

# US trains Sri Lankan naval elite forces during COVID-19 lockdown

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In another indication of Sri Lanka's integration in Washington's war preparations against China, US Army Special Forces officers, also known as Green Berets, conducted extended training courses for Sri Lankan navy elite units in Trincomalee port last March.

The combat-oriented training in the strategic east-coast port continued throughout the month unhindered by the Rajapakse government's coronavirus lockdown and the abrupt closure on March 19 of all Sri Lankan sea and air ports that left thousands of citizens stranded overseas.

The US military personnel were members of Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha 1333, which is attached to the US Indo-Pacific Command. They trained 35 members of the Sri Lankan navy's Special Boat Squadron and 4th Fast Attack Flotilla. The training included: Small Unit Tactics, Military Operations in Urban Environment, Tactical Combat Casualty Care, Combat Marksmanship, Close Quarter Battle, Mission Planning, Maritime Operations, Human Rights and Law of Armed Conflict.

The Special Boat Squadron is a commando unit but also engages in ground operations. The 4th Fast Attack Flotilla is the navy's premier offensive unit. Both units were established during Colombo's almost 30-year war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

These units have been suppressing public protests and conducted recent so-called anti-terrorism search operations in civilian areas. In December 2016, navy personnel, led by then Navy Commander Admiral Ravindra Wijegunaratne, were used to crush strike action by Hambantota Port workers.

The infamous Green Berets have a seven-decade record—from Vietnam to Afghanistan—of committing crimes for US imperialism. Closely collaborating with

the CIA, they have trained death squads for pro-US dictatorships and terrorist formations around the world and engaged in operations violating the laws of war and international human rights conventions.

The Sri Lankan navy is equally notorious for its crimes, including the cold-blooded massacre of 35 Tamil civilians on a public ferry in 1985 and other illegal actions.

Wartime Navy Commander Wasantha Karannagoda and other high-ranking officers for example, currently face charges over the abduction and “disappearing” of 11 Tamil youths from Colombo in 2008. In 2018, a mass grave of 136 bodies was found near a war-time navy checkpoint in the northern town of Mannar. Tamil activists claim the corpses were of those killed by Sri Lankan military forces.

Training ties between US Special Forces and the Sri Lankan military are not new but were initiated during Colombo's communalist war against the LTTE and included Green Berets “Balance Style” operations. Exercises were also held in 2009 and 2017.

The US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM), which is the largest concentration of US military forces, has increased its involvement of Sri Lankan military forces in Indian Ocean regional operations. Sri Lanka's strategic location, just north of China's critical naval trade routes, makes it indispensable to Washington's war preparations against China.

Testifying to the US Senate Armed Services Committee in February 2019, USINDOPACOM commander Admiral Philip Davidson declared, “It is in our interests to continue military collaboration and cooperation with Sri Lankan forces.” The island-nation, he added “remains a significant strategic opportunity in the Indian Ocean.”

The US provided material and strategic support to

Colombo in the final years of the bloody war against the LTTE. In 2007, then President Mahinda Rajapakse signed an Access and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) with the US giving its armed forces access to Sri Lankan ports and airports.

While these links grew steadily after the war ended in May 2009, the US became increasingly concerned over Rajapakse's economic ties with China. In 2015, Washington initiated a regime-change operation against Rajapakse, which brought Maithripala Sirisena to power as president and saw the establishment of a pro-US, United National Party-led government.

US-Sri Lanka military ties have rapidly expanded since then, including frequent US naval ship visits to Sri Lankan ports and combined exercises.

In early 2019, the US 7th Fleet aircraft carrier, USS John C. Stennis, visited Trincomalee port, initiating moves to establish a US Navy Logistics Hub in Sri Lanka.

In 2017, Colombo renewed the ACSA and began a process of renewing the existing Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with the US, providing much broader access and movement for US forces on Sri Lankan soil.

Last month's high-level training exercise indicates that President Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who came to power in November, is further integrating Sri Lanka into Washington's long-term military-strategic plans.

In a congratulatory message last year, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo cynically proclaimed that Washington would cooperate with President Rajapakse to establish "a free and open Indo-Pacific region where all countries can prosper, deepening good governance, and promoting justice, reconciliation, and human rights."

In January, President Donald Trump wrote to Rajapakse declaring that the White House was committed to "furthering and deepening [its] partnership" with the island nation.

The statements were a warning to Rajapakse not to deviate from Washington's geo-political operations in the region against China.

Amid the catastrophic and deepening social impact of COVID-19, Washington is even more determined to offset its decaying economic dominance by military means.

The Trump administration has ramped up its

belligerent anti-Chinese rhetoric with claims that the pandemic was caused by "a foreign virus" that "started in China." The US then withheld US funding to the World Health Organization (WHO), with Trump accusing the international agency of being "biased to China." On April 21 the US provocatively moved its warships to the South China Sea.

Washington will even more aggressively seek integration of its Indian Ocean allies into military operations against Beijing, including through US military encampment in smaller nations, such as Sri Lanka. Full combat training for Sri Lankan naval elite forces amid the global pandemic lockdown is another indication that Washington's preparations for war against China are extremely advanced.



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