

Sri Lanka and India seek to patch up relations

Wije Dias
4 June 2009

Relations between Sri Lanka and India were strained in the last months of the Sri Lankan military's offensive against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), in which thousands of civilians were killed. The army's final drive coincided with Indian general elections in which politicians, with an eye to Tamil voters in southern India, postured as defenders of the civilians in northern Sri Lanka. With the election finished and the last pocket of LTTE resistance eliminated, the two governments are seeking to patch up relations.

In a calculated move last week, India supported a Sri Lankan resolution at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) that endorsed the Colombo government's brutal war and sanctioned its internment of 300,000 Tamil civilians in squalid detention centres. The resolution, which was adopted, was aimed at countering a move by European powers, backed by the US, for an investigation into human rights violations and war crimes in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lankan Human Rights Minister Mahinda Samarasinghe, who was at the UNHRC special session, later announced that India had agreed to donate \$US300 million to the Sri Lankan government to be used in rehabilitation work. "What Western country would do that?" he exclaimed.

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse is scheduled to visit New Delhi this week in his first foreign trip since declaring victory over the LTTE. Speaking to the media last week, Rajapakse was effusive about closer relations with India. "A new age of ties will begin between the two nations. India my neighbour and best friend," he said, adding that he would also like to meet political leaders of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

India's decision to back the UNHRC resolution did not represent any fundamental shift. The Congress-led coalition government in New Delhi has quietly supported Rajapakse's war throughout the past three years. India was the first country to ban the LTTE after the assassination of former Congress prime minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991. The LTTE's declared aim of establishing a separate Tamil state was seen by the Indian elite as a dangerous destabilising factor that only encouraged separatist movements in India itself.

At the same time, the Indian government was constrained by the widespread popular opposition to the Sri Lankan war, particularly in Tamil Nadu. However, that did not stop New Delhi from helping to train Sri Lankan military personnel, supplying radar equipment with technicians to track the LTTE's light aircraft and reportedly providing intelligence to assist in the sinking of the LTTE's supply ships—all in the name of "non-offensive" aid.

The LTTE's resistance rapidly collapsed after the army captured its administrative centre of Killinochchi in early January. The LTTE fighters, together with more than 250,000 civilians, were driven into a narrow strip of territory on the north east coast. Despite its claims to the contrary, the Sri Lankan military had no compunction in using heavy artillery and aerial bombardment to pound the enclave, killing civilians and provoking international outrage.

In India, parties and politicians who had been largely silent on the Sri Lankan war suddenly began to compete with each other in the election campaign to posture as ardent defenders of the Sri Lankan Tamils. In Tamil Nadu, Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi pressed the central government in New Delhi to force the Sri Lankan government to halt its military offensive, but to no avail. Karunanidhi's party, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, is a member of the ruling national coalition.

The Indian government maintained its precarious balancing act on the Sri Lankan war until polling was over on May 13. Rajapakse announced victory over the LTTE on May 19, as Indian election results were flowing in, which guaranteed a majority to the Congress-led coalition.

Two days later, on May 21, two top Indian officials, Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon and chief defence advisor N. K. Narayanan, flew to Colombo for closed-door discussions with Rajapakse. The Indian External Affairs Ministry stated: "Both sides agreed that, with the end of the military operations in Sri Lanka, the time was opportune to focus attention on issues of relief, rehabilitation, resettlement and reconciliation, including a permanent political settlement in Sri Lanka."

In plain language, New Delhi was expressing its readiness to resume business as usual. The rapid rapprochement exposes the

utter hypocrisy of the Indian political establishment, including in Tamil Nadu, which at opportune moments shed crocodile tears in public about the suffering of Sri Lankan Tamils. A week later India cast its vote in the UNHRC special session in favour of the Sri Lankan resolution sanctioning the government's criminal war.

The speed with which both sides moved is also a sign of the strategic and economic interests at stake. New Delhi has been particularly concerned that rivals Pakistan and China have strengthened their influence in Colombo at India's expense. Unlike India, China and Pakistan were not constrained by domestic political considerations from selling arms to the Sri Lankan military.

China not only provided military assistance, but financial support and diplomatic assistance in blocking discussion of the Sri Lankan war in the UN Security Council. In return, Beijing was given offshore oil exploration rights and the contract to build and maintain a port at Hambantota in the south of the island, adjacent to China's vital trade routes to the Middle East and Africa.

India was deeply concerned at China's growing influence in what it regarded as its sphere of influence. External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee told the Indian parliament last October: "In our anxiety [over the Sri Lankan war refugees], we should not forget the strategic importance of that island and it is not only their security, it is closely connected with our security.... Surely we would not like to have the playground of international players at our backyard."

Indian corporations are also looking to Sri Lanka for business opportunities. The state-owned Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) announced last week that it intended to expand its operations on the island. Lanka IOC, which already operates 150 retail outlets, has applied to the government for approval of another 300 over the next five years. India's \$300 million rehabilitation package is designed to provide more openings for Indian business, particularly to exploit cheap labour in the devastated North and East of the island.

For its part, the Sri Lankan government is looking for all the political and economic support that it can get. The economy is weighed down with huge debts from high military spending and confronts a pressing balance of payments crisis. At the same time, its major exports have been hard hit by the global recession. Sri Lankan corporate leaders are keen to press ahead with long-held plans for closer integration with India's still growing economy.

India has long provided vital political support to the Sri Lankan government. It backed Colombo in 1971 when the Sri Lankan security forces crushed an armed uprising of rural youth in the south of the island, killing an estimated 20,000. New Delhi also came to the rescue of Sri Lanka in 1987, by signing the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord and sending Indian troops to occupy the north of the island and suppress the expanding separatist insurrection.

Speaking in Singapore last week, Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama told the *Hindu* that India was "an important partner". He indicated that the Rajapakse government was looking for Indian support in imposing its "political solution" to the war on the Tamil minority. "India has been always a part of the home-grown process [in Sri Lanka] ... New Delhi has respected the local formulation of proposals in Sri Lanka," he said.

The discussion of a "political solution" exposes the fact that the 26-year civil war in Sri Lanka was not a "war on terrorism" but the outcome of decades of anti-Tamil discrimination by successive Colombo governments. While prepared to make cosmetic concessions to the Tamil elites, President Rajapakse has no intention of altering the Sinhala supremacist character of the Sri Lankan constitution and state apparatus. The task of pushing through his "political solution" would be easier with India's assistance.

Rajapakse, however, has whipped up a climate of Sinhala triumphalism in Colombo in the wake of the army's victory over the LTTE. Throughout the three years of war, he has depended heavily on the support of Sinhala extremist parties, including the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, Jathika Hela Urumaya and the National Freedom Front. These parties, not to speak of the Sinhala chauvinists in Rajapakse's own party, are vehemently opposed to concessions to the Tamil minority and regard India as an insidious patron of Tamil rights.

The initial overtures between India and Sri Lanka are part of a far broader strategic scramble for influence in Colombo, not only by India and China, but also the US, Japan and the European powers. Far from the war ending communal conflict on the island, this rivalry is likely to inflame tensions as each of the major powers exploits political divisions to advance their own economic and strategic ambitions.



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