

What is US envoy Thomas Pickering doing in Sri Lanka?

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With the visit of US envoy Thomas Pickering to India and Sri Lanka, the United States has inserted itself directly into the civil war that has for seventeen years wracked the island nation off India's southern coast. In the person of Pickering, the US is bringing American muscle to bear against an impending military victory by the Tamil separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

As has become the custom, the US Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs declared that Washington's intervention was motivated purely by humanitarian concerns. Pickering, one of the US State Department's longest-serving and most trusted hands, told the Indian press he was meeting with top officials to prevent "a humanitarian catastrophe" on Sri Lanka's Jaffna peninsula. Stunning military advances over the past month have brought the LTTE within a few miles of Jaffna town, the center of the region overwhelmingly populated by Sri Lanka's Tamil minority. Some 30,000 Sri Lankan troops, backed up to the strait that separates Sri Lanka from India, are in danger of being overrun by LTTE forces.

No informed and objective observer of US foreign policy can give the slightest credence to Pickering's humanitarian pretences. For nearly two decades Washington has provided economic, military and political support to successive Sri Lankan governments that waged war against the Tamil population in the north and east of the country. Its "humanitarian" impulses were not stirred by the campaign of murder, torture, military occupation and repression carried out by the dominant Sinhalese bourgeoisie against the Tamils, a civil war which, according to US State Department documents, has claimed the lives of nearly 60,000 and driven 600,000 from their homes.

It is, rather, the prospect of a devastating defeat for the Sinhalese ruling class and a fracturing of the Sri Lankan state that has brought Pickering to New Delhi and Colombo. As always, behind Washington's rhetoric of democracy and human rights, stand the global economic and geo-political interests of American imperialism.

On May 24 and 25, after meetings with Indian Foreign Secretary Lalit Mansingh and Defense Minister George Fernandes, Pickering and his Indian counterparts declared their common opposition to a "military solution" as well as to the

LTTE's demand for a separate state of Tamil Eelam. Pickering made clear Washington's insistence that India move more aggressively to head off an LTTE victory, including a commitment to use its naval forces to evacuate Sri Lankan troops from Jaffna, should the People's Alliance government in Colombo so request. He further gave Washington's public imprimatur to the efforts of a Norwegian delegation, currently in Colombo, to mediate a cease fire and initiate peace talks between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE.

While insisting the US had no intention of playing a direct role in these diplomatic efforts, Pickering declared, ominously, that Washington was "watching the situation in Sri Lanka carefully." Both the US and India disavow any plans for military intervention on the side of the Sri Lankan forces in Jaffna, but India has moved a naval flotilla and fighter aircraft off the coast of Jaffna, and the US has dispatched a part of its Persian Gulf fleet into the southern Arabian Sea, to the west of Sri Lanka.

Pickering is to meet with Sri Lankan government officials in Colombo on May 29. While in Sri Lanka he will also confer with the Norwegian mediators. Meanwhile, Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga has opened the door for more direct US diplomatic, if not military, involvement, telling a television interviewer she would like to see the US become involved along with Norway and India in the "peace process."

Washington's high-profile moves to force the LTTE to the negotiating table are bound up with its recent shift toward an alliance with India, which the US hopes to cultivate as its regional proxy on the subcontinent. Throughout the period of the Cold War, Washington viewed India, ruled since independence by the Congress Party, as a stalking horse for the Soviet Union. The US sought to build up Pakistan as a counterweight to India.

But with the coming to power in New Delhi of the Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), Washington has distanced itself from its former Pakistani ally, demonstratively moving to strengthen its economic, military and intelligence ties with the Indian regime. The BJP is looked on sympathetically by US banks and transnational corporations because it is pledged to carry out more rapidly and ruthlessly than its Congress rivals the policies of privatization and deregulation prescribed by the International

Monetary Fund.

The Clinton administration's embrace of the BJP regime in and of itself gives the lie to Washington's democratic and pacifist pretensions. The BJP is a Hindu chauvinist party with ties to fascist organizations. It signaled its aggressive and militaristic intentions when, two years ago, it tested a nuclear device near the border with Pakistan.

Both India and its US mentor look upon an LTTE military victory in Sri Lanka, and the prospect of an independent Tamil nation, as a grave threat to the integrity of the Indian nation, which faces a number of separatist movements, most prominently in Kashmir, but also in the southern state of Tamil Nadu.

Washington's alliance with the right-wing BJP is only one of many contradictions that abound in its foreign policy pronouncements. Even more glaring is the contrast between its hostility to the Tamil separatists in Sri Lanka and its embrace of the ethnic Albanian separatists in Kosovo. This date one year ago the US was allied with the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and engaged in a bloody air war against Serbia, justified on the grounds that Belgrade was guilty of ethnic cleansing and genocide against the majority Albanian population of its southern province.

Today, the same humanitarian slogans are employed to justify intervention against the LTTE separatists and support for Colombo's repression of the majority Tamil population in the east and north of Sri Lanka. How is this obvious contradiction to be explained? How is it that humanitarianism compels Washington to spurn diplomacy and rain bombs on the Serbs one day, and demand a diplomatic settlement in order to rescue the Sinhalese bourgeoisie on the next?

US spokesmen, in their arrogance and cynicism, never bother to address such questions, secure in the knowledge that the thoroughly corrupt American media will never raise them.

There are important differences between Kosovo and the plight of the Tamils in Sri Lanka, but these only underscore Washington's hypocrisy. Serb repression of the Albanian Kosovars pales in comparison to Colombo's seventeen-year slaughter of the Tamils. Most estimates of Kosovars killed in the course of Serb repression and NATO bombing are in the area of 1,000. The death toll from Colombo's war against the Tamils is greater by a factor of 60.

To cite just one paragraph from the US State Department's own report on human rights practices in Sri Lanka, released in February of 1999:

“Most torture victims were Tamils suspected of being LTTE insurgents or collaborators. Methods of torture included electric shock, beatings (especially on the soles of the feet), suspension by the wrists or feet in contorted positions, burnings, and near drownings. In other cases, victims are forced to remain in unnatural positions for extended periods, or have bags laced with insecticide, chili powder, or gasoline placed over their heads. Detainees have reported broken bones and other serious

injuries as a result of their mistreatment.”

Moreover, the LTTE, notwithstanding its communalist politics, has in the course of its history enjoyed far greater popular support than was ever attained by the KLA. US officials were well aware of the KLA's ties to Albanian mafia elements and its involvement in drug smuggling when they decided to remove it from the State Department's list of terrorist organizations and promote it as a “national liberation” movement. But the US continues to proscribe the LTTE, which arose in the midst of Tamil resistance to years of repression and discrimination by the Sinhalese regime. The civil war itself was sparked by government-backed pogroms in 1983 that killed hundreds of Tamils.

No analysis of the US intervention in Sri Lanka would be complete without an examination of Thomas Pickering's democratic and pacifist credentials. Boasting the rank of career ambassador, the highest rank in the US Foreign Service, this veteran of American diplomacy has been involved in some of the most sordid foreign policy episodes of the past three decades.

As a rising star in the US foreign policy establishment, Pickering served as special assistant to Henry Kissinger in 1973-74, when the US was attempting to stave off defeat in Vietnam. He was Kissinger's special assistant when the latter helped mastermind the US-backed coup that brought the fascist general and mass murderer Augusto Pinochet to power in Chile.

He served as US ambassador to El Salvador under the Reagan administration, when Washington was supporting that country's death squad regime. His last ambassadorial post was in Moscow (1993-96), where he helped coordinate the Yeltsin regime's bombing of the Russian parliament in October of 1993.

Such is the résumé of Washington's point man in Sri Lanka. It underscores the reactionary substance behind the humanitarian rhetoric of US policy on the Indian subcontinent.



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