teams in a series of exercises. More important, however, was its involvement in supporting law enforcement efforts through a highly effective liaison with SAUTT's own ground operatives and the TTPS.

Despite the lack of an integrated national security communications network—something that is gradually being established—care was taken to equip all TTPS ground units with Motorola communications sets with direct access to SAUTT aviation assets. This enabled police units in pursuit of suspects, in both urban and rural areas where vehicular pursuit was less than effective, to call in air support to detect and on occasion insert teams to apprehend or otherwise neutralise criminals. The effect of the heliborne Nightsun systems was to become a regular sight over Trinidadian cities. This air-ground liaison was deployed extensively to deal with a spate of kidnappings for ransom that plagued Trinidad between 2002 and 2009. While the direct impact of air operations is difficult to ascertain, there is little doubt that by 2010, kidnappings for ransom had been largely eliminated.

The elite status of the unit was lost when SAUTT was disbanded, but ASTRO continued and the TTPS Air Support Unit continued to improve liaison between the NOC Air Division and ground-based assets. The NOC Air Division's helicopters continued to be a regular sight—day and night—over the skies of Port of Spain, and their efforts were instrumental in the apprehension of a large number of gang members (that the prosecution cases against them collapsed had nothing to do with the NOC) and the discovery of several arms caches. The FLIR systems on the helicopter proved particularly effective for surveillance, while the tactical use of the Nightsun systems was refined and proved to be very effective in blinding suspects. During ASTRO, many of the helicopters came under small-arms fire from weapons ranging from pistols to assault rifles, but it is unclear if any were damaged.

The refinement of liaison between the TTPS and the NOC Air Division enabled the air division to scramble rapidly to respond to calls for assistance. Even when some aircraft were non-operational for routine maintenance, serviceable assets maintained an enviable response time to air support requests. This was facilitated in part by stationing TTPS officers at the NOC Air Division's main base and, wherever possible, attaching a TTPS officer to accompany helicopter flights.

The TTPS experience with its LSA was too short for definitive conclusions to be drawn. However, the operating cost of the LSA was much lower than that of the helicopters. While the LSA could not hover, it could loiter relatively silently over a target area, thus facilitating effective surveillance with onboard FLIR and cameras. The fiscal controversy surrounding the LSA was very unfortunate as the experience could have dramatically altered internal security aviation development in Trinidad with the LSA platform becoming more widely used.

The TTAG fixed-wing assets, as has been mentioned earlier, are deployed as needed. However, their four AW-139 helicopters are constrained from participating fully in internal security operations as their pilots-in-chief (PICs) are civilian contractors whose terms of engagement preclude them from participating in any such operation. To date, the TTAG has only two partially qualified military PICs and as such, participation in support of the TTDF and TTPS is limited to search and rescue operations and fire-fighting.

Persistent Problems

Besides the limitations of the TTAG fleet, air support operations in

Trinidad face two persistent problems: (1) maintenance of the assets; and (2) availability of pilots.

The SAUTT's air division sought to get around the first problem by having its aircraft owned by NHSL and entering into a maintenance agreement with the said company. This approach was followed by the NOC Air Division, but the situation was complicated by the NOC deciding to lease the AS.355F2 and purchase helicopters from Bell. The NHSL was not a party to these contracts and this means that maintenance and serviceability will be an issue.

When SAUTT was created, pilots from NHSL were used on attachment to SAUTT. This continued under the NOC Air Division. Always few in number and hard pressed to meet requirements, the pilots were neither members of SAUTT nor of the TTDF or TTPS. This meant that they were unable to carry firearms for self-defence and tensions between uniformed personnel and the civilian pilots were always evident. Moreover, being civilians, they were subject to no disciplinary standards outside of the employee guidelines of NHSL, which led to a worrisome level of disrespect and laxity. These problems worsened significantly when SAUTT was disbanded as the NOC leadership was even less effective than SAUTT in enforcing discipline.

The factor which had the greatest deleterious impact on the efficacy of the NOC Air Division was political interference and a desire to use the helicopters for VIP transport. Between 2010 and 2015, outside of ASTRO, VIP transport occupied the vast majority of NOC Air Division flight time with thousands of hours being logged flying trips normally made by road. On at least one occasion, a surveillance helicopter was diverted to carry VIPs to inspect a housing complex that was a 20-minute drive away. The helicopters became a status symbol, with the 'personal' pilot of the then Prime Minister acquiring influence far beyond his nominal position in the organisation. Politicians from the then government saw the helicopter as a high-tech taxi and the then Prime Minister was a notorious 'frequent flyer'. This discredited the NOC Air Division in the eyes of the public and diverted assets away from operational tasks. The predominance of VIP flights in the flying hours logged by the NOC Air Division's assets is illustrated by the fact that the halting of such flights post-September 2015 has cut the flight hours for pilots from over 200 per pilot to under 100 per pilot.

A much greater problem has now emerged, following the 2015 change of government. Control of the NOC Air Division has now been

effectively vested in seconded army officers with no experience of air operations or even air support liaison. This has had an adverse impact on air support response times and, in one kidnapping case (as yet unsolved), there was a failure to scramble air assets to assist in search operations as no authorisation for the launch of a helicopter was forthcoming. The NOC Air Division pilots and TTPS liaison personnel have complained about the introduction of military personnel without prior instruction or knowledge of air operations, but to date their complaints have not been addressed.

Some more recent problems have descended into the realms of the farcical. In an attempt to develop a national security secure radio network, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago selected Harris Corporation as the provider for all secure communications systems for all elements of the national security apparatus. Unfortunately, in a decision that had serious consequences for mission effectiveness, the Motorola units that enabled communication between the NOC Air Division and the TTPS were either removed or deactivated. This has meant a complete loss of real-time communication between air assets and TTPS ground units. A largely ineffective ad hoc system is now in effect whereby a TTPS officer aboard the helicopter attempts to facilitate communication via a hand-held line-of-sight device with the attendant deficiencies inherent in such an arrangement.

Nonetheless, Trinidad and Tobago has learnt the value of air support for law enforcement operations. Once the new Harris network is operational, the NOC Air Division and the TTAG will have real-time communication with all national security ground and maritime assets with a quantum leap in efficacy in the offing.

APPLICABILITY IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

Trinidad's experience of using air support in internal security operations has a number of lessons which can be extrapolated to Indian law enforcement agencies.

1. Air support has a disproportionately positive effect in the coordination of ground operations. Good coordination, in turn, enhances the efficacy of security operations manifold.
2. As surveillance assets, airborne platforms offer real-time intelligence to security forces, thereby helping to prevent an incident or controlling one if it occurs.

3. At night, ASTRO can act as both a tool for apprehending or neutralising miscreants as well as a deterrent to such activities.
4. Helicopter SOPs can be an effective tool in CI/CT operations in urban areas using snipers trained to fire from airborne platforms.
5. In low-threat, non-hostile environments, the age of the helicopter matters little. Trinidad makes use of 30-year-old helicopters to the present day. In the Indian context, it is pertinent to ask whether a few Chetak or Cheetah helicopters would not be useful assets for metropolitan police forces.
6. A large number of helicopters are not needed to maintain effective surveillance. Three helicopters were deemed sufficient for the 5,131 square kilometres of Trinidad, and such a number would certainly suffice for cities such as Delhi and Mumbai.
7. India should not shy away from experimenting with LSA for internal security air support. Trinidad's limited experience was very positive with LSA, offering a cost-effective option for providing air support.

In addition, should India choose to begin to make more use of helicopters for urban internal security operations, the following two pitfalls should be avoided:

1. Instead of trying to recruit pilots and maintaining the assets themselves, police agencies should consider letting a civilian helicopter company own and operate the assets, providing both support and pilots. In turn, those pilots can be recruited into police auxiliary units such as the Home Guards (at appropriate rank) so that they could be armed for self-defence. The BSF has followed this approach by partnering with Pawan Hans for maintenance of its six surviving Dhruv helicopters, but has not done so for pilots, leading to chronic shortages of flight personnel. This can be avoided if police forces allow the civilian company to own and operate the assets.
2. Helicopters assigned to internal security tasks must not be commandeered for VIP use. This has been the fate of many helicopters procured by Indian state governments ostensibly for internal security tasks. Therefore, it may be prudent to consider helicopters such as the Chetak and Cheetah, which have few frills, making them not so attractive for VIP transport.

SUMMING UP

Trinidad's experience of using air support for internal security operations offers an interesting study on how a country with relatively limited resources has developed and implemented a reasonably effective ASTRO and SOpS system. Pioneered and developed by SAUTT and continued by the NOC Air Division, non-military aviation took the lead in this regard, while the TTAG continues to lag in its ability to deliver to either the TTDF or the TTPS the required degree of support. Through a sensible partnership with NHSL, the SAUTT/NOC Air Division helicopters have maintained a high degree of serviceability. However, despite significant achievements, Trinidad continues to face challenges as new types of helicopters, unfamiliar to NHSL, will soon be inducted. Disciplinary issues remain pervasive and the misuse of helicopters by VIPs has created some degree of embarrassment.

Yet, in the midst of all its challenges, Trinidad offers an example to India of how to use limited number of aviation assets in support of urban internal security operations. This is an area that India has neglected to a great extent. As has been discussed, cost-effective solutions have been employed by Trinidad to some effect, and this is something that India should consider emulating.

