

Indian government offers full support for Sri Lankan war

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In a statement to the parliament last Wednesday, Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee called on the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka to unconditionally surrender and offered to evacuate Tamil civilians from the war zone in the north of the island.

New Delhi's overt support for the Sri Lankan government's communal war is not motivated by concern for the estimated 250,000 civilians trapped in the island's northern war zone. Rather, based on the calculation that the LTTE's military defeat is imminent, the Indian government is seeking ways to consolidate India's economic and strategic position in Sri Lanka.

Mukherjee told parliament: "As the conflict [the civil war in Sri Lanka] enters what may be the final phase of military operations, the LTTE would best serve the interest of the Tamils by immediately releasing all civilians [in its zone] and laying down arms." He said India continued to back "a negotiated political settlement" but the LTTE remained "a proscribed organisation in India [that] has done much damage to the Tamil community".

India is performing an awkward balancing act. By aligning itself more openly with the Sri Lankan government, New Delhi is moving to take advantage of economic opportunities that may open up in the wake of an LTTE defeat. It is also seeking to neutralise the growing influence of its rivals, Pakistan and China, on the island.

At the same time, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is attempting to placate popular anger in the southern

state of Tamil Nadu, where most of India's 62 million Tamils live. Recent weeks have seen protests across the state over the humanitarian crisis in the northern Mullaithivu district, where the Sri Lankan military's artillery attacks and aerial bombing have killed hundreds of Tamil civilians and injured thousands.

Mukherjee was careful to couch the Indian offer in terms of alleviating the refugee crisis. "India is ready to facilitate the evacuation of civilians trapped in the area of conflict, working with the government of Sri Lanka and the ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] who would take responsibility for the security, screening and rehabilitation of these persons," he said. No details of the evacuation plan, including any involvement of the Indian military, have been provided.

The main purpose of this proposal is to help the Sri Lankan government, not the refugees. Colombo has been criticised internationally for its callous indifference to the plight of civilians trapped in the fighting and over their plans for refugee resettlement. It has announced the establishment of huge "welfare villages" for the compulsory confinement of up to 200,000 war refugees for as long as three years.

By not challenging Colombo's plans and even offering to take some refugees, the Indian government is relieving some of the international pressure on Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse. Not surprisingly Sri Lankan defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella said his government welcomed India's offer, "provided it is done within the framework that we have set up already".

Mukherjee's offer to take refugees was also designed

to throw a lifeline to political parties in Tamil Nadu, particularly its allies in the ruling coalition in New Delhi—the Dravida Munnetra Kazagam (DMK) and the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK). Confronting rising popular anger over the war in Sri Lanka, these parties have been forced to make their own feeble protestations. The DMK and PMK, as well as the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazagam (MDMK), have called for India to intervene diplomatically to stop the conflict.

Mukherjee said Sri Lankan President Rajapakse had promised New Delhi that he would implement a "political solution" to address the democratic rights of Tamils after the war. However, the real face of the Rajapakse regime is shown in the constant military intimidation and arbitrary detentions, as well as deaths and "disappearances" that prevail in the northern and eastern areas already captured from the LTTE over the past two years.

The Colombo government welcomed Mukherjee's statement. In a media statement, C.R. Jayasinghe, the Sri Lankan High Commissioner in New Delhi, described the comments as "constructive", adding: "It reflects very accurately the ground situation, which shows the path ahead for peace and reconciliation."

When the Rajapakse government plunged Sri Lanka back to war in mid-2006, New Delhi gave it cautious, covert support, always with an eye to the political situation in Tamil Nadu. While publicly calling for a ceasefire and a "political solution", it supplied military equipment and training. Last July, Sri Lanka's army chief, Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka, told journalists that India was training 800 officers annually, free of charge, describing India's support as "huge".

New Delhi opposed the LTTE's fight for a separate state in part because of its potential to encourage separatist movements inside India, including Tamil Nadu. As the LTTE lost ground, however, the Indian government's primary concern has been to outmanoeuvre its rivals. Unlike India, which restricted military aid to prevent protests in Tamil Nadu, China and Pakistan sold Sri Lanka large quantities of military hardware.

Mukherjee spelt out India's calculations in a parliamentary statement last October: "We have a very comprehensive relationship with Sri Lanka. In our anxiety to protect the civilians, we should not forget the strategic importance of this island to India's interests... especially in view of attempts by countries like Pakistan and China to gain a strategic foothold in the island nation... We cannot have a playground of international players in our backyard."

Economic interests are also at stake. In last Wednesday's statement, Mukherjee said India was ready to develop the North and East of Sri Lanka after the war. In the guise of helping Tamils living there, India is preparing to invest in the military-occupied areas. Because of criticisms of the war's civilian toll, New Delhi earlier turned down a Sri Lankan government proposal to build a power plant at Sampur in eastern Trincomalee. Recent reports indicate that the Indian oil giant ONGC has now accepted the Sri Lankan offer.



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