

# Sri Lankan prime minister admits US is behind Colombo Port deal with India

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Sri Lanka's government was pushed into crisis by a series of protests by Colombo Port workers last month against plans to privatise the port's Eastern Container Terminal and hand it over to an Indian company. During the workers' actions, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse admitted that the US and India want to transfer the terminal to India's Adani Ports and Special Economic Zone Limited.

Speaking at a port workers' protest on July 24, Udeni Kaluthantri, the secretary of Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya, which is affiliated to the right-wing United National Party (UNP), revealed that when the union leaders met with Prime Minister Rajapakse at his ancestral home, he told them: "[W]e can allow you to unload the gantry cranes, but can't let the operations start [at the terminal]. I had to go home once, because I got hammered by the US and India. I won't make the same mistake again."

Rajapakse was referring to a demand by the unions to fit two gantry cranes at the terminal and start operating it under the government's Ports Authority, without privatisation.

Kaluthantri added: "During the last regime, the then Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe told me, that you have a right to protest, but don't protest against [the terminal] privatisation. That will offend India. We cannot protect our government if India is offended."

Rajapakse's reference to being "hammered" pointed to the Washington-orchestrated regime-change operation in 2015, which ousted him as president and brought Maithripala Sirisena to power. New Delhi supported the political operation.

Washington backed Rajapakse's brutal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and his anti-democratic rule, but was hostile to his growing relations with Beijing. The US wanted to integrate Sri

Lanka into its military encirclement of China and make India a frontline state in its confrontation with Beijing.

After taking power, Sirisena appointed Wickremesinghe as prime minister. They initially halted all Chinese projects and began integrating the military, particularly the navy, with the US Indo-Pacific Command. They conducted joint exercises and sought to develop the island into a logistics hub. India also enhanced its military and political relations with Sri Lanka.

The cash-strapped Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government later turned to Beijing for loans and allowed the resumption of Chinese projects, but continued the military integration with the US and India. That explains Wickremesinghe's statement to the UNP union leader about not being able to offend India.

The comments of both Rajapakse and Wickremesinghe demonstrate the subservience of Sri Lanka's capitalist establishment to the interests of US imperialism, with which Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is aligned.

On July 24, the union leaders met with a representative of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse requesting his assurance that the terminal would not be privatised. He refused to issue any such guarantee.

Terrified that workers' anger over the privatisation would spiral out of their control, the union bureaucrats initiated an impotent "Sathyagraha" (sit-down protest) from July 29, again demanding a "written promise" from the president that "[the terminal] will not be privatised." Some of the unions also tried to divert workers' opposition into a nationalist anti-Indian campaign.

However, 10,000 workers began a strike on July 31, blocking all roads into and inside the port, completely

paralysing it.

President Rajapakse not only refused to talk to the unions but attacked the workers' struggle as an "extremist act of sabotage," declaring: "I cannot be intimidated [by such actions]."

Facing this threat, the union leaders met with the prime minister at his residence again to obtain another empty pledge not to proceed with the agreement with India. Mahinda Rajapakse gave a "promise," but only to prevent the strike continuing, just five days before the August 5 national election. The union leaders immediately called off the stoppage.

The government, as well as the unions, feared the strike would attract the support of other sections of workers also angered by decades of attacks on social and democratic rights.

Behind President Rajapakse's threat and the manoeuvres by his brother the prime minister lies the pressure of India and the US, which want to gain control over the strategic Colombo port. The president and prime minister, well aware they are treading on a geostrategic minefield, do not want to annoy Washington and New Delhi.

Mahinda Rajapakse's previous regime allowed China Merchant Port Holdings (CMPH) to build and operate the Colombo South harbour in 2012. The Chinese company also constructed the Hambantota harbour and, a few kilometres away, the Mattala airport. In 2016, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government leased the entire Hambantota port to CMPH. The US and India expressed their concerns and accused China of creating a "debt trap" to secure the port.

The Indian company's bid for the terminal is not merely to extract profit from it. It is a move to strengthen India's grip over the key port—another step in Washington's economic and military offensive against China, which began under the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia."

Amid the world capitalist crisis escalated by the COVID-19 pandemic, US President Donald Trump has intensified the provocations against China. The US has formed the Asia-Pacific quadrilateral (Quad) alliance with Japan, India and Australia, against China. It also backed India in the deadly border clashes that flared in the Himalayan region between China and India in July.

The Colombo Port workers' struggle has demonstrated that the US and India want Sri Lanka tied

to their strategic and military moves against nuclear-armed China, raising the danger of a catastrophic war in which the island would become embroiled.



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