

FBI arrests in US and Canada signal Washington's backing for war against LTTE

Nanda Wickremasinghe
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An FBI operation last week led to the detention of at least 12 US and Canadian citizens on charges of trying to purchase illegal arms, attempting to bribe US officials and supporting the Sri Lankan separatist group—the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The arrests, carried out in conjunction with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and other US and Canadian authorities, were the first since the US listed the LTTE as a terrorist organisation in 1997.

Four Tamils were detained on August 19 when they allegedly attempted to purchase illegal arms from FBI agents posing as arms dealers on Long Island. The arms included up to 100 Russian-made SA-18 shoulder-fired, surface-to-air missiles, 500 AK-47 assault rifles and other weapons. According to the FBI agents, those arrested were seeking missiles capable of shooting down Kfir fighter jets being used by the Sri Lankan military to strafe LTTE positions in the country's widening civil war.

Another group of Tamils was arrested in a second operation and charged with attempting to bribe FBI agents, posing as US State Department officials, to have the LTTE removed from the US list of terrorist organisations and to obtain classified information. They are also charged with “providing material support to the LTTE, the procurement of military equipment, dual use technology, fund raising and money laundering through ‘front’ charitable organisations and U.S. bank accounts.”

The FBI claimed that “the defendants are closely connected with the LTTE leadership” and “many of them have personally met with LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran”. If convicted, they face prison terms of up to 35 years. All have pleaded innocent to the charges and have been remanded without bail. In Sri Lanka, LTTE military spokesman Rasaiah Ilanthiriyar told the press: “We have no connection with these people and this is not our way of operating.”

The timing and nature of the detentions point to their political character. Although some of the suspects have been under political surveillance for up to six years, US authorities organised the arrests through two “sting” operations amid the outbreak of open warfare in Sri Lanka for the first time since 2002. While it is formally calling for a cessation of hostilities, the arrests are another indication that the Bush administration is

openly siding with the Sri Lankan government in its war against the LTTE.

Sri Lankan defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella hailed the arrests as “tangible support in the global war against terror” and called on the European Union to also “tighten the screws on the LTTE”. Sinhala extremist groups immediately praised the police operation. Patriotic National Movement leader Elle Gunawansa told national television that his group was “very happy”. An editorial in the right-wing *Island* last week said the New York arrests showed that, “the US is beginning to couple its anti-terror policy with some action. It is a matter for happiness that the US continues to move in the right direction.”

Commenting on the case, US Attorney General Alberto Gonzales declared: “[T]he multi-faceted scheme by members and supporters of the Sri Lankan organisation known as the Tamil Tigers demonstrates the need for continued vigilance in the global war against terrorists.” FBI special agent-in-charge Leslie Wiser Jr. remarked that the “operation has severely impaired the Tamil Tigers’ ability to acquire funding and weapons for their ongoing terror operations in Sri Lanka”.

The inclusion of Tamil separatists of the LTTE in the “global war on terrorism” underscores the absurdity of the Bush administration’s catch-all phrase. If the LTTE is seeking to purchase surface-to-air missiles, it is because in the current fighting the Sri Lankan military has ruthlessly used its warplanes, not only to hit LTTE positions, but to terrorise the local population. On August 14, the air force bombed an alleged LTTE training camp, killing up to 61 teenage school children taking part in a first aid course.

FBI arrests followed the visit of senior US State Department official Steven Mann to Sri Lanka on August 17. Mann, who met Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse and army commander Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka, accepted their false claims that the army’s operations were “defensive”. After months of covert provocations, the military launched a major offensive on July 26 to capture the Mavilaru irrigation sluice gate inside LTTE territory in open breach of the 2002 ceasefire. Fighting has since broadened as the LTTE retaliated.

Mann declared that “the LTTE has a direct, clear, immediate responsibility to cease hostilities.” Then in a comment indicating Washington’s backing for Rajapakse’s war on the

LTTE, he added that the US did not want to be asked “if we are fighting it [terrorism] worldwide, why aren’t we doing it here in Sri Lanka?”

The Bush administration’s support for the war against the LTTE marks a certain tactical shift. In 2002, the US, along with other major powers, backed the signing of a ceasefire and negotiations between the LTTE and the United National Party-led government to end the 20-year civil war.

Washington’s backing for the so-called peace process, even as it was militarily occupying Afghanistan, was never out of concern for the plight of the Sri Lankan population. Rather, the Sri Lankan war remained a dangerous, destabilising factor on the Indian subcontinent, where US economic and strategic interests were assuming growing importance, particularly in India itself.

The US, which maintained the LTTE on its list of terrorist organisations, insisted that any role for the LTTE in a political settlement of the conflict had to be limited. It opposed the LTTE’s demand for a separate state of Tamil Eelam and repeatedly called on the guerrilla organisation to formally renounce violence and begin disarming, even before a final political deal had been reached.

Following the collapse of peace talks in 2003 and the ousting of the UNP government in 2004, the Bush administration has backed a more aggressive stance against the LTTE, particularly after the election of Rajapakse as president last November.

The shift in Washington’s stance was expressed in January in a speech by US ambassador Jeffrey Lunstead to the American Chamber of Commerce in Sri Lanka. In a blunt warning to the LTTE, he declared: “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.”

Lunstead listed a series of measures that the US would take. “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.”

High-ranking officers from the US South Pacific Command visited regularly to assess the Sri Lankan military situation, even touring the front lines in the North and East. Since the beginning of the year, the US has pushed Canada and the European Union to ban the LTTE as a terrorist organisation, severely hampering its ability to obtain political and financial support from the broad diaspora of Tamil refugees.

Far from promoting peace talks, Washington’s growing political and military cooperation has only encouraged the Sri Lankan government, the armed forces and various Sinhala extremist parties to take a more aggressive stance toward the LTTE. In return, the Bush administration is seeking Colombo’s backing for its global ambitions. Negotiations have already been initiated for an Acquisition and Cross Service Agreement

(ACSA) that would give the US military extensive access to Sri Lanka’s ports, airports and air space.

In the wake of last week’s FBI arrests, several comments have appeared highlighting Sri Lanka’s strategic potential for the US. The US think tank Stratfor, which has close ties to the US military and intelligence establishment, published a comment last Friday entitled “Sri Lanka: Strategic potential on hold”, stating:

“Sri Lanka’s location places it close to numerous geopolitical hot spots. India’s stature and influence in the international system continues to grow, while nearby Pakistan and Bangladesh battle Islamist militancy. The United States military understands the utility of Sri Lanka’s proximity to these countries. In 2002, Washington and Colombo signed a broad defence agreement under which Sri Lanka allowed US ships to dock and refuel in domestic ports in exchange for US military training and equipment. US warships involved in Afghan operations, such as the USS Sides, used the port of Colombo under the deal.”

The article highlighted the strategic significance of Trincomalee, Sri Lanka’s deepwater port on the east coast, which is in the midst of the current fighting. “If peace were somehow established, Trincomalee would certainly rank on the U.S. military’s wish list, being one of the deepest natural ports in the world,” it commented. Stratfor warned that, if the US refused to help, other powers would step in. “China and Pakistan, meanwhile, have recognised the utility of assisting the Sri Lankan government in its fight with the Tigers as a tool to edge their way into India’s backyard,” it stated.

Whether the US is prepared to politically and materially support an all-out offensive against the LTTE remains to be seen. However, the latest FBI arrests and hints of further action to cut the LTTE’s international support and supply lines will only encourage the Rajapakse government to intensify its military actions, which are plunging the country back to unrestrained civil war.



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