

Under the guise of “humanitarianism”, US marines land in Sri Lanka

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About 200 US troops have now landed in Sri Lanka to take part in relief operations following the December 26 tsunami that devastated large areas of the island. Joining an advance party already in the southern city of Galle, some 100 soldiers came ashore on Monday at nearby Koggala from the USS Duluth, together with a bulldozer, trucks and other heavy equipment.

Washington and Colombo both insist that the deployment is purely for humanitarian purposes. But the real motivation for the US military’s deployment in Sri Lanka, Indonesia and other affected countries is to further America’s economic and strategic interests.

The official US response to the December 26 disaster expresses the indifference and contempt felt within US ruling circles towards the victims. For three days, President Bush said nothing at all. When finally compelled to make a statement, he increased the initial US aid offer of \$10 million to \$35 million. Grudgingly, the overall figure was eventually lifted to \$350 million.

The proposal to send the US military was made in a telephone conversation between US Secretary of State Colin Powell who telephoned Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar on January 1. On the same afternoon, the US ambassador to Sri Lanka, Jeffery Lunstead, announced that 1,500 US marines would be dispatched to carry out relief work in the country.

The decision, and the manner in which it was reached, provoked unease in Sri Lankan ruling circles. No cabinet meeting was held to discuss the issue and parliament was not convened to ratify the proposal. Yet for the first time since independence in 1948, a sizeable contingent of US troops was to arrive on Sri Lankan soil.

An editorial in the *Daily Mirror* on January 6 voiced some of the concerns. It cautioned against the tendency “to think more with the heart than with the head and look more to some short-term benefit instead of the long-term consequences in terms of global geopolitics and the

agendas behind the agenda.”

The newspaper noted US ambitions to use Sri Lanka, and Trincomalee harbour in particular, as a base for its military operations in Central Asia and the Middle East. “Against this backdrop questions are being raised about the deployment of US troops with a warship on the basis of a telephone understanding between two ministers,” it commented.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eeem (LTTE) voiced its opposition to any US military involvement in relief work. An LTTE spokesman told the media that American and Indian troops, “based on their political and military interests” might spy and provide intelligence to the Colombo government to crush the LTTE. Both countries continue to list the LTTE as a terrorist organisation.

These objections reflected concerns that the US agenda would cut across the interests of different layers of the ruling elite in Sri Lanka. There was also the fear that an unabashed embrace of the US military could lead to opposition from working people, who have a long history of opposing the predatory actions of imperialism in the region.

This nervousness was undoubtedly one of the factors that has led to the scaling back of the US military operation. On January 5, the USS Bonhomme carrying tractors, trucks and three huge landing crafts, which was about to land 1,300 marines in Galle, was abruptly diverted to join relief efforts in Indonesia. The decision sparked some media reports that the Sri Lankan government had changed its mind and turned down the US offer.

That turned out not to be the case. During his visit to Colombo last Friday, Powell underscored US determination to go ahead. “We will be here for a long period of time... Our military forces are in the region. I can’t tell you how long they will stay. There are other missions that have to be performed in due course.” As of

Tuesday, however, the US presence had been scaled back from 1,500 marines to 300.

Whatever the size of the contingent, the aims are clear. As far as the Bush administration is concerned, the relief operation establishes an important precedent and will be exploited to break down opposition to a longer term American military presence on the island.

In all, the Pentagon has dispatched 20 warships, including the giant USS Abraham Lincoln, as well as warplanes and helicopters, and more than 13,000 troops to South Asian waters to “help” Indonesia, Thailand and Sri Lanka. It is the largest US military deployment to the region since the end of Vietnam War in 1975.

Washington has long had ambitions to reestablish its strategic presence. Under the banner of the “war on terrorism,” the Bush administration has not only subjugated Afghanistan and Iraq, but strengthened its military ties throughout southern Asia, including a close strategic relationship with India and logistical arrangements with the Philippines and other countries.

But there has been resistance. In June 2002, Bush administration sought to sign an Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA) with the United National Front (UNF) government in Sri Lanka. The deal would have provided the US armed forces with extensive access to the island’s airfields, ports and airspace. Colombo, however, balked at the arrangement and the agreement was not signed.

Last year, in the name of combatting the threat of “terrorism”, Washington proposed to establish permanent naval patrols in the strategic Malacca Strait. Together with the Lombok Strait, the sea lane is the route for nearly half of the world’s trade, including crucial oil supplies from the Persian Gulf to Japan, South Korea and China. The neighbouring countries—Indonesia and Malaysia—both declined the “offer”, saying they were able to protect shipping without assistance.

Now, in the wake of the tsunami, the US has warships off the coast and troops on the ground in Sri Lanka and the Indonesian province of Aceh, directly adjacent to the Malacca Strait.

Whatever the misgivings in Colombo’s ruling circles, no one has openly challenged the US military deployment or done more than hint at the underlying motivations. No reference has been made of the obvious fact that this same “humanitarian” military is involved in enforcing a neo-colonial occupation of Iraq that has cost tens of thousands of Iraqi lives.

The ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA)

headed by President Chandrika Kumaratunga and the right-wing opposition United National Front (UNF) have welcomed the US troops with open arms.

The UPFA coalition includes the degenerated parties of the “left”—the Communist Party of Sri Lanka (SLCP) and the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP). SLCP leader D.E.W. Gunasekera stated that his party believed that getting assistance from Washington in the present situation was not even an issue. LSSP minister Tissa Vitharana adopted a slightly more leftist posture, saying that the party opposed the presence of imperialist troops “in principle” but could do nothing in practice.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the second largest party in the UPFA, has expanded its influence through a mixture of radical, even socialist, demagoguery and Sinhala chauvinism. In the past, its leaders built a reputation, particularly among young people, through their strident, but empty, anti-imperialist phrasemongering. In the current situation, however, the JVP has not uttered a word about the landing of US marines.

Over the last decade, especially since the Bush administration launched its “war on terrorism”, all of these parties have steadily abandoned any anti-imperialist rhetoric. Following the September 11 terrorist attacks, the political establishment in Colombo has sought to enlist the US in its own “war on terrorism”—the protracted civil war to suppress the rights of the country’s Tamil minority.

Thirty years ago all of these parties were compelled to adapt to the mass movement against the Vietnam War. Even the right-wing pro-US leader of the United National Party, J.R. Jayewardene, would not have dreamt of inviting American troops to the island in the event of a disaster. In the 1980s, the decision by the United National Party government to build huge radio transmitters at Iranawila provoked substantial protests. Today these same parties accept the landing of US marines without a murmur.



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