

Tamil Nationalists hail US “Operation Pacific Angel” in Sri Lanka

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In the third week of August, forces of United States Pacific Command (USPACOM), one of the main US military commands leading the “pivot to Asia” aimed to prepare for war with China, staged “Operation Pacific Angel” in Jaffna. Seventy military experts led by US soldiers from Bangladesh, Nepal, and Maldives joined the Sri Lankan Air Force in symbolic medical assistance and the repairing of schools.

Before this operation, in July, the USS New Orleans docked in Colombo harbour. The ship operating under USPACOM is deployed in a seven-month manoeuvre in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. During the stay in Colombo, US Marines conducted workshops and seminars with the Sri Lankan Navy on “assisting victims of natural disasters.” The USS New Orleans was the second ship to visit Colombo this year, after a March visit to Colombo by the US Seventh Fleet flagship, the USS Blue Ridge.

Under the pretext of medical assistance and reconstruction, “Operation Pacific Angel” is the first joint operation between the US and the Sri Lankan military, which slaughtered civilians and seized civilian lands in the North in fighting at the end of the Sri Lankan civil war against the Tamil-nationalist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Seven years after the end of the civil war, nearly 10,000 soldiers still occupy the North.

US Ambassador to Sri Lanka Atul Keshap, who launched the operation in Jaffna, invited Tamil National Alliance (TNA) leader Sampanthan and Northern Provincial Council (NPC) Chief Minister C. Wigneswaran to the event. In his speech, Keshap said, “I am extremely honoured and grateful that my distinguished and learned friend, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition Mr. Sampanthan, is here tonight.”

The TNA made use of this operation to spread illusions that US imperialism is promoting the welfare of the Tamil people.

TNA leader Sampanthan hailed the ouster of President Mahinda Rajapakse and his replacement by President Maithripala Sirisena in a US-backed regime-change operation last year: “[The] Mahinda Rajapaksa regime could not remain in power due to its confrontation with the UN and the international community. The present government must keep that in mind. We would support the government only if it accepts the UN resolution.”

In fact, Sampanthan’s warning is not directed against the government, for whom the TNA is a partner, but at Rajapakse, who is more closely oriented to China and is stoking ethnic Sinhala communalist politics to divert popular discontent with the government.

Sampanthan was sending a blunt message that, should any force in the Sri Lankan ruling elite emerge as an obstacle to US interests, the TNA would support a political attack on it by pointing out their role in the war crimes carried out at the end of the civil war. Sampanthan’s position is utterly hypocritical, however, insofar as it backs the Sirisena government, whose top officials were deeply implicated in the mass killings.

In his remarks, Sampanthan made no comments on serious allegations made by “rehabilitated” former LTTE fighters, that they were poisoned by the Sri Lankan state during their “rehabilitation” in military detention. At this time, they were injected with unidentified substances based on false pretences—such as claims they were receiving an AIDS vaccine. At least 103 of them have died, and many have reported that they are sick.

These allegations are credible. The Sri Lankan government and military brutally massacred thousands

of fleeing civilians and LTTE fighters during the final phase of the war in 2009; they would have had no compunction about poisoning prisoners in the “rehabilitation” outfits.

At the NPC meeting, C.Wigneswaran tried to exploit this issue to promote the US military, announcing that the visiting US medical team would examine the “rehabilitated” former LTTE fighters.

The real face of the humanitarian mission of Operation Pacific Angel came to light when one of Wigneswaran’s secretaries produced a group of “rehabilitated” fighters for examinations. The doctors refused to examine them. Later, the US embassy announced that the doctors did not possess proper medical equipment for such examinations.

The TNA and the Tamil nationalists are increasingly unpopular, and massive opposition is developing against their slavish support to the austerity politics of the government. They therefore tried to exploit popular concern about the former LTTE fighters to spread illusions in the “humanitarian” character of US imperialism and its puppet regime in Colombo.

Over 20 months in power, Sirisena and his United National Party (UNP)-led government unleashed a series of attacks against the working people of the island. They proposed a series of economic reforms that will devastate the working class and the poor. Already, farmers, students and unemployed graduates have protested against austerity. There were widespread protests against the increase of the Value Added Tax (VAT). The Sri Lankan Supreme Court ordered the proposed bill to be stopped, but the government plans to reintroduce it soon.

The East Asia Forum writes in its website that Colombo requires “credible” economic reform—that is, doing directly the bidding of the banks and international corporations. It suggests first, “no more big public-sector salary hikes, no more price controls, and no more ad-hoc taxes.” Second, the government must deliver tax reforms to increase tax revenues and radically simplified business regulations to speed up approvals for investment and project permits.

The TNA’s hailing of Operation Pacific Angel comes amid escalating tensions in Colombo as Washington and Beijing struggle for influence on the island. Initially upon coming to power last year, the Sirisena regime tried to break ties with China—suspending the

Colombo Port City project and cutting Chinese investment, despite the economic crisis. At the beginning of August, however, the government signed a new deal with the Chinese consortium to proceed.

The decision came after the visit of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to China in April. His visit primarily aimed to write off part of China’s \$8 billion dollar loans to Sri Lanka. This debt ballooned to 75 percent of Sri Lanka’s \$82 billion gross domestic product during the last decade.

The struggle between the US and China for influence in Sri Lanka, and in particular the Sirisena regime’s close ties to Washington, have become so manifest that they are even commented upon in the bourgeois media.

In an opinion piece, the *Daily Mirror* wrote, “this Government has a foreign policy that can be written in a sentence—‘say “aye”’ to whatever India or the USA proposes to further their strategic, economic and other interests and submit to China’s economic diktat.”



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