High-level US delegation issues veiled threat to Sri Lankan separatists

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A high-powered team of US officials, led by Assistant Secretary for South Asian Affairs Christina Rocca, flew to Sri Lanka in mid-March for discussions with government ministers and the military over planned peace talks with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). A formal ceasefire was signed last month between Colombo and the LTTE as the prelude to discussions over a settlement in May.

To date, the US has left the preparations for negotiations to Norway, which has formally acted as a facilitator, and to India. Rocca's visit marked a far more active US intervention into Sri Lankan affairs. Its main purpose was to send a blunt warning to the LTTE on the eve of talks: toe the line set down by Washington or face the military consequences.

Arriving on March 14, Rocca declared: "We have a much greater interest this time. The international climate has changed and there is an ideal opportunity for peace now. The world situation has changed and there is a real opportunity for a good news story in South Asia."

The "international climate" to which she refers is the Bush administration's "global war against terrorism" and its military intervention in Afghanistan. Both Washington and Colombo are calculating that the threat of US military assistance to Sri Lanka can be used to pressure the LTTE into making concessions.

Rocca held a meeting with the Sri Lankan military chiefs during a visit to Jaffna town at the heart of the war-torn northern peninsula. Accompanied by US Brigadier General Timothy Ghormely and the US ambassador to Sri Lanka, Ashley Willis, she held a closed-door conference at the Palaly army camp with Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, Defence Minister Tilak Marapana and the armed forces top brass. Rocca later visited the town of Chavakachcheri.

The meeting at Palaly was of symbolic importance. The base came under intense attack by the LTTE during its offensive in May 2000, when it seized the key Elephant Pass army camp and advanced to the outskirts of Jaffna town. Chavakachcheri was one of a number of areas that was overrun, trapping over 30,000 Sri Lankan troops on the northern part of the Jaffna peninsula.

At the time, the Colombo government was seriously considering evacuating all its forces. The US intervened to force the LTTE to back off and agree to negotiations. For the first time in years, a top US official—Assistant Secretary of State for Political Affairs Thomas Pickering—visited Sri Lanka to drive home the point that none of the major powers would agree to the LTTE's demand for a separate Tamil state.

Speaking to the media in Colombo before her departure, Rocca reiterated US opposition to a separate Tamil state and expressed support for the Norway initiative. At present, the US has the LTTE on its list of terrorist organisations. Rocca said the Bush administration would only lift the ban if the LTTE responded to current peace moves by "ending hostile activities, showing respect to humanity and accepting that an independent state is not a viable solution".

Ambassador Ashley Willis reinforced the warning by stating there were "credible reports" that the LTTE was "engaged in activities that could jeopardise the recent ceasefire agreement". He cited continuing recruitment, the abduction of children, kidnappings and extortion, re-supply operations and the smuggling of weapons. In other words, if the LTTE stepped out of line in any way, it would endanger the ceasefire and risk being dealt with as a "terrorist organisation".

Rocca blandly told the press: "General Ghormely is here to talk about military cooperation ranging from operating C-130s (Hercules aircraft) and other humanitarian matters." It was clear that Ghormely, who commands the Marine Expeditionary Brigade, had more than humanitarian aid on his mind. As well as discussions with his Sri Lankan counterparts, he visited Trincomalee, a key strategic harbour on the north-east coast.

Prime Minister Wickremesinghe stated that his government had asked for US assistance in removing land mines from the Jaffna peninsula. "We are looking for at least four de-mining teams of 10 each for about four months... The US has told us that they will try to get us some equipment as soon as possible," he said.

The only previous US troops on Sri Lankan soil have been Special Forces trainers who, according to the US embassy, have been involved in "non-combatant training" for small army units since 1994. Following the Sri Lankan army's defeats in November 1999, the US provided mortar detection devices and collaborated more closely in intelligence exchanges.

Top-level US involvement in Sri Lanka has been relatively

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rare—a reflection of how Washington regards the small island. But in 1998, as the Clinton administration began to orient to the Indian subcontinent, the Assistant Secretary for South Asia Karl Inderfurth and the US representative to the UN Bill Richardson visited Colombo to back the Norwegian peace process. Inderfurth made another trip to Sri Lanka in November 2000 in the wake of the army's disastrous loss of Elephant Pass.

Washington's new focus on Sri Lanka coincides with the deployment of US troops, under the guise of its war against terrorism, to a number of countries where the US has strategic interests. These include the Philippines, Yemen, Georgia and several Central Asian republics as well as Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Sri Lanka is centrally located in the Indian Ocean with access to both the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal and provides a convenient base of operations for the Indian subcontinent. The US already has a communication centre at Iranawila on Sri Lanka's west coast, which reportedly beams US propaganda to a number of countries, including China, Burma and North Korea.

The US wants an end to the long-running war, which has not only destabilised the island but also has the potential to heighten tensions in southern India—home to around 50 million Tamils, many of whom sympathise with the plight of Tamils in Sri Lanka. The war threatens Washington's efforts to establish closer economic and defence ties with the Vajpayee government in New Delhi.

A United National Party (UNP)-led coalition won a snap national election last December by appealing to a widespread sentiment for an end to the war. It was backed by sections of big business that regard the war as a disaster for the economy.

At the same time, however, Sinhala chauvinist organisations oppose the peace negotiations, regarding any concessions to the country's Tamil minority as a betrayal. While the ceasefire agreement effectively commits the LTTE to giving up its demand for a separate Tamil state, the document nevertheless accepts the LTTE control of certain areas. Moreover, its ambiguous terms allow for the LTTE to import arms, collect funds and engage in recruitment. It also implies a certain degree of recognition to the banned organisation by allowing it to conduct political activity in areas presently under the control of the Colombo government.

The US team arrived as the chauvinist opposition against the ceasefire Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) has been building. President Chandrika Kumaratunga and sections of the opposition Peoples Alliance (PA) objected to the fact that she had not been shown the documents prior to their signing as constitutionally required. She pointedly did not meet with the US delegation during the visit, offering the lame excuse that her schedule was too busy.

Other extremist groups have been more aggressive, accusing the government of "dividing the motherland" through a secret agreement with the LTTE. Significantly Rocca's warnings to the LTTE were welcomed by some of these organisations.

The fascistic Sinhala Urumaya (Sinhala Heritage) praised the US government for castigating the LTTE. "The American ambassador has confirmed that the LTTE was taking advantage of the truce to expand recruitment of its guerilla strength and extort money from the civilians... We should also kindly urge the US government to look into the pathetic situation of the Sinhala people in the east which is worse than the plight of the Muslims."

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which falsely claims to be Marxist, would in the past have organised protests and railed demagogically against the evils of US imperialism. But the organisation maintained a studied silence about the Rocca visit—in line with other chauvinist organisations.

As for the LTTE, its response to the implied threats of Rocca and Willis was to assure Washington once again that it will obediently implement the conditions of the ceasefire. Spokesman Anton Balasingham said the LTTE was "sincerely and seriously committed to peace and to a peace process aimed at a negotiated political settlement".

Balasingham added a feeble protest, confessing "surprise and dismay" at the US threat and pointing out that an international team was present to monitor ceasefire violations. "Yet, we are encouraged by the fact that the US government is seriously concerned about the establishment of peace and stability in the island and had appealed to both parties in conflict to observe the terms of the accord," he said.

The Bush administration has directly intervened in Sri Lanka not to establish peace and stability but to assert US interests in the region. If the LTTE cannot be pressured into a deal with Colombo, the US is making clear it will support other means—including the intensification of the war.

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