

Australia boosts links with Sri Lankan regime

By Mike Head
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Australian Foreign Minister Bob Carr concluded a four-day visit to Sri Lanka on Monday, during which he announced direct military cooperation, training and intelligence-sharing. Under the banner of combatting “people smuggling”—that is, stopping asylum seekers fleeing persecution—the Gillard government is boosting its links with President Mahinda Rajapakse’s authoritarian regime.

Amid talks with Rajapakse and his senior ministers, Carr unveiled what he described as a plan to stop refugee boats sailing from Sri Lanka to Australia. It features intelligence sharing and other forms of cooperation with the Sri Lankan military, including Australian-based training programs in “intelligence expertise” and “maritime air surveillance.” Australia will also supply additional resources to strengthen “the Sri Lankan navy’s on-water disruption capacity.”

By forging links with the Sri Lankan military, Carr’s package goes beyond the collaboration that Canberra initiated in November 2009, when it signed a statement in Colombo to cooperate in anti-refugee and “counter-terrorism” policing, technology and intelligence-sharing. That agreement involved the Australian Federal Police and the Australian Secret Intelligence Service—Canberra’s overseas spy agency—working in tandem with their Sri Lankan counterparts.

The deal was initialled just six months after the Sri Lankan military defeated the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) following weeks of intensive bombardment in which tens of thousands of Tamil civilians were killed, including by the shelling of hospitals and summary executions. Nearly a quarter of a million Tamils were then herded into detention camps.

Since the 2009 agreement, thousands of Sri Lankans—both Tamils and Sinhalese—have been intercepted on refugee boats by the Sri Lankan navy,

with documented cases of detention, interrogation, torture and disappearances. This year alone, according to the official figures, boat voyages involving 2,900 people have been “disrupted,” and the Gillard government has arbitrarily deported more than 700 Sri Lankan asylum seekers since August.

Those operations will now be enhanced by giving the Sri Lankan military access to intelligence data, possibly including information derived from questioning refugees in Australian immigration detention facilities. According to an article in today’s *Australian*, Sri Lankan officials have “long sought access to the trove of information gathered by Australian officials who debrief Sri Lankans on Christmas Island.”

Carr’s visit was largely driven by domestic political calculations, bound up with making Sri Lankan and other refugees scapegoats for rising unemployment and deepening cuts to education, health and other basic social programs. In the lead up to next year’s election, the Labor Party and the opposition Liberal National Coalition are involved in a reactionary bidding war over who is tougher on refugees. The collaboration of the Gillard government with the Rajapakse regime is another demonstration of Canberra’s contempt for international law and basic democratic rights.

In a sign of closer ties, Carr declared that Australia would support Sri Lanka, both politically and technically, for the forthcoming Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Sri Lanka. “Australia will be at the Commonwealth Summit next year and will provide Sri Lanka with the technical assistance necessary for a successful summit,” he told local journalists.

The Colombo-based *Daily Mirror* reported: “When asked whether Australia would support Sri Lanka in the face of Canadian pressure not to attend the summit here, the minister said Canada needed to engage with

Sri Lanka on issues of human rights.” Carr added: “There needs to be engagement with Sri Lanka by way of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commissions (LLRC) report to resolve any issues it may have with regards to human rights.”

The Sri Lankan government’s LLRC report whitewashed the mass killings and other abuses committed during the war against the LTTE. Carr’s stance is in line with that of the Obama administration, which in March this year backed a UN Human Rights Council resolution that sidelined international human rights allegations against Sri Lanka by simply urging Colombo to abide by the recommendations of its own LLRC report.

The US has exploited the issue of “human rights” in Sri Lanka to put pressure on the Colombo government. Washington’s primary concern is to curtail the growing influence of China, which provided crucial military and economic support to the Rajapakse government during the war, and continues to supply substantial investment and foreign aid.

In March, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared Washington’s readiness to work with the Sri Lankan government, and removed a ban on selling maritime and aerial surveillance equipment to its military. This shift was part of the Obama administration’s aggressive “pivot” to Asia to counter China’s growing influence. Countries with close ties to China, such as Burma, Cambodia and Sri Lanka, are under pressure to re-align with the US.

One indication came at a gathering hosted by Sri Lanka last week to discuss “strategic maritime cooperation” in the Indian Ocean. The “Galle Dialogue” was attended by 28 countries, including the US, Russia, China, India, France, Pakistan and Australia. Defence secretary Gotabaya Rajapakse used the occasion to reject suggestions that Sri Lanka was aligned with China.

The president’s brother insisted that the Chinese-built port at Hambantota, in the island’s south, was purely a commercial operation, and not part of any “string of pearls” of Chinese bases designed to protect its vital shipping routes across the Indian Ocean. “Sri Lanka has always pursued a non-aligned foreign policy, and our only interest is in our economic development,” he said.

As well as sending Carr to Colombo, the Gillard

government dispatched Vice Admiral Ray Griggs, the Australian Navy chief, to address the Galle meeting on the “role of navies in collective prosperity.” Griggs’ participation highlighted the fact that Australia’s strategic location on the Indian Ocean, and its proximity to the vital shipping lanes through South East Asia, means that the US regards it as vital in its moves against China.

The Gillard government has already lined up completely with the US “pivot.” Last year, during a visit to Australia, President Obama announced a bolstering of US naval basing arrangements in Western Australia, as well as the rotation of US troops through northern Australia. As well as demanding greater action on halting refugees, Carr undoubtedly reinforced the message from Washington that Colombo should distance itself from Beijing and work more closely with the US and its allies.

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