



**IN SANDY PLACES ...**

**T**HE extra £2bn promised to special forces in the Strategic Defence Spending Review (SDSR) can't hide the fact that, now we are "at war", the SAS and its partners in specialist military units are hugely overstretched.

The RAF, celebrated in MoD briefings for its "highly accurate strikes", certainly has accurate weapons. But less widely reported is that UK airstrikes rely heavily on UK special forces, who are already "on the ground" in Iraq and now Syria, identifying targets and trying to ensure "collateral damage" is avoided.

Before UK air strikes in Syria started, it was reported that some 45 SAS troopers and their support were on the ground in Iraq, pointing out targets for drone and aircraft attack. They were doubtless doing other things too.

The Commons approval for RAF missions in Syria gives a green light for UK special forces to move into Syrian areas of operation, under the cover of providing target information. In fact they have already been attacking IS targets in Syria for some time - usually from the Iraqi side of the border, but killing terrorists in Syria all the same. An IS convoy in Syria was destroyed by the SAS on 15 October in this manner. Operation Shader, in which UK special forces have been fighting inside Syria under US command, has been going for more than a year.

All this activity explains why the SAS bases at Hereford and elsewhere are so empty. Their troops are already heavily deployed; now their commitments in sandy places have just increased again.

The £2bn offered in the SDSR will be spent on kit, not people. There is no plan to recruit any more of "them", as special forces are known, so the numbers in service will have to suffice. As a result, operational tours have never been longer and the chances of seeing family are limited. The psychological effects of special operations are an issue in the US. Whether British troopers' extended tours will make the problem worse has yet to be studied.

*'Squarebasher'*

**NUMBER CRUNCHING**

**17 seconds** Time Turkey says Russian warplane spent in its airspace before it was shot down

**17 minutes** Time Médecins Sans Frontières says US warplane spent continuing to fire on its hospital in Kunduz after it warned commanders what was happening



ROBERT THOMPSON  
"Ok children, which party won the largest share of the vote in the regional elections?"

**EU-phemisms**

*"There is disagreement in Europe on the need for reform"*



People for, politicians against

**PATENT-LY ABSURD**

**P**ATENT officers took to the streets of Europe again last week with protests in Munich and The Hague at the treatment of the elected staff union representatives who have been suspended by bosses.

Earlier this year a Dutch court ruled that the European Patent Office (EPO) was violating the fundamental rights of its own staff, but as a supra-national organisation (run by the

European Patent Organisation, a separate treaty organisation from the EU) the EPO claims immunity from national employment law.

Meanwhile, the EPO has exercised its bullying tactics on the UK-based blogger who uncovered the email detailing how the organisation planned to fast-track a backlog of patent applications by a small group of very large (and mainly non-European) companies, including Microsoft (see Eye 1404).

Dr Roy Schestowitz, a software engineer who writes the Techrights blog, said the EPO's lawyers contacted him just before midnight on a Friday evening, threatening to issue legal proceedings unless he removed the post, apologised and agreed "to pay our clients damages (in a sum to be agreed)". They set a deadline of noon on the Monday for him to comply, leaving almost no time to find a lawyer but a whole weekend to worry.

Dr Schestowitz is now being represented by David Allen Green of Preiskel & Co and has not apologised or paid out. He has taken down the specific post that caused the complaint, but he has posted lots more criticism of the EPO since, as have newspapers in several European countries.

While Dr Schestowitz's blog was stridently critical of EPO, the patent office doesn't actually deny that there's a fast-track project allowing big firms to queue-jump. It insists this is the only way to avoid even worse delays for smaller players in the market, since Microsoft et al could take action to force the EPO to prioritise even more of the hundreds of applications they have queued up.

**Letter from Colombo**

from Our Own Correspondent



**O**PTIMISM abounded in Sri Lanka following the surprise results of a presidential election at the start of the year. After our long civil war, and a decade of government by the self-aggrandising Rajapaksa family, opposition candidate Maithripala Sirisena swept to power at the head of a coalition of our two main parties, with promises of freedom and prosperity for all and an end to corruption and nepotism.

Remember, however, that our new broom president was a minister under Rajapaksa; and he was only selected as candidate because veteran opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe didn't have the stomach for a campaign he knew he would lose. Instead, the latter struck a deal, backed by former president Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, for support in return for the promise of the premiership. Then there was help from abroad to facilitate this curious in-house deal, with foreign judges now set to investigate alleged war crimes. So, along with the promise of change comes a certain, ahem, continuity.

What better candidate to chair Sri Lanka Telecom than our new leader's brother, for example? The president's charming daughter, meanwhile, has been using public resources for her personal campaigns, while Sirisena's deeply unqualified, loutish son even accompanied Daddy to New York in September, sitting in on sessions of the UN general assembly.

This commitment to the sacred bond of family is shared by many in our new "anti-nepotism" administration. The United National Party, one of the two opposition platforms to back Sirisena, is more commonly known as the Uncle-Nephew Party. When Arjuna Ranatunga, the minister for ports, shipping and aviation, wanted a ports authority chief, he looked no further than to his own brother. And only opponents of democracy could want to probe a

dodgy bond deal promoted by the new Central Bank governor from which, coincidentally, his son-in-law profited.

Happily we were spared the findings of a parliamentary inquiry into the affair, its chairman threatened with prosecution and the press gagged. Indeed, prime minister Wickremesinghe, who helped pick the Central Bank governor, has a habit of abusing journalists who dare criticise him, while the president prefers to threaten to sue. Sirisena has reintroduced the Press Council, which will allow his appointees to jail journalists and publishers; but he has been rather more lax about a campaign pledge to adopt a Right to Information Bill by 20 February. We are still waiting and there are indications there will be severe limitations on individuals seeking information for the public good.

The Rajapaksa years were notorious for fuelling a gravy train for politicians, many of whom received jobs in an ever-expanding cabinet in return for supporting the former president's appetite for new powers. It seems that even in the brave new world of our new democracy, a promise to have no more than 25 ministers was too difficult to implement: 40 percent of MPs have ministerial positions, while the postal service is now under the auspices of, er, the Ministry of Muslim Religious Affairs. While Sirisena did manage to use his authority as leader of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party to prevent some of his party's crooks from getting back into parliament, at least 30 others, among them murderers and drug barons, did get in. It's clean government, redefined.

Everyone knows our real problem is the lack of constraints on an over-powerful executive presidency. This was another Sirisena campaign pledge that's still in the pending file. Though Sirisena always looked such a nice, humble chap - for a politician, anyway - in power it seems his priority is to deal with his opponents and consolidate his own authority. As we are beginning to realise, it's the same trough and, in among the new faces, many of the same old snouts.