Top US official visits Sri Lanka to bolster strategic ties

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Earlier this month, United States Agency for International Development (USAID) chief Samantha Power made a three-day official visit to Sri Lanka, purportedly to provide humanitarian assistance to farmers and others seriously impacted by the country's deepening economic crisis. The real purpose of her visit, however, was to strengthen Washington's strategic influence in Sri Lanka.

Power's trip came just after President Ranil Wickremesinghe's government signed a staff-level agreement with the International Monetary Fund to impose harsh austerity measures on the masses in return for a $US2.9 billion emergency loan. It also occurred as Wickremesinghe confronts growing opposition from workers, youth and the rural masses, following the months-long popular mass uprising over unbearable social conditions that forced his predecessor, Gotabhaya Rajapakse to resign.

Referencing Power's visit, the USAID web page declared: "The United States is committed to addressing the urgent and intermediate needs facing Sri Lankans and supporting a return to stability, and to reinforce USAID's support for inclusive development that promotes human rights, democracy, and good governance."

Power, who shed crocodile tears about "the grave challenges" facing Sri Lankans, held discussions with small farmers and tenant farmers, as well as female heads of households and their poor children. It was in order to "hear directly from you Sri Lankans about the grave economic circumstances that you face," she declared.

Anyone believing Power to be a living angel flying into Colombo to alleviate the poverty afflicting most Sri Lankans is seriously mistaken. Power is a conscious representative of US imperialism that has deliberately allowed COVID-19 to kill over a million Americans and is recklessly escalating war with Russia in Ukraine, which could lead to the nuclear annihilation of humanity.

Under bogus claims of preserving "democracy" and upholding "human rights," the US has devastated the lives of millions, including countless children, through its endless military interventions and wars in the Middle East and elsewhere over the past three decades. Wherever it intervenes, Washington's posturing over "poverty," "human rights," "democracy" and "good governance" is to camouflage US imperialism's ruthless predatory geopolitical interests.

In Colombo, Power announced $40 million to provide fertiliser to one million farmers—i.e., $40 per farmer—and $20 million in additional assistance to 5.7 million people. These are miniscule amounts compared to the more than $50 billion in military equipment and aid given by the Biden administration to the Ukraine government for the war against Russia.

Underscoring the Biden administration's aim of fully integrating Colombo into the US-led NATO war against Russia, Power blamed the Russian invasion of Ukraine for rising food prices in Sri Lanka. In fact, Putin's invasion of Ukraine, which has disrupted global supply chains, leading to scarcity and inflation, was in response to the provocative and aggressive encirclement of Russia.

Heavily dependent on trade with Russia, the former Rajapakse government publicly refused to "take sides" on the war in Ukraine in late February. The Wickremesinghe regime still maintains this position.

In line with Washington's attempts to closely tie Sri Lanka to its military-strategic offensive against China, Power also used her visit to indirectly blame Beijing for the economic crisis in Sri Lanka. Power told a

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Colombo press conference that the US was ready to help restructure Sri Lanka's debt but added: "It is imperative that all of Sri Lanka's creditors, most notably the People's Republic of China cooperate in this process openly and on comparable terms with each other."

Power's insinuating comment must be taken together with bellicose remarks she made about China last July in India. Speaking in New Delhi, she directly criticised China for "offering often opaque loan deals at higher interest rates than other lenders and financing a raft of headline-grabbing infrastructure projects with often questionable practical use for Sri Lankans."

During her three-day Sri Lankan visit, Power held discussions with President Wickremesinghe, leaders of the parliamentary opposition parties, representatives of various civil society organisations and private sector business chiefs.

Meeting with Wickremesinghe, Power said: "Political reforms and political accountability must go hand in hand with the economic reforms and economic accountability." In other words, the demands of the IMF, the US, European and other foreign and local creditors, for cuts to social welfare, public sector jobs, along with privatisation of state enterprises and higher taxes, must be ruthlessly imposed.

Notwithstanding the mass working-class opposition that this will produce, Wickremesinghe, who has an unwavering record of implementing all previous directions from the IMF and US, will obediently follow Power's orders.

In her discussions with opposition parliamentary parties, Power insisted that "spaces" should be provided for "Sri Lanka's vibrant civil society" and the opposition parties "to raise their voices and hold the government accountable." In plain language, this means opposition party leaders must provide political stability to Sri Lankan bourgeois rule and contain the mass opposition.

Those meeting with Powers, included Sajith Premadasa, leader of the opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), M.A. Sumenthiran, a Tamil National Alliance (TNA) parliamentarian, Muslim Congress leader Rauf Hakeem, and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) parliamentarian Harini Amrasuriya.

While these opposition parties—SJB, TNA and JVP—fully support the IMF's demands, they fear direct backing for the highly discredited Wickremesinghe regime will erode their support bases and are attempting to maintain some political distance from the government.

Power insisted, however, that there could be no wavering from the IMF-dictated austerity, and demagogic criticism of Wickremesinghe should be abandoned.

Any "lack of unity, polarisation, divisiveness, is going to make it even harder to attract the kind of investment needed" and "perpetuate the impression of instability," she said.

In other words, they all must fall into line and provide the Wickremesinghe government with desperately needed political stability against the growing popular opposition of workers, youth and rural masses.

The increasing US efforts to fully integrate Colombo into its military-strategic offensive against China and Russia, highlights the reality that the whole region is caught in the vortex of global geopolitical tensions that is leading to a catastrophic world war, this time fought with nuclear weapons.

These developments powerfully pose the urgency of the working class in Sri Lanka for joining with their class brothers and sisters across South Asia and globally to build an anti-war movement based on the struggle for international socialism.

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