

## **Hambantota port won't be used as military base: Lankan official**

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In an address at a conference here, Sri Lanka's Chief of Defence Staff Admiral Ravindra C Wijegunaratne also invited Indian companies to invest in the industrial areas of the Hambantota port.

**Colombo:** The strategic Hambantota port will not be used as a military base and Sri Lanka will not engage in any activities in its harbours and waters which may harm India's security interests, a top defence official from the island nation today said.

In December last, Sri Lanka had handed over the control of the southern sea port of Hambantota to China on a 99-year lease, triggering concern here over Beijing's efforts to expand influence in the region.

In an address at a conference here, Sri Lanka's Chief of Defence Staff Admiral Ravindra C Wijegunaratne also invited Indian companies to invest in the industrial areas of the Hambantota port.

"There had been this widespread claim about the port being earmarked to be used as a military base. I can assure you madam (Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman) in this forum, that no action, whatsoever will be taken in our harbour or in our waters that jeopardises India's security concerns," he said.

Wijegunaratne made the remarks in the presence of Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and Naval Chief Admiral Sunil Lanba at the inauguration of the 'Indo-Pacific Regional Dialogue' here.

Two Chinese firms - Hambantota International Port Group (HIPG) and Hambantota International Port Services (HIPS) managed by the China Merchants Port Holdings Company (CMPort) - and the Sri Lanka Ports Authority will own the port and the investment zone around it, officials said.

Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe during a visit to China in April had agreed to swap equity in Chinese infrastructure projects launched by former president Mahinda Rajapaksa in his home district.

Wickremesinghe had ruled out the possibility of the strategic Hambantota port being used as a "military base" by any foreign country, allaying India's concerns over the Chinese Navy's growing presence in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka owed China US eight billion, the then finance minister Ravi Karunanayake had said in 2016.

Wijegunaratne also urged Indian policy makers to consider "our (Lankan) ports under the Prime Minister Narendra Modi's initiative of Sagarmala".

The Lankan chief of defence staff said, "We are in the process of developing Colombo and Hambantota hubs (ports)."

Colombo Port is one of the largest and "60 per cent of the containers we handle at Colombo, are transshipment from India", he said.

"Also last year, more than 65 warships were at the Colombo harbour from 14 different countries, with the highest 22, from India, of Indian coasts guards and naval warships," he said.

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