

US deepens military ties with Sri Lanka

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A US Pacific Command (PACOM)-led team of military experts concluded a week-long Operation Pacific Angel exercise in Sri Lanka's Northern Province on August 23. The exercise was part of the expanding links between the US military and Sri Lankan security forces, under the guise of providing humanitarian assistance.

About 70 personnel from PACOM and military experts from Bangladesh, Nepal and the Maldives, along with Sri Lankan air force personnel, were involved. Operation Pacific Angel conducted similar operations last year in other countries, including the Philippines, Vietnam and Cambodia.

A press statement from the US embassy in Colombo claimed that around 4,000 people were provided with free medical assistance, such as dental care, physiotherapy and optometry, at Idaikkadu and Punguduthivu in Jaffna. Six schools were also renovated.

The statement said that Northern Province was chosen by the PACOM because it was "most affected by conflict [civil war]." It also noted that the US Agency for International Development (USAID) was providing financial assistance to small- and medium-scale businesses and to war widows, resettled families and disabled.

The devastation in Sri Lanka's northern and eastern provinces is the result of Colombo's brutal, decades-long communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) which was militarily defeated in May 2009. Tens of thousands of Tamil civilians were killed and wounded and their homes and properties destroyed or damaged during the bloody conflict.

Washington's "humanitarian concern" about Tamil communities is utterly hypocritical. Over the past quarter century, the US has been responsible for the most heinous war crimes and human rights violations in

numerous countries, including Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria, to name just a few. The latest PACOM operation is to increase its political influence in Sri Lanka as part of its military-strategic goals in the Indo-Pacific region in preparation for war against China.

Moreover, the US fully backed Colombo's communal war against the LTTE and turned a blind eye to the associated attacks on democratic rights. The Obama administration only began raising the issue of "human rights" during the final stages of the war when China emerged as Colombo's principal provider of funds and military hardware.

Washington, in line with its efforts to isolate China, began pressuring the then government of President Mahinda Rajapakse to distance itself from Beijing. This included US-sponsored resolutions in the UN Human Rights Council calling for an international investigation into war crimes in Sri Lanka.

The US campaign culminated in a Washington-orchestrated operation to remove Rajapakse and install the pro-US Maithripala Sirisena as Sri Lankan president via an election in early 2015. As soon as Sirisena came to power the Obama administration dropped its demand for an international investigation and backed a domestic inquiry that will inevitably whitewash Sri Lankan military atrocities.

Senior Obama administration officials have also begun visiting Sri Lanka, including Secretary of State John Kerry and the US permanent ambassador to the UN, Samantha Power. Senior PACOM officials are also frequent visitors.

Aiming to secure economic and political advantages for the Tamil elite, Sri Lanka's Tamil National Alliance (TNA) fully supported the regime-change operation to install Sirisena, backed Colombo's moves to develop ties with the US and India, and enthusiastically welcomed this month's Operation Pacific Angel.

TNA leader and Northern Provincial Chief Minister C. V. Wigneswaran and Colombo-based Tamil leader and government minister Mano Ganeshan accompanied the American personnel in a huge US military aircraft. Parliamentary opposition leader R. Sambandan and TNA chiefs were in Jaffna to provide a warm welcome to the PACOM officials.

Recent developments indicate ever-intensifying efforts to boost US military ties with Sri Lanka.

* On July 24, USS New Orleans and its 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit conducted a three-day visit to Sri Lanka. The ship's visit was billed as boosting bilateral ties with the Sri Lankan Navy and providing US support and training for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

A press statement by Atul Keshap, the US ambassador to Sri Lanka, however, pointed to the underlying geo-political reasons. "The 21st century is in many ways the Indo-Pacific century, and Sri Lanka is well-positioned to take advantage of its strategic location," he said. "The United States looks forward to working with the Sri Lanka Navy as a key force for maritime security and stability."

* On 8–9 August, the first Operational Level Bilateral Defence Dialogue was held between a PACOM delegation and Sri Lankan security forces at the Sri Lanka Navy Headquarters. While no details were released, both sides said that the discussion "was to develop military engagements for next three years from 2016" and "continue the training and exercises" between members of the armed forces of both countries.

The meeting occurred as US and Indian officials held talks on countering Chinese submarines in the Indian Ocean, including collaborating in submarine-tracking and augmenting their anti-submarine warfare capacities.

* On August 28, USS Frank Cable, a US naval submarine supply vessel with a crew of 500, arrived in Colombo for a three-day visit. A US embassy communiqué said that the Guam-stationed ship "provides rescue and recovery assistance in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region."

The presence of US war ships in Colombo and PACOM's growing ties with Sri Lanka security forces is an expression of heightened US war preparations against China throughout the Indo-Pacific region.

The US is determined to harness India as a frontline state in its moves against China and strengthening existing military alliances with Japan and Australia. Washington has also intensified its provocations against China, encouraging the South China Sea territorial claims of the Philippines and Vietnam. These manoeuvres pose the danger of a military conflict between nuclear-armed powers with devastating global consequences.

Washington's regime-change operation in Sri Lanka and its expanding military operations with Colombo's security forces make clear that the US is determined to use the strategically-located Indian Ocean island nation as one of its bases in the event of war with China.



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