

Washington's criminal role in the Sri Lankan state's anti-Tamil war

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Last Wednesday, the US embassy in Colombo issued a statement that welcomed the Sri Lankan state's recent victories in the war with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and urged Sri Lanka's government and military to press forward with the annihilation of the LTTE. The key passage in the statement read: "The United States does not advocate that the Government of Sri Lanka negotiate with the LTTE, a group designated by America as a Foreign Terrorist Organization since 1997."

Within hours of Washington formally renouncing its support for a negotiated settlement to the 25 year-old civil war, the Sri Lankan government banned the LTTE.

The Sri Lankan state has now arrogated to itself the power to jail for up to 20 years those it accuses of "supporting" the LTTE. Since resuming offensive operations against the organization in 2006, the government and military have leveled this charge against virtually anyone opposed to the war or even the government's right-wing socio-economic policies, from socialists and striking workers to the Tamil National Alliance, a 20-strong parliamentary grouping that considers the LTTE the only legitimate representative of the Tamils in negotiations with the government.

Colombo had previously outlawed the organization, but lifted the ban in 2002 when a truce was declared and the Sri Lankan state and LTTE agreed to enter into peace talks.

The brief interval between the US's repudiation of the "peace process" and the Sri Lankan government's ban on the LTTE exemplifies Washington's criminal role—as both instigator and facilitator—in the communal war mounted by Sri Lanka's Sinhalese bourgeois elite.

Washington encouraged Colombo to resume the civil war in 2006 and has aided and abetted every step of the Sri Lankan military's bloody advance. The new-found prowess of the Sri Lanka military is due almost entirely to the support it has received from Washington directly or from key US allies.

The Pentagon admits to having provided counter-insurgency training to Sri Lankan troops, as well as intelligence and "non-lethal" weapons. The latter includes sophisticated maritime radar equipment that has enabled Colombo to disrupt key LTTE supply routes from India. Meanwhile, Israel and Pakistan, whose governments and militaries are close US partners, have provided the Sri Lankan military with an expanded and technologically-enhanced arsenal.

US pressure was critical in getting Canada, the states of the European Union, and other countries to proscribe the LTTE. These bans have deprived the LTTE of financial support

from the hundreds of thousands of Tamils chased from their island homes by the civil war.

In January 2006—only weeks after a new government had come to power in Colombo that denounced previous, supposedly excessive concessions to the LTTE—then US ambassador, Jeffrey Lunstead, warned the LTTE that if it did not quickly agree to a settlement on Colombo's terms it would face "a stronger, more capable and more determined Sri Lankan military."

To make the point unmistakably clear, Lunstead added: "Through our military training and assistance programs, including efforts to help with counter-terrorism initiatives and block illegal financial transactions, we are helping to shape the ability of the Sri Lankan government to protect its people and defend its interests."

The quid pro quo for this support has been an Access and Cross Servicing Agreement, signed in March 2007, that allows US warships and aircraft to use facilities in Sri Lanka.

Last Wednesday's US embassy statement joined Washington with the Sinhalese establishment in exalting the "liberation" of Kilinochchi, the city that for a decade had served as the capital of the LTTE-controlled enclave in parts of the island's north and east.

The reality is that the Sri Lankan military offensive, which had been spearheaded by indiscriminate aerial bombing and artillery barrages, produced a humanitarian disaster. Some 300,000 have been rendered refugees. Many of them now face the threat of hunger and disease because the Sri Lanka government, having ordered all aid workers to leave the LTTE-controlled areas in September, has systematically blocked basic relief supplies.

Human Rights Watch, an organization hostile to the LTTE, has condemned Sri Lankan authorities, for detaining and to this day holding in concentration camps "almost all" the ethnic Tamil civilians it has "liberated" since initiating its offensive in the Wanni region ten months ago.

As with the Israeli government's onslaught against Gaza, Washington and the Western media systematically distort the history of Sri Lanka's civil war, denouncing the victims of oppression as aggressors and terrorists, while cynically excusing, indeed celebrating, state terrorism aimed at keeping a people in subjugation.

It is not a justification of the petty bourgeois nationalist politics of the LTTE to recognize that the Sri Lankan civil war was the outcome of the Sinhala bourgeoisie's decades' long and ever-escalating oppression of the island's Tamil minority and that the war has been waged by successive governments with the aim of entrenching the power and privileges of the Sinhala elite.

Unable to provide any progressive solution to the legacy of backwardness bequeathed by colonialism and continuing imperialist domination, the Sinhala bourgeoisie, from the very birth of the Sri Lankan state, has whipped up anti-Tamil chauvinism to split the working class and develop a social base for its rule.

At independence in 1948, the Sinhala bourgeoisie stripped the Tamil-speaking plantation workers, the largest and one of the most militant sections of the working class, of their citizenship rights. Less than a decade later, Sinhalese was declared the state's sole official language. In the 1970s, Buddhism was proclaimed the state religion—the Tamils are Hindus,

Christians and Muslims—and discriminatory quotas were introduced to limit Tamils' access to universities. In 1983, three years after smashing a general strike that challenged its turn to a neo-liberal, export-led growth strategy, the Sri Lankan government whipped up pogroms against the Tamil minority.

Similarly, it was the Sri Lankan state that took the initiative in 2006 to re-launch the civil war, having, with Washington's ample aid, used the "peace process" to rearm. The mindset of the Sinhala establishment was well-illustrated by an interview that Army Commander Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka gave to a Canadian newspaper last September. "I strongly believe," declared Fonseka, "that this country belongs to the Sinhalese. We being the majority of the country, 75 percent, we will never give in and we have the right to protect this country. They [the minorities] can live in this country with us. But they must not try to, under the pretext of being a minority, demand undue things."

By any measure, the 25 year-long Sri Lankan civil war has been a disaster for the people of Sri Lanka—Sinhalese and Tamil alike. More than 70,000 people have been killed in a county of just 19 million. As many as 800,000 Tamils have fled the island and another half million have been internally displaced, meaning that a third of the total Tamil population has been uprooted from their homes. The island's economic development has been set back by decades due to the devastation wrought by the war and the billions squandered on prosecuting it. The military now consumes 17 percent of the national budget.

The war has been invoked to demand round-after-round of sacrifices from the working class and justify the suppression of democratic rights. Disappearances and political assassinations are routine. Parliament has increasingly become a façade behind which a small cabal of politicians—the Rajapakse family and its cronies—and the military rule the country.

In the aftermath of the Sri Lankan state's "historic" victory in Kilinochchi, President Mahinda Rajapakse has bluntly warned the population it will have to make further "sacrifices." Furthermore, the government has imposed a sweeping ban on the LTTE, and the editor of a prominent opposition newspaper has been assassinated.

Washington's brazen support for a war of extermination against the LTTE, an organization that emerged as a mass movement in response to the communal persecution of the Tamil people by the Sri Lankan state, is a further chilling example of the US elite's embrace of war and reaction across the globe.

The international working class must oppose Washington's and Colombo's drive to eradicate the LTTE, aimed as it is at strengthening the reactionary Sri Lankan state and perpetuating the oppression of the Tamils and of the working class. To do so implies no support for the politics of the LTTE.

The LTTE, which represents the interests of the Tamil elite, has sought to carve out a capitalist nation-state, by appealing for the support of India, the US and other great-powers. It is organically incapable of making an appeal to the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally—the only force whose class interests lie in ending the war, overthrowing the Sri Lankan bourgeois state, and ensuring the democratic rights of the Tamil population, and which has the social power to do so.

It is for this international socialist perspective that the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka fights. In a statement announcing that it is contesting coming provincial council elections,

the SEP (Sri Lanka) declared: “In opposition to all other political parties, the SEP candidates will emphatically oppose the war being waged by President Mahinda Rajapakse and his government against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all troops from the North and East.”

“This is not a war of liberation or a war against terrorism, but a war to entrench the power and privileges of the Sinhala ruling elite over the working class as a whole—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike. The SEP calls on all workers to decisively reject the divisive poison of communal politics and to unify in a struggle for their common class interests on the basis of a socialism program.”

The SEP statement went on to declare, “The war in Sri Lanka is just the sharpest example of the incapacity of the capitalist class throughout the region to resolve the most basic democratic and national tasks. For decades, religious, ethnic and language differences have been exploited to divide the working class and buttress bourgeois rule, creating a disaster for tens of millions of ordinary people. Once again, India and Pakistan are beating the drums of war in the wake of the Mumbai atrocity. By taking a stand against ethnic and religious communalism and militarism, workers in Sri Lanka will show the road forward for the working class throughout South Asia.”

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