

Sri Lankan government prepares for Commonwealth summit

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Attempting to boost its image on the world stage, the Sri Lankan government is carrying out a major propaganda blitz ahead of its hosting of the November 15–17 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM).

Asked about the total cost of the summit, External Affairs Minister G.L. Peiris told the press: “Don’t ask what we will spend on the summit. This expenditure must be viewed as an investment to generate more inflows.”

After the CHOGM meeting, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse becomes Commonwealth chairman for next two years. He calculates that the summit, attended by the government heads of 52 former British colonies together with their old master, will help ease the pressure from the US and its allies over human rights abuses in Sri Lanka. He also hopes it will boost foreign investment and buttress his government against the working class.

Rajapakse is seeking to prevent the issue of the war crimes perpetrated by the military during the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) from coming to the fore. A UN expert panel has estimated that at least 40,000 people, mainly civilians, were killed by the military in the months leading up to the end of the war in May 2009. Since then, the government has maintained a huge military occupation of the North and East and is using police state methods to suppress opposition to its austerity policies from working people and youth throughout the country.

Commonwealth countries, including Britain, Canada, Australia and India, fully backed Rajapakse’s war. These countries banned the LTTE and blocked its funds. Britain and India provided military and logistical support to the Rajapakse government’s offensives.

Now they are voicing criticisms, and earlier this year voted for a US-sponsored resolution in the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) calling for a limited investigation into Sri Lankan human rights violations.

The concern of the US and these countries is not the democratic rights of people in Sri Lanka, including Tamils, or the atrocities carried out by the military during the war. Rather they are cynically exploiting the issue to put pressure on the Rajapakse government to limit its relations with China. The US and India regard China’s growing influence in Sri Lanka and the wider Asian region as a threat to their economic and strategic interests.

Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper has hypocritically declared that he will not attend the CHOGM summit because Sri Lanka has not addressed the question of human rights. Like the US, Canada is part of the neo-colonial occupation of Afghanistan where NATO and American military forces routinely carry out human rights abuses and war crimes.

Harper’s non-attendance has been used to bolster the boycott campaign promoted by organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International that lines up with Washington’s efforts to pressure Rajapakse. Various Tamil exile groups are also calling for a boycott. They are seeking international support for a “political solution” to the war that would secure privileges for the Tamil elites.

British Prime Minister David Cameron has stated that he will attend the CHOGM summit and use it as a forum to raise the human rights issue with the Sri Lankan government. In reality, Britain is seeking to use the summit to boost its political influence and business opportunities in Colombo and South Asia.

President Rajapakse is desperate to ensure Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh attends the summit.

His non-participation would exacerbate already strained relations between New Delhi and Colombo. Singh has been pressing the Sri Lankan government to reach a power-sharing deal with the country's main Tamil capitalist party, the Tamil National Alliance.

Singh is under pressure to boycott CHOGM from parties in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, where there is widespread public anger over the treatment of Tamils in Sri Lanka. Replying to Dravida Munnetra Kazagam leader M. Karunanidhi, Singh recently declared that "the issue of my participation in the CHOGM conference will be taken only after considering all relevant factors, including the sentiments of your party and the Tamil people."

Sections of the Indian establishment have been pushing for Singh to attend and use the opportunity to assert India's interests. The *Times of India* cited an external affairs ministry official as saying that participation "would cement India's status as a regional power reflecting its commitment not only to the island nation but also its Tamil minority community."

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott is also attending the CHOGM summit. Successive Australian governments, Labor and Coalition, have forged close relations with the Sri Lankan government and its security forces to prevent refugees fleeing from the island and exercising their democratic right to seek asylum in Australia.

The present Coalition government is fully committed to the Obama administration's aggressive military build-up in Asia that is directed against China. Under the previous Labor government, the US military gained greater access to Australian bases. Abbott will undoubtedly use the opportunity to press Rajapakse to distance Sri Lanka from China.

The Rajapakse government is desperate to attract investment to Sri Lanka and is planning a series of business forums at the CHOGM summit to showcase the country's tax concessions, cheap labour and real estate. Though the government planned for \$US2 billion in investment for 2013, only \$537 million has been secured in the first half of the year.

No doubt lip service will be paid at the summit to the plight of the tens of millions of poor people in the various Commonwealth countries in Africa and Asia. However, decades after formal independence from

Britain, the ruling elites in these countries have proven completely incapable of overcoming the colonial legacy of poverty and anti-democratic rule.

Rajapakse is seeking to use the summit as another political diversion from growing anger and opposition to his government's deep inroads into the living standards of workers and the poor. The president enlisted a celebrated actress to appear on television and proclaim: "What a proud day for us when our country's state leader ascends to become the leader of the Commonwealth!"

Rajapakse, who occasionally strikes a vaguely anti-imperialist posture, clearly has no qualms about assuming the leadership of this relic of the British Empire.



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