

**ANALYSIS-Sri Lanka tsunami aid becomes geopolitical game.**By **Chaitanya Kalbag**

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COLOMBO, Jan 3 (Reuters) - Sri Lanka's tsunami devastation has drawn a huge international aid response, but a geopolitical game of influence between India and the United States is playing not too subtly in the background, analysts said on Monday.

"There is no innocence in the politics of humanitarian assistance," said Jayadeva Uyangoda, head of the department of political science at Colombo University.

Uyangoda said Washington's decision to send as many as 1,500 Marines and an amphibious assault ship to Sri Lanka was seen in New Delhi as not "merely humanitarian".

"It is a symbolic intrusion into India's sphere of influence," he said.

Nearly 30,000 Sri Lankans were killed by the Dec. 26 tsunami and nearly a million have been made homeless.

India, determined not to be seen as just a victim after losing more than 15,000 people in the disaster itself, moved quickly to send help to Sri Lanka and others.

Close to 1,000 Indian military personnel, five Navy vessels including a hospital ship, a field hospital, and six MI-17 Indian Air Force helicopters have been deployed to Sri Lanka by its giant northern neighbour.

The ships were moored off Trincomalee on the east coast and Galle in the south, said Nagma Mallick, spokeswoman at India's High Commission (embassy) in Colombo.

'NATURAL' FOR INDIA TO EXERT INFLUENCE

Both Uyangoda and Kethesh Loganathan, an analyst at the Centre for Policy Alternatives, an independent think-tank, said it was natural for India, with its huge resources and regional ambitions, to come to the aid of its smaller neighbours.

Loganathan noted that in May 2003, when Sri Lanka's south was hit by heavy rain and flash flooding that displaced a quarter of a million people, India sent military personnel to help in the recovery effort.

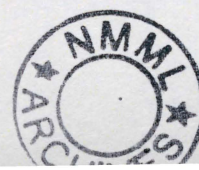
"Over the past decade there has been a sea change in Indo-Lankan relations," he said.

India was seen as a party to the island's civil war when it exploded in 1983, he said. Egged on by its own Tamil population, India provided the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) with training and materiel.

But an Indian "peace-keeping" foray into Sri Lanka's Tamil-held areas in 1987 quickly turned into open war with the LTTE until a humiliating Indian pullout in March 1990.

That debacle also helped restore India's credibility in the eyes of Sri Lanka's Sinhalese majority, Loganathan said.

"India has always been helpful," he said. "It does have the capacity and it is most natural for them to help us."

U.S. LIKELY TO STAY AWAY FROM TIGER TERRITORY

The United States has termed the LTTE a terrorist organisation and the Marines - a few dozen of whom have already arrived by air - are likely to stay well away from the north and east where the Tigers control large swathes of territory.

"Both New Delhi and Kilinochchi (the LTTE stronghold) might view the U.S. presence uncomfortably," Uyangoda said.

But Uyangoda said the U.S. offer of assistance would certainly have "raised eyebrows" in New Delhi.

"Are the Marines going to stay in Sri Lanka? Is this part of the U.S. global design? Is this an opportunity for (U.S. President George W.) Bush to get a foothold in Sri Lanka?" he asked rhetorically, adding: "Humanitarian is not purely humanitarian."

"India Furious!" said a banner headline in the Monday edition of the Sudar Oli (Beacon Light), a Tamil-language newspaper considered sympathetic to the LTTE published from Colombo.

The newspaper said India was upset that Sri Lanka had not given it proper warning that it would be welcoming U.S. Marines into its "neighbourhood".

But G. Parthasarthy, a former Indian ambassador to Pakistan, told Reuters by telephone from New Delhi that too much ado was being made of the aid effort.

"They love conspiracy theories in Colombo," he said.

Parthasarthy said it was clear the United States had got into the aid race rather late "after stringent domestic and international criticism".

For the present, he said - "and please underline 'for the present'" - the aid seemed to be just what it was, humanitarian and with no strings attached.

In contrast, India's polite refusal to accept any foreign aid recognised that "foreigners could come in the way of our own relief efforts", Parthasarthy said.

"Ten foreigners come and work two hours a day and the world's media think they've sorted out our problems tickety-boo," he said.

"We have the resources to manage our own situation."

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