

Sri Lankan government's ties with Israel expose its duplicity

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August 14, 2010 — On July 21 the Israeli newspaper Yedioth Ahronoth published an interview with Donald Perera, Sri Lanka's ambassador to Israel. Perera, the former Sri Lankan Air Force commander and Chief of Defence Staff, thanked Israel profusely for its support in the fight against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), saying: "For years Israel has aided our war on terror through the exchange of information and the sale of military technology and equipment... Our air force fleet includes 17 Kfir warplanes, and we also have Dabur patrol boats. Our pilots were trained in Israel, and we have received billions of dollars in aid over the past few years. This is why I asked to be assigned to Israel — a country I consider a partner in the war against terror."

Perera also expressed support for Israel against the Palestinians, comparing Hamas to the LTTE. Referring to Israel's attack on a Gaza-bound Turkish ship, he said: "As a military man I can understand that Israel had to protect itself. Due to Sri Lanka's vast experience in fighting terror, I can say that it will always support countries that also oppose (terror)."

The blatant anti-Palestinian bias of these comments embarrassed the Sri Lankan government, and the ambassador later claimed to have been misquoted. But the facts on Israel's military aid to Sri Lanka clearly show the close link between the two countries.

The interview helps expose the way in which the Sri Lankan government of President Mahinda Rajapaksa gives contradictory messages to different audiences. When talking to Third World governments, and especially the more radical ones such as Cuba, Bolivia and Venezuela, the Rajapaksa government tries to portray itself as a victim of bullying by the imperialist powers. But the Perera interview shows that Sri Lanka is an ally of Israel, which is both a bully in its own right and a close ally of the world's chief bully, the United States.

Until recently Sri Lanka has been very successful in winning support from Third World countries. Last year it was able to persuade the UN Human Rights Council to reject a resolution mildly critical of the human rights situation in Sri Lanka and instead pass a resolution congratulating the Sri Lankan government on its victory over the LTTE and offering "assistance to Sri Lanka in the promotion and protection of human rights". It was mainly Third World countries that supported this resolution.

This year, however, the Sri Lankan government has had less success in the diplomatic sphere. It was unable to block the decision of United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon to establish a three-person panel to investigate war crimes in Sri Lanka. Its attempts to get the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) to adopt a statement opposing the panel were unsuccessful.

Because NAM decisions are taken by consensus, rather than voting, the failure to agree on the proposed statement does not necessarily indicate majority support for Ban Ki Moon's panel. But it does indicate that Third World countries are not united in opposing it.

Traditionally, NAM members have been reluctant to accept anything which might appear as

interference in the internal affairs of member states. They tend to be suspicious of proposals to investigate human rights violations, because such investigations usually target Third World countries, while the crimes of the imperialist powers are usually not subject to similar scrutiny. The United States and other Western governments often use “human rights” rhetoric to attack governments that are not sufficiently subservient, such as Iran, Cuba and Venezuela.

These are valid concerns. But this does not mean that all demands for investigations into human rights violations by Third World governments are merely a reflection of imperialist interests. Sometimes they are a response to justified concerns about real oppression. And human rights violations in imperialist countries are not totally ignored. For example, Australia has been investigated for its treatment of refugees and Indigenous people.

In the case of Sri Lanka, the issue of war crimes has been put on the international agenda primarily by the campaigns of the Tamil diaspora, which protested in the streets of numerous Western cities against the massacre of an estimated 30,000 people in the last few weeks of the war.

Mass protests can sometimes influence the actions of imperialist governments. The European Union had strongly supported the Sri Lankan government in its war against the LTTE, but the protests of the Tamil diaspora forced it to feign concern for human rights in Sri Lanka. This led to the recent decision by the EU to take away preferential access for Sri Lankan exports to European Union countries until certain human rights conditions are met.

Ban Ki Moon’s decision to establish the panel to advise him on war crimes in Sri Lanka was also, at least in part, a response to popular awareness raised by the Tamil protests. The willingness of some NAM members to support the panel was also a reflection of the growing concern about human rights in Sri Lanka.

However, the belated establishment of the panel, more than a year after the end of the war, and its slowness in starting its work suggest that it is unlikely to achieve much. It seems like a tokenistic attempt to appear to be doing something about human rights concerns, rather than a serious effort to investigate the atrocities that occurred in the war, and the oppression that continues today.

If it does its job well (which seems unlikely), the UN panel could help raise awareness of the oppression of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka. But it cannot be a substitute for the struggles of the Tamil people and their allies, both inside and outside Sri Lanka.

The exposure of Sri Lanka’s close links to Israel can help the Tamil people’s struggle win broader support among progressive people around the world, and thereby strengthen the solidarity movement.

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* From Links:

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