

# What business does the US have with the Sinhala chauvinists in Sri Lanka?

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According to a report in the *Sunday Times*, an English-language weekly in Sri Lanka, three US diplomats, including the deputy head of the US Mission, Andrew Mann, held a meeting on June 23 with members of the Sihala Urumaya (Sinhala Heritage) Party—an extreme right-wing organisation based on virulent Sinhala chauvinism, directed against the country's Tamil minority.

The meeting took place at the request of the US diplomats and was held at the private residence of S.L. Gunasekera, the party's president. Details of the discussion are unavailable. But when approached by the *Sunday Times*, the US representatives confirmed that the meeting took place.

According to the newspaper report, the meeting erupted in a clash. When US diplomats asked the party's attitude to minority rights of Tamils and human rights in Sri Lanka, the Sri Lankan politicians turned the tables and asked about the same issues in the US. Mann and his colleagues reportedly walked out.

But the obvious question is why were they there at all? What was their purpose in asking for a dialogue with this racist and right-wing formation?

The Sihala Urumaya Party (SUP) represents the most vociferous sections of extreme Sinhala chauvinists, who, although still a small minority, have been encouraged and have formed an increasingly important prop for the Peoples Alliance (PA) government, as it intensified the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The SUP was officially founded on April 26, just days after the LTTE drove the Sri Lankan army out of its key strategic base at Elephant Pass and LTTE forces began their advance up the northern Jaffna peninsula.

The SUP, which undoubtedly has connections to sections of the military hierarchy, demands no

compromise with the LTTE and a further intensification of the war. The party wholeheartedly supported the decision of the PA government to put the country on a war footing and impose harsh emergency regulations banning protests, strikes or public meetings, implementing blanket media censorship and giving the military powers to commandeer equipment, buildings and personnel.

The three major SUP leaders—all known for their history of Sinhala chauvinist politics—come from the three major bourgeois parties. Party president Gunasekera was a longtime member of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the leading party of the ruling PA coalition, and the leader of its lawyers' association. SUP secretary Tilak Karunaratne was a United National Party (UNP) parliamentarian until he resigned from both the UNP and parliament on May 9. He had previously been an SLFP member before crossing over to UNP in 1993. During his time in the SLFP he led a chauvinist faction known as Hela Urumaya (Sinhala Heritage). He is the owner of Reckitt and Coleman, a company associated with several multinationals.

SUP national organiser Champika Ranawaka was a student leader in Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in the 1988-89 period, during which the party's military wing, in league with the UNP government, carried out fascistic attacks on the working class and the oppressed masses. The JVP was responsible for the deaths of a number of leaders and members of trade unions and working class parties, including three members of the Revolutionary Communist League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka.

Ranawaka broke from the JVP and formed a new organisation, Janatha Mithru (Peoples Friends), which backed the PA government and greeted its resumption of the war against the LTTE with particular enthusiasm.

In early 1998, he reorganised the group into the National Movement Against Terrorism (NMAT), which has been responsible for a series of provocative campaigns against Tamils, particularly targetting Tamil-speaking plantation workers in the central hill region of Sri Lanka. The NMAT is sponsored by the Sinhala Veera Vidahana (Sinhala Heroes Forum), another extreme right-wing organisation made up of Sinhala businessmen.

When the SUP was formed it united the NMAT and other Sinhala chauvinist organisations. In its inaugural statement the SUP accused the UNP, the PA and other parties of “betraying” and “dividing” the Sinhala nation and said it would win back the “lost rights” of the Sinhalese.

When US envoy Thomas Pickering went to Colombo in May for talks with the government and other political figures, he insisted that his visit was to avert “a humanitarian catastrophe” on the Jaffna peninsula. He added that Washington had no intention of playing any direct role in diplomatic efforts to end the fighting. The fact that the US diplomats engaged in closed-door talks with the Sinhala chauvinist thugs of the SUP not only makes a mockery of the claim that the US will not meddle in internal Sri Lankan politics but exposes the utter hypocrisy and cynicism with which the US flies the banner of “humanitarian” concern.

It is not possible, of course, to determine exactly what was discussed at the meeting. Whatever the precise nature of the talks one thing is certain: the US was up to no good. The US diplomats were sent to sound out the newly formed organisation and test out the potential for establishing some sort of working relationship.

It is possible that the US was attempting to see if the SUP would moderate its position. The Clinton administration, along with the European powers, are pressing the PA government and the UNP opposition to finalise a devolution package for the Tamil-speaking areas in the north and east as the basis for talks and a deal with the LTTE to end the war. The SUP regards any form of devolution, no matter how limited, or any negotiations with the LTTE “terrorists” as tantamount to betrayal.

The prospects of agreement on a devolution package in the near future appear slim, however. Talks between the PA and UNP are due to finish tomorrow. Both parties have indicated that little further will be done

until after national parliamentary elections due in September. For its part the LTTE has rejected the devolution package and announced that it will continue fighting to win full control of the Jaffna peninsula. As a result, the war is likely to intensify under conditions of widespread popular disaffection with both the government and the official opposition, creating a highly volatile political situation in Colombo.

The US is clearly worried about the future prospects of the PA government and expects sharp political shifts in the situation. Its talks with the SUP are aimed at sizing up other potential allies. Given the record of provocation and terror of the SUP leaders, Ranawaka in particular, the discussion takes on an especially sinister aspect. For all its rhetoric about “democracy” and “human rights,” the US has a long record of backing military regimes and training, equipping and funding right-wing militia and paramilitary groups from the Middle East through Asia to Latin America. It is certainly feasible that between exchanges over human rights in the US and Sri Lanka, the discussion between the US diplomats and the SUP thugs turned to other matters of mutual concern, including what to do about the growing popular opposition to the war.



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