

Top-level talks continue on US-led military intervention in Sri Lanka

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Further evidence has emerged confirming that top-level discussions are underway involving Washington, Colombo and New Delhi over an American-led military intervention in northern Sri Lanka on the pretext of evacuating civilians trapped by the island's civil war.

Speaking to a group of South Asian journalists last weekend, US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher was asked about press reports in Colombo revealing plans for a marine expeditionary brigade attached to Pacific Command (PACOM) to be sent to Sri Lanka.

While deliberately vague on detail, Boucher did confirm that talks were taking place. "We had some people there to look at the situation to identify what the possibilities might be. We could do whatever we can to help these people," he said.

The Washington correspondent of the Calcutta-based Telegraph, K.P. Nayar, provided the only detailed report. No account has appeared in the US media, even though, as Nayar wrote: "If the invasion comes about, it will be the first time that the Obama administration will flex its muscle overseas in a new show of American power."

According to the Telegraph, a PACOM team visited Colombo a fortnight ago for discussions with the Sri Lankan army on the proposal. James Moore, deputy chief of mission at the US embassy in Colombo, was dispatched to the northern Jaffna peninsula to make an independent assessment. "Moore's report is said to have persuaded Hillary Clinton's state department to line up behind the idea of a US-led evacuation of Tamils," the article stated.

UN and international relief agencies estimate that up to 200,000 people are caught in a shrinking pocket of LTTE-held territory without adequate food, shelter and medical care and subject to indiscriminate bombardment.

Both the Sri Lankan government and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are using the trapped Tamil civilians as political pawns. The army is seeking to drive out civilians and place them in huge detention camps so as to clear the way for an all-out final offensive. The LTTE has refused to allow civilians to leave without a ceasefire and talks—a proposal the government has flatly rejected.

If US Marines are sent into northern Sri Lanka, clashes could erupt with LTTE fighters. The expeditionary brigade would have US Navy and Air Force support. France has also reportedly indicated its willingness to be involved in the military operation.

While the US intervention is being dressed up as an evacuation plan, it is not motivated by concern for Tamil civilians. Since Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse broke the 2002 ceasefire and launched the first offensives in July 2006, Washington has provided diplomatic and military support for Colombo's criminal war. Thousands of civilians have been killed in fighting over the past two and a half years, with nothing more than an occasional murmur of protest from the US and its allies over the worst human rights abuses.

The Obama administration's interest in Sri Lanka is driven by concerns over the political ramifications of the LTTE's military collapse. Far from resolving the decades of official anti-Tamil discrimination that produced the 25-year war, the army's advances against the LTTE have heightened communal tensions in Sri Lanka and neighbouring India. News of a Sri Lankan army bloodbath would have potentially explosive consequences.

In comments last Friday in Colombo, US ambassador Robert Blake reiterated Washington's call for "a political solution to the conflict where the aspirations of all communities are safeguarded, promoted and preserved." However, having created a state based on Sinhala supremacism, successive Sri Lankan governments have proven completely incapable of making any, even limited, concessions to the Tamil minority.

Establishing a US military presence on the island would certainly give Washington greater leverage to ensure that its interests are protected in the event that the LTTE is destroyed as a regular military force. In the short-term, the US is seeking to prevent any further destabilisation in a region that is already political tinderbox. In the longer-term, Washington is seeking to augment its position in Sri Lanka, which is strategically adjacent to South Asia and the Middle East and astride key naval routes to North East Asia.

A key element in any US-led intervention in Sri Lanka is the attitude of India, which regards the island as part of its regional sphere of influence. New Delhi has been engaged in a delicate balancing act over the past three years. The Indian government has backed Rajapakse's war, politically and militarily, in large part to curb the growing influence of rivals Pakistan and China which have supplied the Sri Lankan army. At the same time, it has had to tread warily, as the war in Sri Lanka has provoked anger among Tamils in southern India.

Over the past decade, Washington and New Delhi have forged a closer strategic partnership based in particular on a shared concern about the rising influence of China. The interests of the two countries, however, are far from completely coinciding. A unilateral US intervention in northern Sri Lanka would raise fears in the political establishment in New Delhi that the US was undercutting Indian influence.

India has already offered its own assistance in evacuating war refugees. Indian medical teams arrived in Sri Lanka yesterday. At the same time, New Delhi is reluctant to become involved in a full-scale military intervention after its "peace-keeping" operation to northern Sri Lanka in the late 1980s ended in disaster.

According to the Telegraph, the Obama administration intends to sound out New Delhi on the military intervention during discussions in Washington this week with Indian Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon. The article also pointed to what it described as "serious differences in the Indian government on how to deal with the mounting crisis in its southern backyard."

National Security Adviser M.K. Narayanan is reportedly opposed to any support for military

action. "Narayanan's main concern is possible fallout on the Lok Sabha [lower house] elections as the result of an evacuation without the explicit approval of the LTTE and any consequent spilling of Tamil blood," the newspaper stated.

Indian parliamentary elections are due to take place between April 16 and May 13. The Congress-led government rests on a patchwork alliance, that includes Tamil parties. Facing protests over the Sri Lankan war, the government's allies in the southern state of Tamil Nadu threatened at one point to pull out of parliament if steps were not taken to halt the fighting.

At the same time, the Telegraph reported that External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee was "aware that if a US-led rescue of Tamil civilians takes place without any role for India beyond that of spectator, New Delhi will suffer grave loss to its reputation as a regional power and an emerging global power."

Whatever the outcome of talks in Washington with India's junior foreign affairs minister Menon, it is already clear that any US-led intervention is being driven by geopolitical interests, not the desperate situation facing Tamil civilians in northern Sri Lanka.

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