

Sri Lankan journalists visit Israel amid ongoing Gaza genocide

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12 September 2025

The recent visit to Israel by a group of 16 Sri Lankan journalists, including two from the state-owned Rupavahini Corporation, amid the ongoing genocide in Gaza, is a further demonstration of the pro-Israel line of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government.

Citing Sri Lanka's ambassador to Israel Nimal Bandara, *Newswire* reported on September 5 that a group of Sri Lankan journalists had arrived in Israel on a "five-day study program aimed at providing foreign media and policymakers with a clear understanding of the country's current situation." Bandara stated that the visit was organised by the Israeli Embassy in New Delhi.

The visit has nothing to do with providing a "clear understanding" of the genocide being carried out by the Israeli military in Gaza, but is to cover up Israel's crimes against Palestinians. The Israeli regime, which has barred international journalists from Gaza and is responsible for killing at least 248 journalists, has no intention of letting the Sri Lankan delegation witness its barbaric operations.

"Our journalists will also observe humanitarian aid operations in the Gaza Strip, which is an important part of understanding Israel's realities on the ground," the ambassador stated. These carefully managed photo ops will not include scenes of starving children clinging to life or the gunning down of Palestinians lining up to get limited aid.

The delegation is also scheduled to meet with senior Israeli foreign affairs and defense officials to be instructed in Israeli propaganda on how to report on its military operations. *Newswire* published a photograph of the ambassador hosting the journalists for a dinner.

News of the visit has sparked outrage in Sri Lanka on social media. Roe De Mel wrote on Facebook: "May

the brain washing propaganda begin;" and Mohammed Arhsad commented: "Best destination to learn crimes and murder." Hassan Mhn wrote: "It is noteworthy that our media, which is now going to promote Israel, has never before worked so closely with Israel as any government."

There is widespread concern and opposition to Israel's ongoing crimes. The Israeli military continue their deadly strikes, targeting homes and aid seekers alike. According to Gaza's Health Ministry, the death toll has surpassed 64,000, one-third of whom are children. Israel continues to use mass starvation as a weapon of war, with the number of dead reaching 313 including 119 children. According to the UN's deputy humanitarian chief, over 130,000 children under the age of five are at acute risk of malnutrition.

As Israel extends its military operations, one million people are being forced out of Gaza City, as part of its plans for the complete occupation of Gaza, fully backed by US imperialism. The Israeli airstrike targeting Hamas negotiators in Qatar has exposed the sham of US-Israeli posturing on ceasefire negotiations.

When the issue was raised in the Sri Lankan parliament, opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) MPs questioned the participation of journalists from the state-owned Rupavahini in the delegation. The SJB, an openly pro-US party, has made very mild criticisms of Israel's genocide in Gaza, in a bid to exploit public anger over the war for political gain.

The government sought to dismiss the comments, insisting the trip was private. House Leader Bimal Ratnayake, who is also co-chairman of the Sri Lanka Committee for Solidarity with Palestine, expressed some concern about photos posted by the Israeli ambassador on Facebook, strongly suggesting the government's involvement in organising the visit.

However, Media Minister Nalinda Jayatissa told a press briefing later: “The government will not bear any responsibility. Anyone is free to go to Israel; there is no ban on visiting. We cannot obstruct this.”

However, if the JVP/NPP government has no involvement, why is its ambassador making statements justifying the visit and hosting dinner for the journalists and posing for photographs with them?

Before taking power last year, the JVP postured in the election campaigns as a critic of Israel’s crimes. Once in office, it abruptly shifted to align with the US-Israel genocidal war in Gaza and broader Middle East strategy. Apart from empty calls for a “ceasefire,” the JVP/NPP has remained silent on the unfolding disaster in Gaza, underscoring its tacit support.

Significantly, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not condemn or even name Israel in its statement on the blatantly illegal Israeli airstrike targeting Hamas negotiators in Qatar on September 9. It simply expressed “deep concerns over the recent strikes reported in Qatar, which might further escalate volatility and undermine regional security” and called for “diplomatic dialogue toward peace and stability in the region.”

The JVP/NPP, tied to imperialism by countless threads, is completely incapable of uttering the term “genocide” in relation to Gaza, let alone condemning the Zionist regime and its imperialist backers for its ongoing war crimes.

An opposition MP argued that state officials on the visit may have violated the Establishments Code and called for an investigation into who organized the trip and under what authority. NPP parliamentarian Lakmali Hemachandra dismissed the suggestion, stating: “We cannot recall our ambassadors without due cause and risk triggering a diplomatic incident.”

The government has no desire to antagonize or upset its close ally in Tel Aviv. Instead it targets those who publicly criticize Israel.

Mohamed Rifai Mohamed Suhail, 21, was arbitrary arrested last October and detained for nine months under draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) alleging that he had posted an Instagram photo showing the Israeli flag being trampled. Another youth, Mohammed Rusdi, was arrested on March 22 and detained under the PTA for allegedly pasting stickers condemning Israel’s attacks on Gaza. He was only

granted bail two weeks later on April 7.



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