

US plans for military intervention in Sri Lanka

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Sri Lanka's Sunday Times has revealed plans for a US-led military mission into the island's northern war zone in the guise of evacuating civilians trapped by intense fighting between the army and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

According to the newspaper, the task would be carried out by a Marine Expeditionary Brigade attached to the US Pacific Command (PACOM). The US Navy and Air Force would also be involved. The newspaper reported in its initial article on February 22 that a high-level PACOM team was in Colombo to pave the way for the operation.

No announcement has been made by the Obama administration or the US military, but Sri Lanka's foreign minister, Rohitha Bogollagama, told the Sunday Times that he was aware of the intended US-led "coalition humanitarian task force". Last weekend, the foreign minister told the newspaper that France had also offered assistance to evacuate civilians. India, which had made its own evacuation offer, last week indicated its support for a joint operation.

No agreement has been reached between the government and the LTTE on any evacuation. Both sides are using the trapped civilians as political pawns. The army has been seeking to drive civilians out of the remaining LTTE-held territory, in order to allow for the area's complete levelling. With its back to the wall, the LTTE has called for a ceasefire and talks before any civilians are allowed to leave—a step rejected by the government which is demanding a full, unconditional surrender.

The Sunday Times indicated that the US-led operation might proceed without LTTE agreement—a provocative move that has the potential to precipitate clashes between US Marines and the guerrillas. "[C]ontinued LTTE refusals, the Sunday Times learns, may force the government to allow the humanitarian exercise to get underway notwithstanding LTTE objections," it stated.

The UN and International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) estimates that as many as 200,000, Tamil civilians are trapped inside LTTE-held territory, which has now shrunk to less than 50 square kilometres. Hundreds have been killed and injured by army shelling. The military has allowed in only limited supplies of food. Fleeing civilians have been shot at by LTTE fighters, and those who manage to cross the frontlines are being held in detention camps.

Members of the international grouping known as the Donor Co-Chairs—the US, the European Union, Japan and Norway—that oversees the defunct Sri Lankan "peace process" have expressed concerns over this humanitarian disaster. Their unease, however, has nothing to do with any genuine sympathy for the plight of the refugees—it is driven by fears that a

bloodbath in northern Sri Lanka would have a profoundly destabilising impact throughout the region.

The hypocrisy of the so-called Co-Chairs can be seen from their tacit backing of Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse as he relaunched the war in mid-2006 in open breach of the 2002 ceasefire. Thousands of civilians have already been killed. Hundreds of thousands more have been driven from their homes and live in squalid refugee camps. Military-sponsored death squads have killed hundreds of people—young Tamils, opposition politicians, journalists and aid workers—with impunity. All of this has raised barely a murmur from those powers overseeing the “peace process”.

In fact, the US-led “humanitarian mission” conveniently meshes with the tactics of the Sri Lankan military, which has used indiscriminate artillery barrages and aerial bombardment to terrorise civilians, drive them out of LTTE-held territory and turn it into a free fire zone. The method has been repeatedly employed by the military over the past two years during its capture of LTTE strongholds in the East and North of the island.

However, the US has its own strategic agenda in Sri Lanka. The Bush administration backed Rajapakse’s “war on terrorism” as a means of ending a conflict that was a destabilising influence in South Asia, particularly in India, which is becoming Washington’s most important strategic and economic partner in the region. The 25-year conflict was not the product of LTTE “terrorism” but decades of official discrimination against the island’s Tamil minority.

In the wake of army victories over the LTTE late last year, the US, India and the European powers have been, increasingly insistently, pressing the Rajapakse government for a “political solution” to end the war. What is meant by this term is not talks with the LTTE, which Washington has specifically excluded, but rather a compromise between the island’s Sinhala and Tamil elites. The fear is that without such a deal the festering communal tensions that led to the war in the first place will erupt again in another form.

The US Senate Foreign Relations Committee convened last week to discuss these concerns. Former US ambassador to Sri Lanka Jeffrey Lunstead told the committee that the decisions made now by the Sri Lankan government would affect the island for decades to come. “It can fail to treat its Tamil civilians properly, fail to engage seriously in political reform, and continue to allow human rights to be violated and dissent to be threatened. If so, unrest will continue, violence will certainly recur, and the promising future which has always seemed just out of reach will recede even further,” he warned.

Lunstead called for the US “to play an important role in shaping Sri Lanka’s future”. Well aware of the severe financial crisis in Sri Lanka produced by huge military budgets and now the global economic recession, Lunstead proposed that international donors insist that aid “only flow if strict conditions are met”. After outlining his “reforms” to ease communal tensions, he concluded: “Without such changes, the prospect is for an inevitable recurrence of ethnic conflict.”

However, Lunstead’s proposal for an end to official discrimination against Tamils and a power-sharing arrangement between the island’s Sinhala and Tamil elites is precisely what successive Colombo governments have proven incapable of achieving. Since independence in 1948, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie has relied on Sinhala supremacism to divide the working

class and buttress its own rule. The recent military victories over the LTTE have only strengthened the hand of the most reactionary sections of the Colombo political establishment that regard any concessions to Tamils as a betrayal of the Sinhala Buddhist nation.

In this context, the presence of a sizeable US military force in the north of the island would give Washington considerable political leverage in Colombo in shaping the outcome of the war to its strategic interests. While Lunstead did not hint at military intervention, he did stress that US action had to be carried out “in close coordination with India,” which has traditionally regarded Sri Lanka as part of its sphere of influence. The US fears that growing political unrest among Tamils in southern India over the Sri Lankan war has the potential to destabilise the Indian government and affect the US-India strategic partnership.

Concerns about India are not the only factor motivating a US military intervention in Sri Lanka. For years, the Pentagon has been seeking to establish a foothold on the island as a base of operations in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. The deep water harbour of Trincomalee on the eastern coast, to the south of the current fighting, has long been regarded as a strategic prize—a point that was made by a US PACOM team that surveyed Sri Lanka in 2002. Following the devastating 2004 tsunami, the US military sent a battalion of marines to southern Sri Lanka, setting an important precedent for the present “humanitarian” plans.

The long-term geo-political significance of the Indian Ocean, and therefore of Sri Lanka, was underscored by an article entitled “Center Stage for the Twenty-first Century: Power Plays in the Indian Ocean” in the latest issue of the US magazine *Foreign Affairs*. Veteran journalist Robert Kaplan identified three related geo-political challenges facing the US in Asia: “the strategic nightmare of the greater Middle East, the struggle for influence over the southern tier of the former Soviet Union, and the growing presence of India and China in the Indian Ocean.”

The article emphasised the rising naval power of China and India in the Indian Ocean, the importance of the ocean’s trade routes, the strategic significance of the adjacent energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia, and the dangers of the relative decline of the US in the region. In relation to Sri Lanka, it noted: “Whereas the prospect of ethnic warfare has scared away US admirals from considering a base in Sri Lanka, which is strategically located at the confluence of the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, the Chinese are constructing a refuelling station for their warships there.”

The need for greater strategic focus on the Indian Ocean is undoubtedly a major motivation behind a US military intervention on the island. The last consideration of any US military operation in Sri Lanka will be the plight of Tamil civilians trapped in the North. Like the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, which have led to disasters for the Afghan and Iraqi peoples, an intervention in Sri Lanka would seek to advance the strategic and economic interests of US imperialism and must be opposed by the working class in Sri Lanka, South Asia and internationally.

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