

Sri Lankan suicide bombing: more hypocrisy from Washington

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Thirty people—20 soldiers and 10 civilians—were killed by a suspected Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) female suicide bomber on February 9 in the Mullaithivu district of northern Sri Lanka. It was a desperate act by the LTTE, which is now confined to a small pocket of territory in north-eastern Mullaithivu and faces the full brunt of the Sri Lankan army.

The blast took place in a receiving centre at the Sugandarapuram Maha Vidyalaya (school) in Vishvamadu run by the military for civilians fleeing from the LTTE-controlled Puthukkudiyiruppu area. According to the military, nearly 900 civilians were there at that time. As female soldiers were approaching the bomber to search for weapons she blew up herself. Several women and children were killed, and 40 civilians were among 64 injured. All the civilian casualties were Tamil refugees.

The suicide bomber was no doubt motivated by concern over the desperate situation facing Tamils after a quarter century of war. But the LTTE's methods only underscore the bankruptcy of its perspective. Such senseless attacks have no military significance, only alienate working people and play directly into the hands of Sinhala extremists in Colombo.

So it was in this case. The military and the government immediately seized on the suicide bombing to justify their criminal war as the means of "liberating" Tamils from the "clutches of the terrorist LTTE". President Mahinda Rajapakse issued a cynical statement restating his commitment to "eliminating terrorism" and extending his "heartfelt condolences... to the bereaved families."

An editorial in the *Island* pounced on the incident as evidence that LTTE chief V. Prabhakaran was "killing hapless people having grabbed their children as cannon fodder, plundered their wealth and destroyed their future". In a justification for further state repression against opponents of the war, the newspaper denounced anyone calling for an end to the fighting as "trying to open an escape route for Prabhakaran" and being as guilty as Prabhakaran "of the heinous crimes being committed against civilians".

Reality is stood on its head. Tens of thousands of heavily armed troops have encircled a small area containing an estimated 250,000 civilians and are pounding it relentlessly with artillery and from the air. Military spokesmen have declared that the army takes no responsibility for civilians outside its self-declared safe zones—itself a breach of international law. Hundreds of civilians have been killed—for the most part by government shelling. The "safe zones" themselves have come under fire. The military's strategy is clear: to stampede civilians into fleeing the area then transform it into a wasteland.

In the twisted logic of the Colombo political and media establishment, a suicide bombing is used to justify an entire communal war and all of its associated crimes. Editorials such as the *Island's* are common currency among an elite that has based itself for six decades on official discrimination against the island's Tamil minority and has fought a war for 25 years to maintain the Sinhala supremacist state.

What is more significant is that the US embassy quickly issued its own official statement condemning

the suicide attack. The hypocrisy is all too evident. No condemnations have been made of the Sri Lankan army for its relentless shelling and killing and maiming of civilians. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, at least 16 patients were killed this week by shelling at a makeshift hospital in the war zone. The government, which has overwhelming artillery superiority, issued its standard denial and was not of course challenged by Washington.

The US statement simply repeats the arguments of the Rajapakse government, declaring the suicide bombing to be an "apparent effort by the LTTE to discourage Tamils from leaving the conflict area". Whatever the LTTE's motive in carrying out the attack, its heavy-handed tactics are just one factor preventing an exodus of civilians from its territory. Apart from the dangers of crossing the frontlines, the fleeing Tamils understand that what awaits them is state persecution, arbitrary detention and murder by pro-government death squads.

The embassy statement concluded with an appeal to the Sri Lankan government to ensure that all internally displaced persons "are registered and transferred in a transparent manner to temporary camps in accordance with international standards". However, the government is already flouting international standards for the treatment of refugees, without a bleat of protest from Washington.

A US-based Human Rights Watch report made clear last December that fleeing civilians are being detained indefinitely in what amount to squalid concentration camps. According to the Associated Press (AP), the government is now circulating a plan to house an expected 200,000 Tamil refugees for up to three years in five huge "welfare villages". In classic Orwellian doublespeak, Rajiva Wijesinha, secretary at the Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights, told AP that the camps were necessary to protect the refugees. He added that the "welfare villages" would be government-run but the military would have "great involvement".

Washington's hypocritical statement underscores the fact that the Obama administration is following on from where Bush left off—backing Rajapakse's war and

covering up for all his crimes. The US and its allies have helped arm and train the Sri Lankan military. Washington played a major role in isolating the LTTE internationally by pressuring the EU and Canada to ban it as a terrorist organisation. The US tacitly backed the Rajapakse government's open breaches of the 2002 ceasefire lines even though it was one of the so-called co-sponsors of the international "peace process". Its occasional limp expressions of concern about the Sri Lankan army's most flagrant abuses have been with an eye to containing growing public outrage in Sri Lanka and internationally.

The parallels with Washington's support for Israel's criminal war on Gaza are glaring. Its statements equated the limited rocket attacks on Israel settlements and towns with the Israeli army's blitzkrieg against the entire civilian population of Gaza. The US accepted as good coin the Israeli military's lies, blaming its own crimes on Hamas for using civilians as "human shields" and the overarching propaganda that this was Israel's "war on terrorism". The benchmark for all these practices had already been set in the US invasion and neo-colonial occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Following Gaza, Afghanistan and Iraq, the war in Sri Lanka is another sharp warning to working people around the world. As the global economic crisis deepens and imperialist rivalry intensifies, vicious wars of aggression and the flagrant abuse of democratic rights are becoming the norm as the major powers, particularly the US, seek to defend their strategic and economic interests, either directly or through various local allies.



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