

- 01 Workers at Magampura Port
- 02 Dr Priyath Wickrema, chairman of Sri Lanka Ports Authority
- 03 The Suriyawewa International Cricket Stadium in Hambantota, which hosted matches in February's World Cup



**A**  
OUTPOST OF OPPORTUNITY  
Hambantota



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## PORT OF CALL *Sri Lanka*

**Preface**  
Hambantota is about to hit the big time thanks to Chinese money and dynastic might. But not everyone is set to benefit.

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A sleepy rural backwater of 15,000 people, Hambantota, the main town in the southern Sri Lankan district of the same name, does not look like an international trading hub. Fishing boats trawl the compact harbour, with fishermen selling their hauls at a market on the shore, while shoppers amble between two small grocery stores in the town centre. The tallest building is the three-storey bus station overlooking the harbour. Little English is spoken, and apart from fishing, salt mining is the main industry.

But Hambantota is about to benefit from two lucky coincidences. It is the home town of Sri Lanka's president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, and his son, 24-year-old Namal, is the area's MP. Perhaps more importantly, the town's location between the markets of Asia, Africa and the Middle East makes it a prime candidate for a seaport – a fact not lost on China, which, according to some, hopes its Navy will gain unfettered access to a deep-water port smack bang in the centre of the strategically vital Indian Ocean. While Rajapaksa gives Hambantota's redevelopment political blessing, China is providing much of the funding.

“China has been a good friend to Sri Lanka for a long time, so they offered their financing and their help to build the port and airport,” says Namal Rajapaksa. The face of Hambantota is already



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beginning to change. Land prices have increased tenfold in the past two years, “and there’s nothing left to buy,” says Thassim Azmi, the head of the local chamber of commerce.

About a kilometre along the main road from town and the development activity starts to come into focus, with plans afoot to relocate the business and administrative district here. In a couple of years, says Azmi, this road will be completely built up and unrecognisable from its current lush green state.

Further afield and the wild jungle and wetlands, alive with birdlife, conceal a flurry of activity that will see the area become one of the country’s most popular entry points within five years. The centrepiece is a new seaport, the first phase of which opened in November 2010. Sri Lanka’s second international airport is also being constructed nearby, as well as an international cricket stadium, a convention centre, a new administrative block for municipal authorities and a handful of five-star hotels.

Also in the works are a botanical garden, sports village and safari park, while a new film studio has already been unveiled. Road and rail links to and within the region are being upgraded. The government has also made an ambitious bid to host the 2018 Commonwealth Games in Hambantota; Australia’s Gold Coast is its main rival.

This all comes at a buoyant time for the country. After a decade of modest growth, the economy expanded after the long-running civil war ended in May 2009, with growth last year pegged at about 8 per cent. Remittances from Sri



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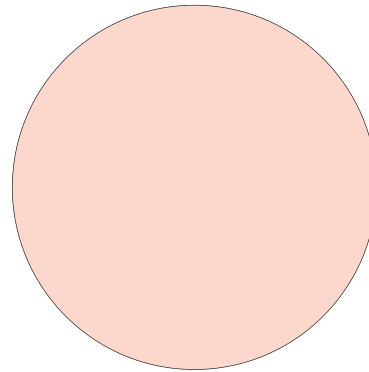


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- 01 The Suriyawewa International Cricket Stadium
- 02 Workers at the stadium
- 03 The cricket stadium under construction
- 04 Central bus station
- 05 Central Hambantota
- 06 Sri Lankan army soldier drafted in to help build the cricket stadium
- 07 Namal Rajapaksa, son of the Sri Lankan president



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### Aftermath of war

The brutal manner in which the Sri Lankan military brought an end to the civil war with the Tamil Tigers in 2009 has led to accusations of war crimes. Diplomatic cables released by Wikileaks documents revealed that US officials in Colombo privately believed President Rajapaksa was responsible for the massacre of thousands of civilians, when the army fired on people who had gathered at what they believed to be safe points. A UN panel will advise secretary-general Ban Ki-moon on allegations of humanitarian law violations.



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country. Almost a quarter of Sri Lankans live below the poverty line – and this figure rises to a third in Hambantota district, one of the least-developed regions in the country and a seven-hour drive south of the capital Colombo.

“Within the next five years Sri Lanka will definitely go up the ladder to the developed country level,” says Sri Lanka Ports Authority chairman Dr Priyath Wickrema. “We won’t reach the level of Singapore, Dubai, Hong Kong and the other developed countries but we will come closer to that,” he says.

Lankans overseas grew by a quarter to more than \$4bn (2.9bn), while there is a trade surplus of around \$900m (£657m).

It is a major turnaround in fortunes for a country that has suffered devastating setbacks over the past decade. After narrowly avoiding bankruptcy at the turn of the century, the 2004 tsunami cost 40,000 people their lives and 500,000 were made homeless.

The civil war with the Tamil Tigers, which began in 1983, has led to more than 70,000 deaths. The war ended in controversial circumstances in 2009, and the Sri Lankan government has repeatedly blocked UN war crimes investigators from travelling there. With almost a third of its citizens working in agriculture, Sri Lanka remains a developing

Located near one of the world’s busiest shipping routes, some 36,000 ships travel along Sri Lanka’s coast each year, making the region a lucrative proposition for a port. “[Hambantota] is strategically well located, close to the Subcontinent. We can feed the Indian east coast and Bangladesh, as well as the Indian west coast and Pakistan. From Hambantota, they’re almost an equal distance,” says Wickrema.

It is not a new idea, however. There is evidence that a port existed in the area 2,000 years ago, when it was part of the ancient maritime silk route. It is just that it has taken another two millennia for people to remember its importance. When completed, the port will be the biggest constructed in Sri Lanka so far this century.

It is being built by China Harbour Engineering Company and Beijing has provided more than half of phase one funding – \$370m (€270m) of a total cost of \$650m (€474m). China Harbour is also at the helm of two other showpiece projects: the airport and cricket stadium.

The former is still in a fairly embryonic stage of construction. The site that will eventually house Mattala International Airport is just 15km from Hambantota town – although it takes at least 45 minutes by car along unsealed and desperately potholed roads at present.

“The only problem we’ve had at this site has been with the wildlife, as we’re close to Yala National Park,” says Sun Lidang, an engineer and manager with China Harbour, who is overseeing work. As we talk, a buffalo wanders on to the area that’s being cleared to make space for the runway as a peacock watches on.

The airport is slated for completion later this year, and even if it miraculously makes the deadline it will still have missed another important milestone in the rise of Hambantota: February’s

cricket World Cup. The Suriyawewa Cricket Stadium, a short drive from the airport site, hosted two cricket matches during the tournament. With a capacity of 35,000, the timeline was perhaps the most ambitious of all projects and the Army was called in last November to assist Chinese workers dressed in the familiar blue jumpsuit of China Harbour.

“We have a solid plan to promote Hambantota and the economy,” says Namal Rajapaksa. “We started designing the port when I was 16, so I’ve been involved in the planning since then.”

Throughout the district, larger-than-life posters of Namal, the president, or both, are on walls and poster sites. The president is shown in various poses but mostly he is looking into the distance – as though towards Sri Lanka’s future.

Politics is somewhat of a family business for the Rajapaksas: President Mahinda Rajapaksa’s two brothers are both cabinet ministers and there are up to 130 other Rajapaksas in political office.

President Rajapaksa rose to power in 2005 on a platform of privatisation and a pledge to end the war. He quickly attracted criticism over his hardline leadership style, curtailing of media freedoms and his handling of human rights, particularly when it came to civilian casualties suffered in the Tamil-dominated areas as the civil war ground to a halt.



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Made in Hambantota

- 01 Battered fried fish
- 02 Dodol, a Malay dish
- 03 Handmade leather bag (unlike to worry any luxury brand)
- 04 Woodapple jam beats marmalade around here
- 05 Treacle sauce
- 06 Tea, for those rare quiet moments in Hambantota

“He could have been one of the best leaders this country has seen in a long time. I truly believe that,” says editor of activist newspaper *The Sunday Leader*, Frederica Jansz, cautiously. With two civil cases worth 2bn rupees (€13m) pending against the paper by the president’s brother, she can’t afford to be candid.

“Unfortunately he seems to have been ill-advised in terms of how to deal with the Tamil problem, how to address human rights, how to allow freedom, and in a democracy how vital these components are,” she adds.

*The Sunday Leader’s* former editor, Lasantha Wickrematunge, was assassinated two years ago, at the height of a campaign to silence journalists. His killers are still unknown and no murder investigation has been launched.

Jansz says the onslaught against the media has now wound down but mainly because the media has muzzled itself out of fear. “The physical attacks on journalists appear to have stopped last year,” she says. “There was only one political cartoonist [Prageeth Eknaligoda], who

simply disappeared. Having said that, however, there has been a serious amount of self-censorship, mainly because [editors] have decided to play safe and not anger the regime.”

Jansz also says that while the development in Hambantota is much-needed and very welcome, there are questions about how the profits are being allocated. “It’s good it’s being developed but it should be more equally distributed, and I would think the north and east [of the country] are priorities for sure,” she says.

But Namal Rajapaksa insists that those areas, once the stronghold of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, have received their dues. “For the past three years, that’s the place where we have pumped most of the money; for resettlement, for reconciliation and rehabilitation. We have targeted about 400km of road for construction and we have given them seed paddy, the fertiliser. So all the basic infrastructure has been provided.”

While Sri Lanka’s own war is still fresh in people’s minds, it is hoped development will help heal the scars. The Rajapaksas, father and son, hope that the projects in the country’s south might just help the battle-scarred north and east – but that is a feat that will take considerable will, and may just prove to be the ultimate test of Rajapaksa senior’s political might. — (M)