Australian Federal Police aid Sri Lankan unit implicated in torture

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The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "7.30" program last Tuesday exposed collaboration between the Australian Federal Police (AFP) and Sri Lanka's Criminal Investigation Department (CID), a unit implicated in torture and the violent treatment of opponents of the Sri Lankan government.

Starting in mid-2009, under Australia's previous Labor government, the AFP provided the CID with office equipment, vehicles and spying tools, which would directly aid its repressive activities. Based on the pretext of "combating people smugglers," Australian police agencies developed close collaboration with Sri Lankan authorities in blocking and victimising asylum seekers attempting to flee persecution.

Significantly, the relationship was established at the peak of a reign of terror by the Sri Lankan government of President Mahinda Rajapakse, directed against the minority Tamil population, political opponents and journalists, in the final stages and aftermath of its brutal war against the secessionist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). An estimated 40,000 civilians were killed in the last months of the war, while over 300,000 Tamils were herded into detention camps.

The LTTE was defeated in May 2009. During the same month, the AFP's collaboration with the CID was itemised in the Rudd Labor government's budget, under the title: "Enhancing Australia's Approach to people smuggling—Fusion & Colombo New Policy Initiative." There was specific funding for the AFP of $2.8 million over four years. In June 2009, the AFP opened an office in Colombo to liaise with the CID and other police agencies.

The "7.30" segment based its revelations on documents dating back to 2011, acquired through a Freedom of Information claim. The reporter, Dylan Welch, said he first asked the AFP in 2011 about the equipment they supplied to Sri Lankan police, but his requests were stonewalled and denied for four years.

Among the material provided to the CID were high-powered intelligence computing programs. These included Jade Investigator, which allows videos, photos and reports to be linked and cross-referenced, and IBM's i2 Analyst's Notebook, a "visual analysis tool" that collates information into graphical networks of people being targeted. Also supplied was a machine that extracts information from emails, text messages and mobile phones, including deleted location information.

Together with a number of other vehicles, the AFP gave the CID a new white van in November 2011. Such vans have been synonymous with kidnappings, torture and extra-judicial murders in Sri Lanka for decades.

The AFP also fitted out, or refurbished, at least four offices in the CID's Colombo headquarters, which is a notorious site of illegal detention and torture. Numerous human rights organisations have documented such crimes.

"7.30" also spoke to victims of the CID's torture program, who outlined the brutal abuses committed against them. "Nick," whose identity was protected by the program, was kidnapped five times by the authorities between 2010 and 2012 while documenting government repression as a photographer. On most occasions, his abductors were CID members.

While detained, "Nick" was blindfolded, burnt with cigarettes, raped and subjected to sexual torture. He was threatened with a gun on multiple occasions. Describing one bout of torture, he said: "I felt a burning metal rod pushed into my back in about six places, leaving burning wounds. The pain was excruciating."

Another Tamil, Raja, who was also tortured and raped by CID officers, told the program that his 16-year-

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old brother was kidnapped by the agency just three weeks ago.

The forging of closer ties between Australian police and Sri Lankan authorities was part of a broader assault on the democratic rights of refugees. The Labor governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard reintroduced the policy of offshore detention, consigning asylum seekers to virtual prison camps on impoverished Pacific islands.

In early 2010, the Rudd government "froze" asylum applications from Sri Lanka, declaring, despite evidence marshalled by human rights organisations, that torture and persecution ended with the conclusion of the civil war.

In December 2012, the Gillard government's foreign minister, Bob Carr, visited Sri Lanka and touted an expansion of "intelligence sharing," along with the provision of training in "intelligence expertise" and "maritime air surveillance."

The visit occurred under conditions in which the Labor government rejected the asylum applications of hundreds of Sri Lankan refugees. They were deported potentially into the arms of the CID and other government agencies for interrogation and abuse.

A Human Rights Law Centre report, released last year, stated that between October 2012 and September 2014, 1,248 refugees were denied asylum by Australian authorities and sent back to Sri Lanka. This practice of refoulement—returning asylum seekers to the country they fled—is a flagrant violation of the international Refugee Convention.

The Special Broadcasting Corporation's "Dateline" program last September featured Tamil refugees who were refused asylum, and returned to Sri Lanka, where they were tortured. Documents obtained by the program under a Freedom of Information request indicated that the AFP was aware of the claims by one of the victims, but chose not to meet with him, "in the interests of keeping our distance from the Sri Lankan investigation ..."

In November 2013, Australia's current Liberal-National Coalition government gave the Sri Lankan government two navy patrol boats, in order to intercept refugees and prevent them from exercising their right to seek asylum. While in Colombo, Prime Minister Tony Abbott lavished praise on the Sri Lankan government, and effectively sanctioned torture, while claiming there was "more freedom" on the island than during the civil war. When a journalist pointed to well-documented allegations of torture, Abbott declared that while his government "deplores the use of torture, we accept that sometimes in difficult circumstances difficult things happen."

The closer ties between the two governments are also bound up with Australia's complete integration into the US military build-up in the Asia-Pacific, directed against China. Sri Lanka is a strategically vital location, near Indian Ocean shipping routes on which China depends and which the US plans to blockade in the event of war.

The US, with the support of its major allies, including Australia, increasingly placed pressure on Mahinda Rajapakse's government as it deepened ties with China. Having backed Rajapakse's communal war against the Tamil population, they hypocritically conducted their campaign under the banner of opposing the very same human rights abuses in which they were complicit.

In this January's presidential election in Sri Lanka, the US backed a regime-change operation involving the ouster of Rajapakse and the installation of Maithripala Sirisena, Rajapakse's former health minister, as president. All this was in the name of restoring democracy.

However, the abuses of detainees have only continued. Freedom From Torture director of policy and advocacy Sonya Seats told "7.30" that her organisation "can say categorically that torture has continued in Sri Lanka." This is a damning exposure of the "human rights" pretext for the US-orchestrated removal of Rajapakse.

Significantly, none of Australia's major corporate media outlets has commented on the "7.30" revelations. The entire political establishment is seeking to cover-up, and continue, the repressive relations established with successive Sri Lankan governments.

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