

Sri Lankan foreign minister discusses war, not peace, in Washington

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As Sri Lanka rapidly heads back to open civil war, Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera was in Washington last week for three days of high-level talks with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and other defence, treasury and state department officials.

Officially, both sides reiterated their commitment to “peace”. In bland diplomatic language, a spokesman for Rice declared that she and Samaraweera had discussed “the current status of the Sri Lankan peace process and the importance of strengthening the ceasefire”. Samaraweera told the US media that he had assured Rice that Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse was “still willing to walk that extra mile for peace”.

No one should be taken in by any of this. Since Rajapakse narrowly won the November 17 presidential poll with the backing of Sinhala extremist parties, there has been a dramatic escalation of violence in the North and East of the island as well as a provocative crackdown by security forces on the Tamil minority. More than 100 people, including military personnel and members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), have been killed in ambushes and assassinations in less than two months.

Even as Samaraweera was in Washington, there were widespread protests in eastern Sri Lanka over the cold-blooded killing of five Tamil students in the town of Trincomalee on January 2. Last weekend’s *Sunday Times* revealed that the special task force (STF) commandos responsible had been stationed there by a presidential defence adviser—in all likelihood, H.M.G.B. Kotakadeniya, a former police deputy inspector general and leading figure in the Sinhala chauvinist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU).

The Sri Lankan military has implausibly denied any involvement in the killing of Tamils and LTTE members, either directly or indirectly via closely associated paramilitary outfits. But a series of provocative attacks,

including the assassination of a pro-LTTE parliamentarian Joseph Pararajasingham on Christmas Eve, has inflamed communal tensions throughout the island. In response, there have been ambushes of military personnel, the latest being the ramming of a naval vessel on Friday that killed 12 sailors. Like the military, the LTTE has denied responsibility for these attacks.

The prospect of meaningful negotiations between the Colombo government and the LTTE are bleaker than at any time since the breakdown of talks in April 2003. Despite the efforts of Norwegian facilitators, there is no agreement on where any meeting would take place, let alone what would be discussed. Rajapakse is demanding talks to “strengthen” the 2002 ceasefire—to the advantage of the Sri Lankan military. LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran called in late November for the government to propose “a reasonable political framework” to satisfy the aspirations of the Tamil people, or face renewed war.

In this context, it is inconceivable that Samaraweera simply exchanged diplomatic pleasantries with Rice and other US officials. The foreign minister undoubtedly pressed Rice for US backing, political and possibly military, as the island slides back to war. He probably reiterated the suggestion, repeatedly made in the chauvinist media in Colombo, that the US should support, if not actively participate in, Sri Lanka’s “war on terrorism”—just as the Sri Lankan government has tacitly backed the US occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq.

In an interview with the right-wing *Washington Times*, Samaraweera was less diplomatic in asserting what the US should do. “Tea and sympathy are no longer enough,” he told the newspaper. “The United States must realise they are not dealing with a liberation movement but a ruthless killing machine more dangerous than al Qaeda.” The LTTE, he declared, was “the godfather of modern terrorism”.

Washington has already outlawed the LTTE as a

“terrorist organisation” and, during negotiations in 2002 and 2003, refused to rescind the designation unless the LTTE formally renounced violence and disarmed. Samaraweera, however, pressed the Bush administration to go one step further and ban the activities of the Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO)—an LTTE relief organisation that has been active in assisting victims of the December 2004 tsunami.

As the representative of a small South Asian country, Samaraweera was no position to insist on more than “tea and sympathy”. But he repeated his message to anyone who would listen, including Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman Richard Lugar and other Congressmen. Lugar assured the foreign minister that Sri Lanka had the “full support of the US Congress as it seeks to move the peace process forward”.

More significant was the Bush administration’s response. In the midst of the escalating violence in Sri Lanka, Secretary of State Rice made no criticism—even in guarded diplomatic terms—of the provocative stance of the Rajapakse government or the actions of the military. Nor did she make any reference, even obliquely, to the communal agitation of Rajapakse’s allies—the Sinhala extremists of the JHU and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

Instead, according to a state department spokesman, Rice, after expressing “concern over the recent upsurge of violence” then “lauded the Sri Lankan government for its restraint in the face of the Tamil Tigers’ provocations”. She declared that the US remained committed to working with Sri Lanka “to defeat terrorism and to promote peace”. Rice announced that state department under-secretary for political affairs Nicholas Burns would travel to Sri Lanka to “talk about facilitating peace between the government and the LTTE”.

The direction in which the Bush administration is leaning is unmistakable. To “laud” the Colombo government for its “restraint,” even as the Sri Lankan security forces are engaged in attacks, murders and repression, is only to encourage Rajapakse, the military and Sinhala extremists to go further. Rice’s remarks come in the wake of a meeting last month of the co-chairs of the Sri Lankan donors group—the US, the EU, Japan and Norway—which showed a similar bias. Its statement urged the LTTE to “put an end to its ongoing campaign of violence” and warned of “serious consequences” if it failed to do so.

The Bush administration is no more committed to “peace” in Sri Lanka than it is in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Having largely ignored the brutal 20-year civil war on the island, Washington only wants it ended now because the conflict threatens to destabilise a region in which US strategic and economic interests are growing. Not only is India an expanding source of cheap labour for American corporations but South Asia is adjacent to the key resource-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia.

The Bush administration has been fostering a close relationship with India—a fact that was reflected in Rice’s remarks last Friday. She told the media: “The whole South Asia region I expect to be very high on my list of priorities. Enhancing the relationship with India will be extremely important.” President Bush is planning to visit India later this year.

US support for the so-called peace process in Sri Lanka has always been a purely tactical means for gaining its ends. While US diplomats have insisted on the resumption of peace talks, there has been a steady stream of top US military officers through Colombo to enhance “cooperation” between the two countries. The Pentagon seized the opportunity following the 2004 tsunami to dispatch US troops for the first time to Sri Lanka, creating a precedent for future US military involvement in the island’s affairs.

At present, with the US military embroiled in a quagmire in Iraq, the Bush administration is not in a strong position to plunge into a civil war in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, as the island slides back to war, US officials are obviously in the process of calculating their response. By turning a blind eye to the Sri Lankan military’s provocations and berating the LTTE, Rice is adding more inflammable material to what is already an explosive situation.

Rajapakse appears to have quickly worked out which way the wind is blowing in Washington. Last weekend he seized on the sinking of the naval vessel to markedly toughen his stance toward the LTTE. “It is a great mistake if anyone thinks that our decisions can be altered by means of terror. The LTTE should realise that we are not deaf and blind. If they think so, the time has come for them to give up such thoughts,” he declared.

This is not the language of peace, but of war.



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