

Sri Lanka sends troops to back US-installed regime in Haiti

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In its first major overseas military deployment since World War II, the Sri Lankan government has dispatched more than 700 troops to the small Caribbean nation of Haiti in a move designed to bolster the US-installed regime of Prime Minister Gérard Latortue.

During World War I and World War II, the British colonial regime in Ceylon sent thousands of “native soldiers” to the Middle East and other parts of the globe to be used as cannon fodder in these inter-imperialist conflicts. The decision by United Peoples Front Alliance (UPFA) government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga is likewise in the service of imperialism.

While the Sri Lankan troops are part of a so-called UN peace-keeping mission, the purpose of the operation is transparently in the interests of the US. Haiti’s elected president Jean-Bertrand Aristide was forced into exile in February by an armed rebellion of former officers from the disbanded Haitian army and pressure from Washington and its allies. It was, in effect, a US-organised coup.

Several thousand US-led troops were dispatched to the island not to establish “law and order”, but to ensure that a pro-US regime was installed. American soldiers stood by while armed thugs and ex-soldiers associated with Haiti’s former dictatorships continued to wage bloody attacks on Aristide supporters, particularly in the slums of the main cities.

Even as Sri Lankan troops were arriving last month as part of the Brazilian-led UN “stabilisation” force, a new wave of violence was being unleashed against Aristide supporters. At least 80 people have been killed since September 30. Criticising the new regime, Reverend Jean Hassens, head of the Catholic church’s peace and justice committee, commented recently: “Human rights are being trampled underfoot.” Yet the UN force has done little or nothing to disarm the right-

wing thugs responsible for carrying out the attacks.

The presence of Sri Lankan troops has helped free US troops for dispatch to other parts of the globe—including Iraq where the US occupation forces are stretched to the limit. As Sri Lankan soldiers were landing in Haiti, the US military was gearing up for an all-out offensive against Fallujah, which saw the criminal destruction of much of the city and the slaughter of thousands of fighters and civilians.

Fearful of provoking domestic opposition, the UPFA government in Sri Lanka, like its counterparts in a number of other countries, has declined US requests for troops in Iraq. In her address to the UN in September, President Kumaratunga issued a guarded criticism of the US occupation, declaring she was saddened by the violence and suffering in Iraq. At a subsequent press conference, she stated that her government “refused to send troops to Iraq because it does not believe war is a solution”.

Even setting aside for the moment the fact that successive governments in Sri Lanka have waged a vicious war of attrition against the Tamil minority of the island, Kumaratunga’s comments reek of hypocrisy. By sending troops to Haiti, the UPFA government has contributed indirectly to strengthening the hand of the US military in Iraq and thereby proved its loyalty to the Bush administration.

In return, the UPFA and the political establishment as a whole are hoping to garner US support in pressuring the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to the negotiating table on Colombo’s terms. If that fails and there is a slide back to civil war on the island, Sri Lanka will be looking to the US for military assistance in defeating the LTTE guerrillas.

After coming to office in April, Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar left for the US in May and

wholeheartedly backed the Bush administration's "war on terrorism". Under this banner, Colombo can not only tacitly back Washington's neo-colonial occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan but also seek US support for its own "war on terrorism" on the Tamil minority at home.

In the past few months, the UPFA has encouraged closer ties with the US military and several US officers have visited Sri Lanka. As part of broader plans to assist Washington in "peace keeping", an Institute of Peace Support Operations Training, Sri Lanka (IPSOTSL) centre was established in June. The US Pacific Command has already used the facility to conduct its first training session, which included 64 Sri Lankan soldiers and another 180 from Bangladesh, Mongolia, and Nepal.

The opposition United National Party (UNP) has always been a staunch supporter of US imperialism. But the UPFA comprises parties that have in the past adopted an "anti-imperialist" stance if only to exploit the broad anti-colonial sentiment of the masses. In the 1960s and 1970s, Kumaratunga's own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) played a prominent role in the non-aligned movement.

The SLFP's left-wing credentials were boosted by the Stalinist Communist Party and the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which betrayed its former Trotskyist principles by joining the bourgeois government led by Kumaratunga's mother, Sirima Bandaranaike, in 1964. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, both of these parties have rapidly abandoned any anti-imperialist rhetoric. Still part of the ruling alliance, the CP and LSSP issued not a murmur of criticism as the government committed troops to Haiti.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—the largest UPFA partner after the SLFP—has also kept a studied silence on the government's relations with the US and its dispatch of troops to Haiti. The JVP, which denounced the LSSP in the 1960s and 1970s for joining the Bandaranaike government, is based on an eclectic mixture of Castroism, Maoism and reactionary Sinhala communalism. Often falsely described as "Marxist" in the international media, the JVP has a long record of empty anti-imperialist demagogy and even participated in the anti-war protests in Colombo prior to US invasion of Iraq last year.

Now in office for the first time, the JVP has dropped any criticism of the Bush administration. As one of the most vicious proponents of Sinhala chauvinism, it is adamantly opposed to any concessions to the LTTE. As a result, the JVP "radicals" are quite prepared to assist in Washington's crimes in Iraq by sending Sri Lankan troops to Haiti—as long as Washington provides a measure of assistance to Colombo in dealing with the LTTE.

There is an additional reason for the JVP's support for the Haitian mission. Turning a blind eye to the rampant capitalist exploitation in China, the party continues to hail that country's corrupt Stalinist bureaucracy as a model of socialism to be emulated throughout the Third World. JVP leaders make a pilgrimage to Beijing at least once a year to pay their respects to their fellow "socialists" and to receive in return the formal blessings of their sister party.

Like Sri Lanka, however, the Chinese bureaucracy has decided that the UN mission in Haiti provides a convenient way of ingratiating itself with Washington. Reluctant to run the political risks associated with dispatching troops to Iraq, Beijing has sent 125 policemen, especially trained in riot control, to Haiti. China's vice minister of public security, Meng Hongwei, cynically declared on state television: "This is our country's obligation in safeguarding world peace. China, being a responsible major country in the world, should play such role."

Both Colombo and Beijing are playing with fire. The very fact that these governments are compelled to resort to confidence tricks to disguise their prostration to the Bush administration is an indication of the broad popular hostility to US militarism, particularly in Iraq. Sooner or later the anger felt by masses of ordinary working people over US aggression is going to be directed against the ruling elites who are assisting in these imperialist crimes.



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