

Bowing to Washington's pressure, Sri Lanka and India refuse to provide aid to Iranian ships

Rohantha De Silva
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Bowing to pressure from Washington, both Colombo and New Delhi have refused to provide essential assistance to the crews of 20 empty Iranian oil tankers that have been stranded off Sri Lanka's southwestern coast for weeks. The tankers had delivered Iranian crude oil, mainly to China, before becoming stranded as a result of the US naval blockade of Iran, imposed in July.

This has turned into a humanitarian crisis with crew members reportedly running short of food, fresh water and fuel. These are empty commercial oil tankers, not warships engaged in hostilities.

According to a report in the October 14 Colombo-based *Island*, the Iranian Embassy in Colombo has asked the Indian High Commission about its response to the situation. Given that the US has issued a global warning against providing all services, including food and water, to the Iranian vessels, sources "asserted India may not throw its weight behind Iranian efforts to address the issue."

India's far-right, Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party government and the Indian ruling class as a whole are complicit in the US war of aggression against Iran that began on February 28. New Delhi has not condemned the illegal war that has killed thousands of Iranians.

The Associated Press, on October 9, reported the Sri Lankan government as saying that it has no immediate plans to help the Iranian ships that lie within Sri Lanka's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)—though outside the 12-nautical-mile territorial sea. AP quoted Foreign Ministry spokesman Thushara Rodrigo as saying that his government will put its "national interests first before considering any help."

This "national interest first" argument is not a neutral position. It is the standard ideological cover under which a bourgeois government subordinates itself to imperialism

while pretending to stand above the conflict.

Earlier, on October 3, Foreign Affairs Minister Vijitha Herath told the *Sunday Times* that "As a government, we haven't provided them with anything so far, and we don't intend to do so in future either." Herath said that the US had "not officially conveyed any message" relating to the Iranian vessels. However, he did not deny pressure coming from US officials. He brushed the issue aside, saying that "such supplies to vessels are usually provided by the private sector" and therefore were not a government matter.

A *Wall Street Journal* report on October 1 exposed the hollowness of this argument. The newspaper reported that US officials had pressured Colombo in recent weeks to prevent local vessels from delivering essential provisions to the Iranian tankers and their crews. The US Embassy had warned Sri Lanka that it was tracking 19 Iranian tankers off the country's western coast and raised the prospect of "secondary sanctions" against companies servicing sanctioned vessels.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration has also introduced additional sanctions against Iran and warned its trading partners to sever ties with Tehran, as Washington seeks to pressure Iran into making concessions amid the ongoing conflict.

The timing is not coincidental. On September 9–11, the US Embassy conducted a three-day workshop training more than 40 Sri Lankan officials—from the navy, coast guard, ports and finance—to identify "suspicious vessels" and detect alleged sanctions evasion.

US Ambassador to Sri Lanka Eric Meyer said the country sits at a strategic crossroads for global commerce and that, as "sanctions-evasion networks increasingly exploit commercial shipping, the United States is taking decisive action to counter these networks and sharing US

expertise with our Sri Lankan partners to protect legitimate trade, secure critical waters, and strengthen regional security.”

Colombo has been integrated into the enforcement of an imperialist blockade. President Anura Kumara Disسانayake government’s posture of neutrality and helplessness—claiming “such supplies are usually provided by the private sector”—is a transparent evasion. It shifts responsibility to private companies while ensuring, through the threat of secondary sanctions, that none will act.

Responding to the Sri Lankan government’s refusal to provide assistance, Iranian Ambassador Alireza Delkhosh in Colombo said that, under the Convention on the Law of the Sea (Article 98) as well as the SOLAS and SAR Conventions, Sri Lanka could not refrain from assisting the Iranian vessels stranded in its EEZ.

While the JVP/NPP government is refusing to provide essential supplies to Iranian vessels, the US Navy’s USS Tulsa arrived at the Colombo Port on October 7 for a scheduled goodwill and replenishment visit. The vessel refueled and took on supplies before departing on October 9 to continue its Indo-Pacific mission. According to the US Embassy in Colombo, “This goodwill visit provides an opportunity to strengthen ties between US and Sri Lankan sailors.”

This development comes nearly seven months after a US torpedo attack sank the Iranian naval ship IRIS Dena, killing 108 sailors, on March 4. The ship was part of a naval group that had returned from the MILAN-2026 exercises hosted by New Delhi. While Colombo rescued 32 survivors and recovered 84 bodies, its “humanitarian” posture was a fraud.

It initially refused the IRIS Bushehr, a second Iranian ship, entry, then admitted it only on terms dictated by Washington and Tel Aviv. According to a leaked US State Department cable, the government detained all 240 Iranian sailors for nearly five weeks, barred them from speaking to the media, and delayed the repatriation of the dead—while never naming or condemning the US aggressor.

Likewise, India refused the Iranian ships safe harbour on February 28, the day the US-Israeli strikes began, granting access only to the Lavan, a third Iranian ship. This fatal delay left the Dena exposed; it could have reached safety within 14 to 24 hours. External Affairs Minister Jaishankar never denounced the torpedoing, speaking instead of “geopolitical volatility.” The Modi government’s silence confirmed its role as a frontline

state of Washington’s war drive.

Despite the proven complicity of the JVP/NPP government in Washington’s provocations, speaking at the 81st session of the UN General Assembly on September 28, Foreign Minister Herath recalled the March incidents without mentioning the US torpedoing, let alone naming the US or Iran. Herath said that his government “went to rescue hundreds” of lives on a “ship of a party to a conflict,” whose actions were based “on international law,” and added, “While safeguarding our neutrality, we placed humanity above all else.” The evidence stands against every single word uttered by Herath.

The tanker episode is not an aberration. Since coming to power in 2024, the Disسانayake government has systematically aligned itself with US imperialism. Colombo has maintained the controversial Acquisition and Cross-Serving Agreement (ACSA), signed a 2025 defense pact, and hosted top commanders, effectively turning the island into a US strategic outpost to encircle China.

The government’s conduct towards Iran is part of this broader orientation. It refused to condemn the US airstrikes on Iran in June 2025, while failing to denounce Israel’s genocidal war in Gaza, backed by Washington, or the US-Israeli aggression against Iran that began at the end of February. Instead, Colombo has issued calls for “de-escalation” that avoid opposing the aggressors or defending their victims.

Behind its bogus claim of “neutrality,” the JVP/NPP has thoroughly tied itself to US imperialism, shedding its pretence of anti-imperialism in the past. Sri Lanka’s ruling class is not the innocent victim of US pressure; it is aligned with the US-led war drive, and it has chosen that role because its own interests—partnership with the IMF, the suppression of the working class, and the fear of a mass movement like that of 2022—are bound up with Washington’s. The Disسانayake government is not being coerced into compliance against its will. It is implementing the foreign policy of its class, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie.



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