

US imposes travel ban on Sri Lankan army chief

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US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo last Friday announced a travel ban on army commander, Lieutenant General Shavendra Silva, who is also the country's acting Chief of Defence Staff.

Pompeo's statement claimed that the action was taken in response to "credible information of his [Silva's] involvement... in gross violations of human rights, namely extrajudicial killings during the final phase of Sri Lanka's Civil War in 2009." The bans have also been imposed on his immediate family members.

These actions by the US—a consistent violator of human rights—have nothing to do with human rights in Sri Lanka. The ban is a direct and threatening message to Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse that Washington will use the war crimes committed during the final phase of the conflict against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to force Colombo to commit to US war preparations against China. Washington will not tolerate any attempt by the new Sri Lankan government to balance between the US and China.

Last July, Washington stepped up its demands on Colombo for the renewal of a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), first signed in 1995. The proposed SOFA will allow free access of US military forces throughout Sri Lanka and its use as a US base in war against China. The Rajapakse government has put on hold, at least for the time being, any discussions of this military agreement.

Washington has also voiced its concerns over delays in signing the US Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) deal. The project was approved last October by the previous Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government. Last week the White House said that the Rajapakse government should express its intention to proceed with

the MCC project and the \$US480 million allocated by the US.

The Sri Lankan government has not rejected the offer but has appointed a committee to "review the program." During last November's presidential campaign Gotabhaya Rajapakse, for his own electoral purposes, sought to exploit public opposition to the US agreements.

The US ban on Sri Lanka's army commander is clearly aimed at the new president and his brother, Mahinda Rajapakse, who was president during the final phase of the war against the LTTE. At the time, Gotabhaya Rajapakse served as the Defence Secretary.

Shavendra Silva was one of the military leaders who brought the war to a bloody end in May 2009. According a UN expert panel, the Sri Lankan military was responsible for slaughtering an estimated 40,000 unarmed Tamil civilians, including by shelling "no-fire zones" where civilians had been told by the government to take shelter. It also worked with death squads that carried out the extra-judicial murder of thousands of people.

Silva commanded the infamous 58th Division, which played a major role in these operations. The Rajapakse brothers are also implicated in these crimes.

The Rajapakses, the military hierarchy and every faction of the ruling elite continue to insist that the Sri Lankan military was not involved in any human rights violations and to hail its forces as "war heroes" who "liberated" the country from LTTE "terrorism."

President Gotabhaya Rajapakse is heavily dependent on support from the military and has, under conditions of increasing social demands by workers, promoted retired officers into key government positions in preparation for authoritarian methods of rule.

Rattled by Pompeo's actions against Army

Commander Silva, the Rajapakse government immediately directed the foreign ministry to oppose the travel ban. On February 16, Foreign Affairs Minister Dinesh Gunawardena summoned Alaina Teplitz, the US Ambassador in Colombo, to convey his “strong objection” to the ban and urge its “review.”

US concern over human rights in Sri Lanka is utterly bogus. Washington fully backed the war against the LTTE and turned a blind eye to the atrocities carried out by the Sri Lankan military. Washington only began raising human rights issues in the months prior to the LTTE’s defeat in May 2009 as a means of exerting pressure on Colombo to distance itself from China.

When Mahinda Rajapakse failed to respond, the US engineered a regime-change operation to oust him. Maithripala Sirisena, one of Mahinda’s senior ministers, with behind the scenes support from former President Chandrika Kumaratunga and others, quit the government and ran for president. Elected in January 2015, Sirisena claimed that he would fight for “good governance” and “human rights” and promised to improve living conditions.

After coming to power, Sirisena, with the support of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe Minister, moved Sri Lanka’s foreign policy back into line with the geopolitical aims of the US and its strategic ally in the region, India. The Sri Lankan military, particularly its navy, were closely integrated with the US Indo-Pacific Command and its military plans against China. In return, the US effectively dropped the human rights issue.

With the election of Gotabhaya Rajapakse last November, Washington is determined to ensure that Sri Lanka remains committed to US war plans. In his congratulatory message, Pompeo pointedly raised the issue of “human rights,” effectively putting the new president on notice.

Gotabhaya Rajapakse has not heeded the warning, declaring that Sri Lanka as an independent nation will not be subordinate to any country. In foreign policy, he has attempted to balance between the US and China—a stance that the US will not tolerate. The latest travel ban makes explicit the US threat to once again exploit the issue against the Rajapakses.

Neither of the Rajapakse brothers has responded officially to Pompeo’s travel ban. However, replying to a question from the media, Prime Minister Mahinda

Rajapakse claimed that the ban was a “result of Tamil parties’ propaganda” against Sri Lanka’s war heroes. The Colombo media quickly fell into line with this provocative attempt to again whip up anti-Tamil chauvinism and whitewash the military.

Opposition leader Sajith Premadasa said the ban on Silva was “regrettable and unfortunate” and hailed the military chief. Silva “is one of the heroic field commanders who spearheaded the national effort to eradicate terrorism,” he declared.

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) praised Washington’s travel ban. M. A Sumanthiran declared: “Our people have been waiting for justice for over a decade, and they are finally beginning to see the first moves by the international community to hold government officials accountable for crimes committed during the war.”

Like all other Tamil parties, the TNA’s rhetoric is yet another signal that it is ready to serve the US geopolitical interests in return for power-sharing arrangements with Colombo’s ruling elite.

The US ban amounts to a demand that every faction of the Colombo elite must fall into line with its agenda. It underscores the advanced stage of the US war preparations against China which could rapidly deteriorate into a conflagration between the two nuclear-armed nations.



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