

# US ambassador to Sri Lanka threatens the LTTE

K. Ratnayake  
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In a speech to the American Chamber of Commerce in Sri Lanka on Tuesday, US ambassador Jeffrey Lunstead delivered a blunt warning to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to return to the negotiating table or confront a strengthened Sri Lankan military backed by the US.

Lunstead's comments come amid rapidly escalating tensions on the island where the military and the LTTE are engaged in what amounts to an undeclared war. There is mounting evidence that both sides are deliberately heightening communal tensions and carrying out provocative attacks and murders. Each denies responsibility for the wave of killings.

Washington has already signalled where it will stand in the event of open war. Just four days before Lunstead's speech, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met with Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera in Washington and lauded the "restraint" shown by President Mahinda Rajapakse government "in the face of the LTTE provocations." She declared that Washington was working with "Sri Lanka to defeat terrorism."

Lunstead began his comments by explaining that the US and other major powers would continue to pressure the LTTE to restart peace talks stalled since 2003. "There can be a role for the LTTE in future development of Sri Lanka, but only if it returns to the peace table, renounces terrorism in word and deed and becomes a responsible participant in Sri Lanka's future," he declared.

But while saying "We want peace. We support peace," Lunstead warned: "If the LTTE chooses to abandon peace, however, we wanted it to be clear, they will face a stronger, more capable and more determined Sri Lankan military. We want the cost of a return to war to be high."

To make the point unmistakably clear, Lunstead added: "Through our military training and assistance programs, including efforts to help with counter-terrorism initiatives and block illegal financial transactions, we are helping to shape the ability of the Sri Lankan government to protect its people and defend its interests."

"Now you may be asking, why is the American ambassador using such blunt language at a gathering of the business elite," Lunstead told the gathered corporate leaders. "It is imperative that business community become seized with the peace process."

Officially at least, Washington continues to support the so-called peace process. The US, along with other major powers, has been pushing for a peace deal to put an end to a brutal 20-year war that threatens to cut across its growing economic and strategic interests on the Indian subcontinent. The corporate elite in Colombo has also been pushing for an end to the conflict in order to further their ambition to make the island into an investment gateway to the region, India in particular.

Politically, however, the Colombo ruling elites have proven organically incapable of extricating themselves from the Sinhala chauvinism that they have stirred up and exploited for decades to divide the working class. Amid a deepening social crisis, Mahinda Rajapakse narrowly won the presidential election last November by advocating a more aggressive stance against the LTTE. The LTTE, which is also mired in communal politics, has responded in kind.

While US officials still speak of "wanting peace", Washington is also preparing for the eventuality of war. As Lunstead was addressing the Colombo business elite, a report in *Ravaya*, a weekly newspaper, indicated that US defence attaché James F. Oxley and US

political affairs secretary Evans Williams were in the northern town of Jaffna inquiring into the military situation and the needs of the Sri Lankan armed forces. The two US officials held discussions with the Jaffna commander, Major General G.A. Chandrasiri.

Successive governments in Colombo have been keen to cultivate close military ties with the US. Both of the major parties—Rajapakse’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the opposition United National Party (UNP)—have backed the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism” and tacitly supported the US-led occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. For the Pentagon, the island is located in a key strategic position in the Indian Ocean aside naval routes between the Middle East and South East Asia.

In June 2002, Washington held discussions with the UNP-led government on a far-reaching Access and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA) that would enable US warships and aircraft to use facilities in Sri Lanka. Following the December 2004 tsunami, the US military dispatched warships, helicopters and marines to the island setting a precedent for future US involvement in the name of “humanitarian aid”.

As Lunstead indicated, the US military has been quietly engaged in training programs for the Sri Lankan armed forces for more than two decades. In 2004, closer ties even were established. An Institute of Peace Support Operations Training, Sri Lanka (IPSOTSL) centre was established and used by the US Pacific Command to train “peace-keeping” troops from Sri Lanka and other regional countries. In October 2004, Sri Lanka dispatched 700 troops to help bolster the so-called peace-keeping force on the small Caribbean nation of Haiti sent to prop up the US-installed regime of Prime Minister Gérard Latortue.

By indicating US support for the Sri Lankan military, Lunstead’s comments will only encourage the Rajapakse government, its Sinhala chauvinist allies and the military to escalate their aggressive stance towards the LTTE. An editorial in the right-wing *Island* newspaper on Thursday hailing the US ambassador’s remarks made clear that the message has been understood in Colombo ruling circles.

“When one deals with an erring child, one has to be soft and mild,” the editorial began. “But being soft and mild doesn’t pay in dealing with grown-up men unleashing unbridled terror. In dealing with them, one

has to speak the language they understand most. The US ambassador in Sri Lanka Jeffrey Lunstead has minced no words in telling the LTTE where to get off. His message to the outfit is loud and clear: ‘Return to war at high cost!’”

Reflecting the frustrations of sections of the Colombo ruling elite, the *Island* has repeatedly criticised the major powers for backing Washington’s “war on terrorism,” but failing to support Colombo’s. It routinely castigates “the peace lobby” and “the LTTE appeasers”. Feeling vindicated, its editorial concluded with the jubilant cry: “Three cheers to the US warning and hats off to Mr Lunstead!”

Mr Lunstead entitled his talk “Peace and Prosperity: US Policy Goals in Sri Lanka 2006”. In the name of “peace”, increasingly overt preparations are being made for war.



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