

US cable demonstrates Sri Lankan government's collusion with paramilitary death squads

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A US diplomatic cable released last week by WikiLeaks confirms the Sri Lankan government's collusion in the criminal activities of various paramilitary groups, including the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) and Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulihal (TMVP), during its war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Written by then US Ambassador to Sri Lanka, Robert O. Blake, and dated May 18, 2007, the cable reports that the governments of both President Mahinda Rajapakse, and his predecessor, President Chandrika Kumaratunga, aided and abetted these death squads. Blake was dismissive of government denials and investigations, declaring: "Outside the capital, the incidence of human rights abuses has continued, including extrajudicial killings, abductions, child trafficking, extortion, and prostitution." As well as public allegations by human rights groups, he declared that "a growing number of trusted Embassy contacts, often at personal risk, have described in detail the extent of the GSL's involvement with paramilitary groups."

Blake's cable to the US State Department noted that the Colombo government saw "several advantages in allowing paramilitary groups", not only for operations against LTTE, but to "enhance security in Colombo by kidnapping and sometimes killing those suspected of working with the LTTE. Frequent abductions by paramilitaries keep critics of the GSL [Government of Sri Lanka] fearful and quiet." The memo said the paramilitaries also gave Colombo "a measure of deniability".

The cable reported that Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president's brother, ordered Jaffna military commanders to "not interfere with the paramilitaries on the grounds that they are doing 'work' that the military cannot do because of international scrutiny"—in other words extra-judicial killings and other illegal activities. The defence ministry also instructed top officials "not to interfere with operations of military intelligence", which worked closely the paramilitaries.

Blake's cable confirms what the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party, along with various human rights organisations, reported and condemned at the time. While Blake

and the Bush administration were well aware of the crimes being committed, Washington maintained a diplomatic silence and fully backed Rajapakse's renewed war against the LTTE.

The cable reported that an informant "stated that he believed Karuna set up the assassination of Tamil MP Joseph Pararajasingham on Christmas Day 2005 with the help of EPDP leader Devananda." The same information "was also positive that Karuna [TMVP] cadres were employed in the killing in Colombo of popular Tamil MP Nadarajah Raviraj on November 10, 2006."

The murder of pro-LTTE Pararajasingham was a particularly provocative act coming just weeks after Rajapakse narrowly won the presidential election in November 2005. Rajapakse was determined to sabotage internationally sponsored peace talks and the 2002 ceasefire. The killing, which was followed by other high-profile assassinations, was designed to goad the LTTE into responding thus providing the pretext for a renewed war.

Once Rajapakse restarted the war in July 2006, his government, "strapped for cash, has cut direct payments to paramilitaries initiated by former President Kumaratunga and instead turns a blind eye to extortion and kidnapping for ransom by EPDP and Karuna."

According to the cable, Gotabhaya Rajapakse authorised the EPDP and Karuna to blackmail Tamil businessmen as a means of raising funds. Details obtained from informants revealed that both paramilitaries forced war widows and young girls into prostitution and were involved in the recruitment of child soldiers, as young as 14.

The collusion between the paramilitaries and the Sri Lankan security forces has been evident all along. Of the hundreds of people who have been murdered or "disappeared", a number of high profile cases have been in areas closely monitored by the military, yet the killers always made a clean escape.

The killing of *Sunday Leader* editor Lasantha Wickrematunge, a government critic, is one well-known instance. He was killed in broad daylight on January 8, 2009 while travelling to work in

Colombo's suburbs. Although the murder occurred near a high security zone and checkpoints were located at every junction in Colombo, the assassins fled without a trace.

An informant explained the modus operandi to the US embassy: "[W]hen the EPDP intends to kill a target, they first provide notice to the military... At an agreed time, all of the soldiers in the designated area take a five to ten minute 'break' at once ... At that point, armed and masked gunmen, often riding on motorcycles, race down the street and assassinate the intended victim. Shortly after the killing, the soldiers' break over, they return to their posts to deal with the aftermath." The cable noted that while police investigations were common they "almost never led to arrests."

The SEP was targeted by the paramilitaries for its principled opposition to the communal war. The party fought for the unity of Tamil and Sinhala workers and the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Sri Lankan army from the North and East.

On August 7, 2006, just two weeks after Rajapakse resumed Colombo's war against the LTTE, SEP supporter Sivapragasam Mariyadas was shot and killed at his home at Mullipothana, near the eastern port city of Trincomalee. The killer escaped despite a heavy military presence in the town. The Sri Lanka authorities failed to properly investigate the murder and falsely insinuated that Mariyadas was an LTTE supporter.

On March 22, 2007, SEP member Nadarajah Wimalaswaran and his friend, Sivanathan Mathivathanan, disappeared near Velanai on Kayts Island near the Jaffna Peninsula. They were last seen riding a motor bike on a long causeway between Punguduthivu Island and Kayts Island. At both ends of the causeway were naval checkpoints. Official inquiries failed to question either the naval commander or personnel from the Velanai navy camp. All the evidence points to the involvement of the navy either directly or indirectly in collusion with the EPDP, which was responsible for previous violent threats against SEP members.

The 2007 cable exposes the completely hypocritical character of the US stance on human rights in Sri Lanka. Although well aware that the Sri Lankan military was using paramilitaries to provoke a war, the US echoed the government's claims that the LTTE was breaching the 2002 ceasefire. In January 2006, the US Ambassador to Sri Lanka, Jeffrey Lunstead, 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."

For two and a half years, the US kept quiet about the Sri Lankan military's crimes. It was only as the LTTE's defeat appeared imminent that Washington began to voice concerns about Tamil civilians being killed by the military's air and artillery attacks. According to conservative UN figures, at least 7,000 civilians were killed in the months prior to the LTTE's collapse in May 2009.

The Obama administration's public criticism had nothing to do

with defending the democratic rights and lives of Tamil civilians. Rather it was aimed at pressuring the Sri Lankan government which the US viewed as being too close to its rival China. During the war, Rajapakse had increasingly relied on Chinese arms and aid, providing Beijing with investment opportunities, including in the key strategic port of Hambantota.

By last December, however, a report by the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, *Sri Lanka: Recharting US Strategy After the War*, concluded that the US focus on "human rights" was counterproductive. The report declared that the US could not afford to "lose" Sri Lanka, given its strategic location across key Indian Ocean shipping routes and proposed closer collaboration with the Rajapakse government on a range of issues. The previous limited criticisms of Colombo's criminal record were all but dropped. Blake is now the Obama administration's Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs.

As for the EPDP and TMVP, the political arms of these paramilitaries continue to operate closely with the Rajapakse government. The EPDP is part of the ruling coalition and its leader, Douglas Devananda is the current minister for traditional industries. The TMVP, which was formed through a split with the LTTE in the East in 2004 under Karuna's leadership, has split again. Karuna has joined Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and is now deputy minister for resettlement. The TMVP is the leading party in the pro-government coalition that controls the provincial council in the East.

WikiLeaks previously released a January 15, 2010 cable by Patricia Butenis, the current US Ambassador to Colombo, which also confirmed that Washington was aware that the highest levels of the Sri Lankan government were responsible for war crimes. The Rajapakse government, with the complicity of the Colombo media, continues to deny any responsibility for the crimes of the military or paramilitaries. And the Obama administration maintains a studied silence.



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