

12 years since Mullaitivu massacre of LTTE fighters and Tamil civilians

To divide workers, Tamil nationalists sow pro-imperialist lies on Sri Lankan war

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Last month, in the runup to the 12th anniversary of the Mullaitivu massacre, the Association of Relatives of the Disappeared in the Sri Lankan Civil War organized roadside protests in the Vavuniya District in Sri Lanka's Northern Province. There have been over 1,500 such days of protests since 2015, after the war's end in 2009. Hundreds of people regularly defy heavy police deployments to attend. Many are elderly Tamils, who have protested for years despite poverty and old age, holding aloft pictures of their disappeared children, demanding to know where they are.

The problems facing workers in Sri Lanka and beyond emerged sharply in the debased remarks of Tamil National People's Front (TNPF) leader Gopalakrishnan Rajkumar, a member of the Vavuniya Citizens' Committee, to a roadside gathering on April 15. Rajkumar's comments exemplify the political lies used by Tamil bourgeois politicians to divide the working class, even as millions of lives are threatened by the global COVID-19 pandemic and growing US and Indian threats against China.

Saying nothing on the pandemic or on the war threat, Rajkumar instead launched into a racist diatribe against Sri Lanka's Sinhalese ethnic majority. Speaking on the national question in Sri Lanka, he declared, "Tamils have three obstacles to achieving any solution. The first is the Buddhist clergy, the second are Sinhala politicians, and finally there is the Sinhala public. They always choose Sinhala racist politicians."

Rajkumar then called upon Tamils to place their hopes in Washington, Delhi and the European Union (EU) for a solution to their problems. He said, "Since February 2017, we have been asking for US intervention in our struggle. ... We collectively call on US assistance to rescue Tamils from genocide and oppression." Indicating the TNPF's pro-imperialist orientation, he added, "We call on the United States, the European Union and India to intervene to help Tamils achieve an appropriate political solution and economic growth."

The Mullaitivu massacre in 2009 is one of the major crimes against humanity committed in the 21st century. However, Rajkumar's remarks aim to shift the blame away from imperialist and capitalist powers, who supported this massacre, and onto the Sinhala working people, who are not responsible for it. This bloody massacre was a devastating exposure of the criminality of the Sri Lankan capitalist regime and of the world capitalist system which Rajkumar defends.

It is not only Tamil youth and workers who were disappeared by the Sri Lankan capitalist state. More than 200,000 people were killed or disappeared during the 1983-2009 Sri Lankan war. The UN estimates that, just in the final massacre at Mullaitivu in 2009, more than 40,000 innocent Tamils were slaughtered with cluster bombs and artillery strikes. However, more than 100,000 Sinhala youth were disappeared during the

first JVP uprising in 1971 and the second uprising of 1987-90.

The mass murder carried out by the Sri Lankan capitalist state against working and toiling people of all ethnicities constitutes an exposure of the bankruptcy of bourgeois nationalism. Between 60,000 to 100,000 people have been reported missing in Sri Lanka since the late 1980s. This makes Sri Lanka second only to Iraq, a country devastated by 30 years of US-led wars and occupation, in terms of the number of people reported disappeared.

Thrusting this history aside, Rajkumar denounces the entire Sinhalese population and appeals for a solution to such mass killings to the NATO imperialist powers and New Delhi. It is these powers, however, that have championed "herd immunity" policies that let coronavirus run rampant, killing already nearly 2 million people inside their borders. Instead of warning that the "herd immunity" policies in Sri Lanka threaten a surge like the one now devastating India, the TNPF is promoting India's Hindu supremacist government.

Rajkumar's slanders against the Sinhalese population deserve nothing but contempt. First, he is trying to falsely appeal to mass disgust among Tamils at President Gotabhaya Rajapakse, whose brother Mahinda was in power during the 2009 massacre. But if many Sinhalese voted for the current Rajapakse in 2019, it was because of the antiworker, pro-austerity policies of the previous 2015-19 "good governance" government.

That government came to power in a US-led regime change operation, backed by New Delhi and Sri Lanka's Tamil National Alliance (TNA), targeting the Rajapakse clan's ties with China.

In fact, the current protests were launched in 2015, after the collapse of the "good governance" government's promises to carry out reforms and to free Tamil political prisoners. On February 14, celebrated by many around the world as "Valentine's Day," the families of the missing in Sri Lanka declared it "Missing Lovers' Day" in memory of their loved ones. In Colombo, they marched on the offices of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse and President Gotabhaya Rajapakse to protest.

Secondly, a central contradiction marks Rajkumar's dishonest bourgeois nationalist appeals. While he denounces the 2009 Mullaitivu massacre, he calls on workers and youth in the North and East to place their hopes in the very same capitalist powers that helped bring it about. Indeed, without the financial and diplomatic support of the US, European and Indian ruling elites, the Sri Lankan military, which had suffered a catastrophic defeat in 2000 at Elephant Pass, could never have carried out the 2009 massacre.

This was indicated by the cynical remarks by Mahinda Rajapakse himself, about the support he received from the imperialist powers and India before the Mullaitivu massacre. Speaking last year to World Is One

News (WION), Rajapakse said, “It was a humanitarian war. India helped us in every possible way. We didn’t want to publicize it, tell the press too much. And not only China and Pakistan, even the British and the Americans helped us.”

WikiLeaks cables expose US-Indian complicity in the Mullaitivu massacre

Secret US diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks confirm Rajapakse’s confession, irrefutably establishing the complicity of US imperialism and its allies in the massacre of Tamil civilians and Tamil nationalist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fighters at Mullaitivu.

A May 4, 2009 email sent to Hillary Clinton by Burns Strider, a lobbyist known as Clinton’s “faith and values guru,” states: “My take is that the people on the ground both with World Bank and IMF believe the Tigers need to be completely defeated and any collateral damage inflicted on private people by SL govt in process is ok ...”

Another leaked secret report, from August 2008, details a discussion between then-US Ambassador to Sri Lanka Robert Blake and Indian Ambassador to the UN, T.S. Tirumurti. In it, Washington and New Delhi discussed their common hostility to the LTTE and endorsed calls to murder LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran, who was killed less than a year later in the Mullaitivu massacre.

The report states: “Tirumurti stated that ‘Rajapaksa wants Prabhakaran finished’ and further pointed out that the LTTE continues to receive funding from Europe. This is a source of concern for India and Sri Lanka and a credibility problem for the West, he said. He emphasized that cutting off their funds would encourage the LTTE to talk. Ambassador Blake said that while the US would be glad to see [LTTE leader Velupillai] Prabhakaran captured or killed, the US and India should not allow Rajapaksa to predicate progress on a power-sharing agreement on Prabhakaran’s demise.”

Significantly, US officials drafting the report noted that Tamil bourgeois parties in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, who posture as the great allies of Sri Lankan Tamils, also agreed to a massacre. “Tirumurti commented that there is not significant LTTE support in Tamil Nadu now, but that could change if there was an influx of refugees,” they wrote.

They added, “Tirumurti denied there is any pressure on the GOI [Government of India] from Tamil Nadu about the situation in Sri Lanka, saying that there is no sympathy for the LTTE there now. He added that would only change if refugees start arriving in Tamil Nadu in much greater numbers.”

That is, capitalist politicians from the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) or the rival Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK) supported a massacre and only feared an outcry that the atrocities and a mass influx of refugees might provoke among Indian workers and peasants.

Indian support for the Rajapakse regime’s massacre of the LTTE was based on venal strategic and commercial calculations. Not only was New Delhi anxious to win greater influence in Sri Lanka at China’s expense, but the Tamil Nadu bourgeoisie expected to realize huge profits by ending the war and founding business empires atop the freshly spilled blood of LTTE fighters.

To thank the Tamil Nadu ruling elite for its help in the 2009 massacre, Rajapakse invited DMK parliamentarian T.R. Baalu and Kanimozhi, the daughter of former DMK Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Muthuvel Karunanidhi, to Sri Lanka to receive gifts and discuss future investments. Silver Park International, a fund largely owned by the family of DMK

politician J. Jagathrakshakan, invested billions in Sri Lanka, including \$3.85 billion in refineries at Hambantota. Former Indian Finance Minister P. Chidambaram’s son Karthi also invested in Sri Lankan luxury hotels.

Significantly, as TNPF leader Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam revealed in a 2012 meeting on the war, numerous Tamil nationalist factions, including his own, were also consulted by the imperialist powers about plans for a massacre of the LTTE. Referring to the final days of the war in 2009, Ponnambalam made the following statements about his back-channel talks with the imperialist powers about the massacre.

In the statement, publicly available on YouTube, Ponnambalam reveals that he had secret talks about the massacre with the major powers, with whom he worked out a deal behind the backs of working people. It amounts to an admission of complicity in the Mullaitivu massacre. He declared:

Whilst those crimes were being committed, and whilst we as former members of parliament, and members of parliament at that time, engaged with the international community, we were given two assurances. One was that if there was a bloodbath, the Tamils were given assurances that there would be very serious consequences for the Sri Lankan state. The second assurance that was given, was that the LTTE—in the eyes of the international community being a terrorist organization—once that organization is taken out of the picture, the Tamil people’s struggle for their rights will be recognized and that there would be peace.

Why did the Tamil nationalists betray their promises to the people?

This betrayal is not the product of tactical errors by Tamil nationalist politicians but of the bankruptcy of a political orientation. The Tamil nationalists’ perspective for armed action purely within the confines of Sri Lanka entailed an orientation to working out deals with other regional capitalist powers, notably India. Various Tamil nationalist groups sought aid with weapons and training from the Indian state and Indian Stalinist parties. All of these forces together went far to the right under the impact of economic globalization over the last half-century.

Next year will mark 50 years since the enactment of a new, antidemocratic constitution for the Sri Lankan capitalist state in 1972. Adopting a Sinhala-only language policy, making Buddhism the state religion and limiting admissions of Tamil students to university, it paved the way for an uncontrolled explosion of communal violence in Sri Lanka. Drafted with the support of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), it was the poisoned fruit of the LSSP’s repudiation of Trotskyism and its entry into the capitalist Bandaranaike government in 1964.

There were, however, two distinct critiques of this Great Betrayal of Trotskyism by the party that had been the principal party of the Sri Lankan working class. These two critiques spoke for diametrically opposed class standpoints.

The Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), founded in 1968 as the International Committee of the Fourth International’s (ICFI) Sri Lankan section, defended the perspective of Permanent Revolution that the LSSP had defended but then betrayed. It upheld the traditions of unity in struggle of Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim workers. Ethnic conflict, it explained, could only be overcome by uniting the working class in a struggle for the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of socialism across Asia.

Tamil nationalism, while it denounced the 1972 constitution and the LSSP’s opportunism, was a critique from the right. To be sure, in its 1976

Vaddukoddai Conference resolution, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) pledged that “the exploitation of man by man shall be forbidden in a secular, socialist Tamil Eelam.” However, behind the quasi-socialistic rhetoric in which it clothed its separatist program lay an orientation to the capitalist nation-state system agreed to between the imperialist powers and the local bourgeoisies at the country’s formal independence from Britain in 1947.

After the communal war broke out in Sri Lanka in 1983, following the anti-Tamil pogroms of Black July, the RCL was the only party that opposed the war and defended the democratic rights of Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims alike. It also opposed the Indian intervention into Sri Lanka, agreed to between Delhi, Colombo and the Tamil nationalists in 1987. The Tamil nationalist groupings all endorsed the Indian intervention, including the LTTE. Prabakaran pledged to hand the LTTE’s weapons to the Indian army “for the liberation and the future security of our people.”

The four-year Indian intervention turned into a bloody debacle, however. The Indian army, whose troops did not know the area or the local language, relied on the help of the local Tamil National Army (TNA, previously called the Citizen Volunteer Force) to organize its intervention. However, the Indian troops and the TNA ended up in a bloody three-way conflict with the LTTE and Sri Lankan troops with devastating consequences for the population of northern Sri Lanka.

The Tamil Centre for Human Rights (TCHR) compiled a tally of the casualties caused by the Indian Peace-Keeping Forces’ (IPKF) actions in Sri Lanka. The IPKF killed 8,118 people, disappeared 4,184, tortured 10,156, raped 3,507, injured 15,422 and displaced 550,250. Among the victims of the Indian intervention was RCL supporter Krisnananthan, a brilliant economics lecturer at Jaffna University, who was famous among Jaffna students at the time but was murdered by the TNA, led by Varadaraja Perumal and Suresh Premachandran.

In 1987, the ICFI and the RCL drew fundamental political lessons from this bitter experience of the international working class. Its conceptions have been vindicated by the events of the last three decades, especially the capitulation to imperialism of all the Tamil nationalist groups. The statement exposed not only the nationalism of then-Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President Junius Jayewardene, but also the dead end that the LTTE’s national separatism had produced.

The Indian intervention, with Colombo’s agreement, turned into a disaster. As the Sri Lankan army repressed a Sinhalese uprising in the South, and the Indian army turned on the LTTE and the Tamil population in the North, the ICFI statement explained: “Jayewardene’s defence of Sinhalese national sovereignty and Gandhi’s protection of Tamil freedom have predictably degenerated into the grotesque spectacle of their unified military campaigns against the very populations in whose name they claimed to speak.” It explained the class roots of this crisis:

As Lenin warned more than 70 years ago, the bourgeoisie of an oppressed nation conceives of self-determination exclusively from the standpoint of securing its own national privileges and establishing the best conditions for the exploitation of the workers and peasants within the “independent” country. This selfishness is rooted objectively in the nature of the bourgeoisie as a class, which bases itself on the extraction of surplus value from wage labour, that is, on the subjugation of the working class. This class objective guides the policies of all wings of the bourgeois nationalists, including its most radical tendencies, such as the LTTE, and determines their political physiognomy. At every step, the bourgeois nationalists take care not to permit the liberation struggle “to get out of hand” and become a threat to the maintenance of capitalist rule.

Making a historical review of events in Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Burma after the end of British rule over the Indian subcontinent, it wrote:

Upon the rotting structure of capitalist states and within the strangulating confines of their artificial boundaries, neither the democratic aspirations nor basic material needs of the masses can be satisfied. Since the end of World War II, imperialism has not allowed the creation of a single national state based on the genuine democratic equality of its various linguistic, religious, and racial components. Invariably, imperialist-sanctioned “independence” has meant the setting up of bastard states whose very foundations have been built upon a fatal compromise of democratic principles. In this process, the national bourgeoisie has functioned not as the liberator of the oppressed masses, but as a junior partner in imperialist plunder.

The statement reaffirmed its uncompromising opposition to the communal war in Sri Lanka, while emphasizing that “the unresolved democratic obligations of the Tamil people can only be achieved through the united international struggle of the working class for socialism.” Against the Sinhalese and Tamil nationalists, it advanced the perspective of a struggle for a United Socialist States of Sri Lanka and Tamil Eelam, as part of the struggle for the United Socialist States of South Asia.

Against the Tamil nationalists’ call for a new Indian intervention in Sri Lanka

Even 34 years later, these lines illuminate the fundamental political problems facing workers in Sri Lanka and across Asia. Vast economic and political shifts have accelerated over this period, with the advent of capitalist globalization and transnational production and the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Hundreds of millions of people have been added to the ranks of the working class across Asia.

These changes only raise more sharply the bankruptcy and venality of the capitalist ruling elites and the growing danger of war, now intensified by the capitalist powers’ criminal handling of the pandemic.

The LTTE’s defeat in the communal war and the 2009 Mullaitivu massacre were themselves products of these vast international changes. Over the 23 years of the war, it had lost support in Sri Lanka’s Tamil population. While it taxed income from fishermen’s catches, peasants’ harvests or teachers’ pay slips, it produced only a bloody, never-ending conflict. At the same time, the LTTE found itself wrong-footed by the vast shifts in international geopolitics.

As it waged failed imperialist wars killing millions in the Middle East, starting with the 1991 Gulf War against Iraq, US imperialism was desperate to shore up its regional position. It found an ally in the Indian bourgeoisie, who had shifted far to the right since its opening to world markets in 1991. In a 2005 military treaty, Delhi began a turn towards being Washington’s key regional ally against China’s rising economy.

Washington and Delhi, fearing China’s alliance with the Rajapakse regime, agreed to the Mullaitivu massacre to maintain their influence in Colombo. This underlies the complicity of the imperialist powers, the Indian state and the various Tamil bourgeois politicians in the massacre.

Mass murder and the posting of Sri Lankan army troops in the North and East of Sri Lanka have not, however, resolved national questions that cannot be solved under capitalism, or reduced to silence the legitimate

anger that still burns among millions of working and toiling families at these events.

The Sri Lankan government has admitted it massacred the missing persons in the North. In January 2020, in a meeting with UN Resident Coordinator Hannah Singer at the Presidential Secretariat, Gotabhaya Rajapakse declared for the first time that “the missing are really dead” and callously proposed that “action will be taken to issue death certificates to these missing persons.”

For his part, the Tamil nationalist Varadaraja Perumal, who was chief minister of the North East of Sri Lanka during the Indian occupation, said, “Their relatives are well aware that the missing are no longer alive. An international inquiry is not possible, and the president will pay them compensation and resolve their issue.” That is, he proposed that the families of the missing be satisfied with Rajapakse’s shocking announcement and whatever blood money he might see fit to pay.

The Tamil nationalists, who still posture as opponents of the Rajapakse brothers and who supported the pro-austerity “good governance” government installed by a US-led regime change operation in 2015, have deepened their ties to the capitalist powers complicit in the massacre.

This winter, many Tamil nationalist politicians appealed for a political and military alliance with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). They also endorsed the formation of a Sri Lankan BJP (SLBJP). “The Eelam Tamils will never permit Chinese companies on this soil,” Tamil National Party leader K. Shivajilingam said, calling for the formation of “another international in the name of the BJP” against the Chinese Communist Party.

Significantly, Shivajilingam threatened the Rajapakse regime with a renewed military occupation of the North of Sri Lanka, as India carried out in 1987-90. He said, “In the Indo-Pacific, if you were to act against India and the United States, certainly there would be a major conflict. ... There is no guarantee that perhaps American or Indian troops might not land and stay in the North and East” of Sri Lanka.

Such remarks brand Shivajilingam and his political co-thinkers as political reactionaries, prepared to work once more with the Indian state to brutally suppress the working class.

The pandemic further exposes the reactionary character of the Tamil nationalists’ calls for an alliance with Washington and Delhi, threatening a renewed war and Indian occupation. Their endorsement of the Modi regime is the endorsement of a policy, championed above all by Washington, of letting the coronavirus run rampant through the population. Nearly a half-million Indians are contracting the deadly disease every day, in a renewed explosion of the pandemic that threatens to hit neighboring Sri Lanka, as well. Yet the Tamil nationalists applaud the Modi regime.

The critical question facing workers and youth opposed to the Rajapakse regime, “herd immunity” policies and imperialist war is the unification of the struggles of the working class. This means a conscious break with nationalism.

The struggle to discover what happened to the disappeared and to punish those responsible for the massacre must be organized internationally, as part of the struggle for socialism. In Sri Lanka, only the SEP, which fights for a Trotskyist perspective, is fighting to overthrow the outdated world capitalism system through socialist revolution and establish a regime that represents the interests of the working and oppressed masses. For workers, youth and the oppressed, the way forward is to build the SEP in Sri Lanka and sections of the ICFI around the world.

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