

Washington uses terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka to strengthen ties with Colombo

Rohantha De Silva**11 May 2019**

The US exploited last month's terrorist bomb attacks in Sri Lanka to immediately dispatch Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) officials and military intelligence experts to Colombo under the pretext of assisting investigations. More than 250 people, including about 50 foreigners, died in the April 21 suicide bombings of Christian churches and upmarket Colombo hotels.

US President Donald Trump and the Secretary of State Mike Pompeo telephoned Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe offering condolences and promising assistance. The real concern of the US leaders, however, was not the killing of innocent people, but to use the crisis to boost its military and political relations with Colombo as part of its preparations in the Indo-Pacific for war against China.

A spokesman for the US embassy in Colombo told the *Daily Mirror* that an FBI team arrived in Sri Lanka two days after the attack and declared that "once the present investigations were over, the two sides would look at future cooperation."

President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe have called for "international assistance" in the investigation. However, apart from the government, the defence establishment and select members of the political elite, the Sri Lanka population has no idea what the US police and military agents are doing or the specific nature of their engagement.

Having no regard for democratic rights, Washington fully endorses Colombo's imposition of a state of emergency and the deployment of military. It knows very well that key Sri Lankan political leaders and the defence establishment had prior warning of the attacks, allowed them to happen, and have used the disaster to impose a series of police-state measures against the working class.

Sirisena admitted in a May 4 discussion with opposition MPs led by former president Mahinda Rajapakse, that there are eight senior FBI investigators and 32 assistants

currently in Sri Lanka. Opposition leader Rajapakse had no objection to the FBI's presence.

An April 25 statement by the US Ambassador in Sri Lanka, Alaina Teplitz, also revealed that the US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) military experts were also assisting the "investigation." She declared that Washington wanted "to provide all possible support" to Sri Lanka's efforts and added that the US was "helping Sri Lanka emerge from this crisis stronger and more unified."

Washington's claims to be "helping Sri Lanka" is a total fraud. All its activity in Sri Lanka is aimed at binding Sri Lanka ever more closely to its geo-strategic operations against China. The US orchestrated a regime-change operation in the 2015 presidential election that ousted Rajapakse and brought Sirisena to power. Washington is deeply hostile to Rajapakse's ties with China.

Sri Lanka sits astride key Indian Ocean shipping routes used by China for energy and raw materials from the Middle East and Africa. It would play a key role in any military conflict between the US and China.

INDOPACOM, the Pentagon's largest command, is in charge of military operations throughout the Indo-Pacific region and has close relations with the Sri Lankan military, and its navy in particular.

Two days before the terrorist attack, USNS Millinocket and USS Spruance arrived at Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port to kick off the annual Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training exercises. This is the latest in an ongoing series of US joint exercises with the Sri Lankan navy.

Following Rajapakse's ousting in 2015, Sirisena and Wickremesinghe rapidly tilted Sri Lanka's foreign relations back towards the US and its Asian strategic partner, India. In 2017, the government renewed its Access and Cross Service Agreement (ACSA) for US forces and made it permanent. ACSA allows the US

military to use Sri Lankan sea and air ports for supplies and mobilisation.

The Trump administration's determination to maintain the closest ties with Colombo was further revealed during the bitter political infighting that erupted in Sri Lanka last year. Sirisena suddenly removed Wickremesinghe as prime minister last October, replacing him with his arch rival Rajapakse.

Washington opposed Sirisena's move because it still regards Rajapakse as pro-Beijing, and made clear that it wanted Wickremesinghe's reappointment. Washington had no opposition to Sirisena's anti-democratic methods but was concerned that Rajapakse as prime minister would disrupt its relations with Colombo.

Late last month, the US Embassy in Colombo declared that the involvement of FBI and US military teams in the terror attack investigations "does not indicate a larger, long term presence of US security teams in the country." But this is a ploy aimed at trying to avoid an eruption of anti-imperialist sentiment, particularly against the US, among working people in Sri Lanka.

Irrespective of whether FBI officers and US military experts are in Sri Lanka for a short or long period, one thing is certain, Washington is determined to maintain its grip on the island and use it as a key base in its military preparations against China.

Over the past two decades, and particularly under the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the US has dramatically increased its strategic and military ties with nuclear-armed India. Washington, with support from New Delhi, orchestrated the ousting of the pro-Chinese Abdulla Yameen government last year in the Maldives, and is exerting pressure on Bangladesh and Nepal to fall into line.

Under the pretext of providing "stability," Washington is attempting to establish its hegemony in this politically explosive region in preparation for war with nuclear-armed China.



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