

Imperialist hypocrisy over the Sri Lankan war

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The human tragedy unfolding in northern Sri Lanka has become the occasion for an outpouring of hypocritical concern, on the part of the major powers, for the plight of an estimated 50,000 civilians trapped in fighting between the army and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Over the past week, the US, the European Union (EU) and the UN Security Council have called on the Sri Lankan government for a ceasefire, dispatching their emissaries, UN humanitarian chief John Holmes, British Foreign Secretary David Miliband and French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, to Colombo.

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse has rejected the appeals for a temporary halt to the fighting and for a UN humanitarian team to visit the war zone, insisting that the LTTE, now confined to a tiny pocket of territory, must unconditionally surrender or be annihilated. Even the government's pledge this week to stop using heavy weapons was broken within hours of its announcement. As a result, hundreds of men, women and children have been killed in the past week.

No one should place any faith in the imperialist powers' intervention to halt the war. Their attitude was revealed in the UN Security Council presidential statement issued last week. Far from condemning the Rajapakse government for its war crimes or threatening action if it failed to stop the fighting, the declaration demanded that the LTTE lay down its arms and surrender.

The statement is in line with the stance of the so-called international co-chairs of the Sri Lankan peace

process—the US, the EU, Japan and Norway—since Rajapakse restarted the war in 2006. While making occasional protests about the army's worst abuses, the co-chairs remained silent as the government launched repeated offensives in breach of the 2002 ceasefire. The US continued to provide military training and aid, and permitted its allies Israel and Pakistan to supply arms.

Rajapakse has modelled his aggression on Washington's own bogus "war on terrorism". He has denounced the LTTE as terrorists, blamed civilian deaths on the LTTE's use of "human shields" and resorted to arbitrary detention, torture and extra-judicial murders. The US has provided political and diplomatic backing by maintaining the LTTE on its "terrorist list" and pressuring the EU and Canada to follow suit.

In reality, the 26-year conflict is not a "war on terrorism" but a communal war produced by decades of anti-Tamil discrimination on the part of successive Sri Lankan governments. Its purpose is to entrench the power and privileges of the Sinhalese ruling elites at the expense not only of the Tamil minority but the working class as a whole.

Army chief Sarath Fonseka summed up this Sinhala supremacist attitude when he declared last September: "I strongly believe that this country belongs to the Sinhalese... They [the minorities] can live in this country with us. But they must not try to, under the pretext of being a minority, demand undue things."

In the poisonous communal atmosphere in Colombo, any ceasefire call is treated as "saving the Tiger terrorists". The Sri Lankan establishment has reacted to international expressions of concern with barely

concealed contempt. An editorial last week in the right-wing *Island*, for instance, dismissed the plight of Tamil civilians, declaring: “Who doesn’t know that war is synonymous with suffering?”

Behind the “humanitarian” concerns of the major powers lie definite economic and strategic interests. The Obama administration is no more disturbed about the killing of Tamils by the Sri Lankan military than it is about the slaughter of Afghan and Pakistani civilians by US bombs and rockets. The US, Britain and France, along with China, India and other lesser powers, are all hovering around Sri Lanka to stake their claim in the new environment created in the wake of the LTTE’s defeat.

Washington is pressing for a “political settlement”, not to save the LTTE, but because it fears that communal tensions will continue to fester, producing ongoing instability, unless a deal is struck between the island’s Sinhala and Tamil elites. Unrest in Sri Lanka also threatens to spill over into southern India, where there is already widespread anger among Tamils over the slaughter of civilians in northern Sri Lanka. For the past decade, Washington has been establishing close economic and strategic ties with New Delhi.

The US also wants to advance its interests in Sri Lanka. At a business gathering in Washington last week, US assistant trade representative Michael Delaney spoke of new investment opportunities once the war was over, and announced a visit by American entrepreneurs later this year. The Pentagon already has access to Sri Lanka under an Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement but is seeking closer ties. In recent years, top-level US military teams have not only provided advice to their Sri Lankan counterparts, but visited the eastern port of Trincomalee, which is widely regarded as one of the region’s key deep-water harbours.

The island’s strategic position in the Indian Ocean—aside the main shipping routes from the Middle East and Africa to Asia—has made it the focus of international rivalry. The US is concerned to block the growing influence of China, which has backed

Rajapakse’s war unconditionally and provided financial aid and arms. In return, Colombo has given the green light for Beijing to construct a major port in the southern town of Hambantota as part of China’s naval strategy to defend its trade routes. India, which regards Sri Lanka as part of its regional sphere of influence, has also been seeking to undercut the activities of China and Pakistan.

These machinations and intrigues only underscore the futility of the LTTE’s appeals to the “international community” to halt the war. The dead-end at which the LTTE has arrived is the outcome of its political perspective, based on appeals to one or other of the major powers to back an independent capitalist state of Eelam in the North and East of the island. This separatist program, which served to deepen the communal divide, represented the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie, not of the Tamil masses.

The working class can only put an end to the war on a progressive basis by advancing its own independent perspective. The Socialist Equality Party calls on all workers to fight for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Sri Lankan forces from the North and East as the first step in uniting the working class in the struggle for a workers’ and farmers’ government based on socialist policies.

The allies of Sri Lankan workers, Tamil and Sinhala alike, are not the imperialist powers, but workers throughout the region and internationally. That is why the SEP insists that the fight for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam must be part of the struggle for a Federation of Socialist States of South Asia and throughout the world.

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