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## Burma-Sri Lanka Connection: Religion and Terrorism

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By Arkar Monday Sri Lankan President Mahindra Rajapakse paid an official visit to Burma on Sunday to cement ties between the two countries. Burma was the first country to be visited by President Mahindra Rajapakse after his government defeated the Tamil Tigers guerrilla forces in May. Inside sources in Burma said that Burmese military leaders who recently launched a military offensive against Karen rebels in eastern Burma were impressed by Mahindra Rajapakse's military strategy used against the Tamil tigers.

Deputy Minister for Defense Maj-Gen Aye Myint said at the 8th Shangri-La Dialogue Meeting in Singapore in May: "The world has recently witnessed the successful end of a long-standing insurgency in Sri Lanka. But, people have forgotten about insurgency in Myanmar [Burma]. Why? Because there is no more major fighting erupted in Myanmar in recent days. But it does not mean Myanmar has completely brought to an end of its internal insurgency. We have realized that hard power alone is not fully effective in winning the counter-insurgency campaigns. Therefore, we are painstakingly, patiently and time-consumingly [sic] solving the problems of insurgency." The Burmese regime donated US \$50,000 to the Sri Lanka government to assist internally displaced persons in the Northern area of Sri Lanka. Snr-Gen Than Shwe warmly welcomed President Mahinda Rajapaksa and expressed appreciation for his visit to Burma as Prime Minister of Sri Lanka in 2004 to participate at the World Buddhist Conference in Rangoon. The visit also commemorated the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations established between the two countries. The state-run newspapers in Burma stressed the Theravada Buddhism that the two countries share. But aside from religion, the two governments agreed to enhance their military cooperation. Minister of Foreign Affairs Rohitha Bogollagama who accompanied the president said that the decision of President Rajapaksa to choose Burma as the country for his first overseas tour after successfully defeating terrorism is of significant event for both nations. Minister Bogollagama noted that Snr-Gen Than Shwe had commended that the "bold steps" taken by the government to fight terrorists organizations. The regime in Burma often labels ethnic rebel groups in Burma as terrorists. According to the official government news portal of Sri Lanka, President Rajapaksa also agreed to offer placements for two officials of the Burmese armed forces to be trained at the Kothalawala Defense Academy as a follow-up to a MoU signed on Intelligence Exchange Cooperation in 2007 to strengthen cooperation in combating terrorism and intelligence sharing. Dr Tint Swe, a self-appointed minister for information of the exiled Burmese government, the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma, told The Irrawaddy that the regime in Burma is deceitful to use the religion card in light of its brutal crackdown on monks in September 2007. Ashin Issariya, a leader of the All Burma Monks Alliance (ABMA) in exile, said: "Sri Lanka is a Buddhist country and exercised Theravada principles. The government (in Sri Lanka) allowed Burmese monks to demonstrate in the country in 2007 (to protest against brutal crackdown in Burma). But they did not condemn the Burmese military junta." Minister Bogollagama said that Burma and Sri Lanka maintained a close and cordial relationship as both nations are influenced by Theravada Buddhism. "Both countries are linked through political, religious and cultural heritages that have an extended history of over 20 centuries," he said. Minister Bogollagama said that President Rajapaksa expressed a willingness to offer scholarships to Buddhist monks from Burma to pursue higher studies in Sri Lankan Universities. But to political analysts in Burma, see the visit by the Sri Lanka president as not about religion, but rather that the generals are increasingly finding it difficult to contain insurgent groups in the country's northern frontier and are willing to learn some fresh lesson from President Mahindra Rajapakse on how to defeat the enemy. Courtesy: irrawaddy.org