

Indian foreign minister visits Sri Lanka

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Indian External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna arrived in Sri Lanka on January 16 and spent four days in discussions with political leaders. He also commissioned several projects financed by the Indian government. While he cynically expressed concern about the plight of Sri Lankan Tamils, the purpose of Krishna's trip was to push India's economic and geopolitical interests.

This was Krishna's second visit since the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ended in May 2009. The Sri Lankan government of President Mahinda Rajapakse had issued the invitation in an effort to secure India's support to block an international inquiry into war crimes allegations against the Sri Lankan military.

The Rajapakse government faces the prospect of a resolution calling for a war crimes investigation at a meeting of the UN Human Rights Council late next month in Geneva. The government averted a similar move last year by pointing to the proceedings of its own internal inquiry—the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC), appointed by Rajapakse.

The LLRC report, published on December 16, was a transparent whitewash of the Sri Lankan military and government, which were responsible for tens of thousands of civilian deaths and other gross abuses of democratic rights. Yet the major powers and regional powers commended the report, while maintaining the need for a fuller investigation. As a result, the Rajapakse government still faces the threat of an international inquiry.

Canada's Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird stated on January 11: "Canada remains concerned that the

report does not fully address the grave accusations of serious human rights violations that occurred toward the end of the conflict. Many of the allegations outlined by the UN Secretary-General's Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka have not been adequately addressed by this report [the LLRC]. We continue to call for an independent investigation into the credible and serious allegations."

Last year the UN panel reported credible evidence of war crimes by the Sri Lankan military during the final months of the war, including the deliberate targeting of hospitals and aid depots. In a recent lecture in Geneva, panel member Professor Steven Ratner told an audience of US and European diplomats and NGO representatives there was "the need to go ahead with an international inquiry despite Sri Lanka's resistance."

The Sri Lankan government used Krishna's visit to try to ensure an Indian vote against an international investigation. India, the US and other powers have exploited the issue, not out of genuine concern for the rights of Sri Lankan Tamils, but as a means of pressuring the Rajapakse government to distance itself from China, whose influence in Colombo grew during the civil war.

Sharp rivalry between China and India, which regards Sri Lanka as in its traditional backyard, was evident in the course of Krishna's visit. The foreign minister inaugurated a new railway line from the southern city of Galle and a housing project of 50,000 units in the island's north for people displaced by the war. Days before, Chinese officials held a ceremony to lay the foundation stone in Colombo for the tallest telecommunication tower in the region.

The Indian government had its own agenda during

Krishna's visit. On the second day, the Indian foreign minister met with Rajapakse and later his Sri Lankan counterpart, G.L. Peiris for discussions, including on India's call for a "political solution" to the island's civil war. "The President assured me that he stands by his commitment to pursuing the 13th amendment plus approach," Krishna told the media.

India's call for "a political solution" is for a power-sharing arrangement between Sri Lanka's Sinhala and Tamil elites to suppress the alienation and anger among Tamils, many of whom live in appalling conditions more than two years after the end of the war. The Indian government is concerned that any political turmoil in Sri Lanka will spill into the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, which has close historic ties to the island's Tamil minority.

The 13th amendment to the Sri Lankan constitution was adopted as part of the Indo-Lanka accord signed in 1987 to send "peace-keeping" Indian troops to Sri Lanka to end the conflict. It proposed the devolution of limited powers at the provincial level, and a unified northern and eastern province.

The plan was never fully implemented as the Accord collapsed amid renewed fighting in the north and a Sinhala chauvinist campaign against the deal in the south. The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the main Tamil bourgeois party in Sri Lanka, is pushing for the implementation of the 13th amendment or a similar devolution plan, not because it addresses the basic rights of Tamil working people, but because it would give the Tamil elite a greater political say.

TNA spokesman Suresh Premachandra, who participated in talks with the Indian minister, later told the media: "The TNA delegation stressed to Mr. Krishna that India is duty bound to persuade the government of Sri Lanka to evolve an acceptable solution to the national question."

Having defeated the LTTE, the government has been unwilling to make any concessions to the Tamil elites and has made no move to implement the 13th amendment. The ruling coalition includes Sinhala extremist parties such as the Jathika Hela Urumaya

(JHU) and National Freedom Front (NFF).

During Krishna's visit, JHU and NFF extremists attempted to whip up anti-Indian sentiment by accusing India of dictating terms to the Sri Lankan government to devolve more powers and grant concessions to Tamils. They were immediately joined by sections of Rajapakse's own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

Under these conditions, the TNA continues to promote dangerous illusions that decades of anti-Tamil discrimination can be overcome by appealing to the "international community," pressuring the Rajapakse government, or implementing a devolution plan. In fact, the entire history of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie since formal independence in 1948 demonstrates that it is completely incapable of addressing the democratic rights of working people—Sinhala, Muslim and Tamil.

The basic democratic rights of Tamils will be achieved only as part of the struggle by the working class as a whole to abolish the capitalist system that is the root cause of exploitation and oppression. The Socialist Equality Party fights to unite and mobilise workers and the rural masses in the struggle for a united socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as a component of the broader struggle for socialism throughout South Asia and internationally.



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