

Sri Lanka joins US-led coalition in Red Sea amid Gaza genocide

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Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe announced on January 3 that his government will send navy ships to the Red Sea supposedly to protect commercial ships from attacks by Iranian-aligned Houthi rebels in Yemen.

The announcement was in response to calls by the Biden administration for a US-led coalition, codenamed Operation Prosperity Guardian, to fight the Houthi rebels who are alleged to have launched 25 attacks on ships since December 31.

The Houthis, which control most of the western side of Yemen along the Red Sea, justify their attacks under international conventions designed to prevent genocide. They have demanded Israel stop its ongoing slaughter of Palestinians in Gaza.

Wickremesinghe cynically justified his decision by citing the economic consequences of the rebel attacks, which have forced cargo ships to divert from their usual route through the Red Sea.

By sending naval ships to the Red Sea, the Wickremesinghe government is effectively joining the US-led imperialist coalition in support of Israel's genocidal war against Palestinians in Gaza, which has already killed over 25,000 people, mostly women and children.

Having supported Israel's genocide since early October, the Wickremesinghe government is actively involving itself in this brutal war and Washington's efforts to ratchet up tensions with Iran, as a precursor to military action against Tehran. Colombo's announcement is a flagrant act of subservience to US imperialism.

The estimated fortnightly cost of deploying a Sri Lankan Navy cruiser in the Red Sea is 250 million rupees (\$US775,043). While the Sri Lankan government faces mass working class opposition over

its ruthless imposition of austerity measures, Wickremesinghe regards participation in the Red Sea operation and other military expenditures as a necessary demonstration of his government's commitment to the US and its global geostrategic aims.

In December, the Wickremesinghe government began sending Sri Lankans to work in Israel's agriculture and construction industries, insisting that this was necessary to boost remittances to Sri Lanka. The number of these workers, the government said, would increase to 20,000. Colombo's decision provides crucial assistance to the Israeli economy, which is facing severe labour shortages as a result of the ongoing Gaza conflict.

The Sri Lankan Navy responded cautiously to Wickremesinghe's announcement on deployments to the Red Sea, declaring that it would conduct a feasibility study and that no final decision had been made.

"Prior to deployment, we need to arrange logistic supplies. We also require a robust weapon outfit for this kind of a deployment," a Navy spokesman told the *Daily Mirror* on January 5.

He continued, "It is crucial to analyse the threats in the Red Sea area," and to "enhance our vessel's security, an air defence system is imperative." He added, "Identifying specific patrol zones, securing fuel supplies, and establishing collaboration with foreign navies are essential components before deploying a ship."

Notwithstanding these concerns, the Wickremesinghe government is determined to go ahead. State Minister of Defence Premitha Bandara Tennakoon told the *Sunday Times*: "Anything that happens in the Red Sea has a direct impact on our economy and livelihoods... We are for freedom of navigation and we have a global responsibility."

In an obvious reference to the concerns raised by the Navy, Tennakoon added: “There are risks, but that does not mean we can dodge the responsibility. The armed forces understand that and calculate the risks.”

The Wickremesinghe government’s closer integration with Washington’s geo-strategic aims is further indicated in its announcement of a 12-month embargo, starting this month, on research vessels from any nation docking in Sri Lankan ports. The decision follows a recent request from China for one of its research ships—the Xiang Yang Hong 3—to dock in a Sri Lankan port.

While Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Ali Sabry said the embargo applies to all nations, it is a clear signal from Colombo to Beijing that its research ships are no longer welcome.

The new embargo follows diplomatic pressure from the US and India in 2022 and 2023 over previous visits by Chinese research ships. The decision underlines the Sri Lankan government’s support for the US-India military build-up against Beijing and the danger of a catastrophic nuclear conflict with China.

While France, Italy and Spain have unreservedly endorsed Israel’s brutal attacks on Gaza, these countries have refused thus far to send warships to the Red Sea under Washington’s command.

Unwilling to subjugate their own geo-political interests to the US, they contend that the UN, NATO, or the European Union should be in charge of naval operations in the Red Sea.

Sri Lanka previously signed two significant military agreements with the US—the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) and the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA).

The 2007 ACSA agreement, which was extended in 2017, allows the two countries to exchange logistics, supplies, and services during humanitarian operations, joint drills, and peacekeeping missions.

A new version of the SOFA, which was first signed in 1995, is currently being negotiated. It grants specific rights and exemptions to American contractors and military personnel stationed in Sri Lanka on official business.

Significantly, the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) has been completely silent on the planned Red Sea deployment. Hoping to win power in

the next general election, the JVP has dropped its previous demagogic anti-imperialist rhetoric and developed close relations with Washington. JVP leaders have publicly met with US Ambassador to Sri Lanka Julie Chung three times over the past two years, the last time just as Israel unleashed its murderous attacks on Palestinians in Gaza.

Last Saturday, parliamentary opposition leader and Samagi Jana Balwegaya (SJB) chief Sajith Premadasa commented on Wickremesinghe’s announcement that the Sri Lankan Navy would join the US-led Red Sea operation.

“Why should Sri Lanka undertake such a costly military operation at a time when we are unable to meet even the basic requirements of our own citizens,” he said. Premadasa carefully avoided any criticism of the provocative Red Sea operation or Wickremesinghe’s unwavering support for the US.

The SJB, which is also aiming to win power in next elections, has no opposition to joining the US-led coalition. If Washington pays the cost of the Sri Lankan Navy’s participation, it will enthusiastically support it.

Sri Lankan workers and youth must oppose the Wickremesinghe government’s participation in the Red Sea provocation and its endorsement of the Gaza genocide and Washington’s military-strategic offensive in the region. Its embrace of these reactionary endeavours poses grave dangers to workers, youth and the oppressed masses, not only in Sri Lanka but throughout the Middle East and the South Asian and Asia-Pacific region.

The only way to combat militarism and imperialist war is by building a unified anti-war movement led by the international working class on the program and perspective of international socialism.



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