

China mounts defence against debt-trap claims

A media report had alleged that a Chinese firm funded Mahinda Rajapaksa's 2015 election campaign.

China on Thursday mounted a defence to allegations that the Asian giant was trapping Sri Lanka in debt, saying its partnership was in the interest of the island's development.

Unleashing a direct attack on the West, the spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy here said the "so-called debt trap" is "a false proposition created by the Western media, with a direct attempt to obstruct the joint development of China and other developing countries, including Sri Lanka". In a select media briefing, Luo Chong said the "fundamental purpose" of such an allegation was to maintain the Western world's "traditional superior position".

The official remarks come in the wake of a recent *New York Times* report which revealed that a Chinese company funded former President Mahinda Rajapaksa's 2015 election campaign, with \$7.6 million. China and Mr. Rajapaksa have denied the allegations.

Ongoing probe

With the report, based on an ongoing government probe, raising questions over apparent money trails from China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC) to Mr. Rajapaksa's aides, Beijing appears to be keen on countering it — first with a statement from the Embassy here, then a statement by the Foreign Ministry and Thursday's press conference in Colombo.

The *NYT* report has aroused considerable curiosity about the "deal", but the government is yet to disclose more information on the "investigation" cited in the report. Local and foreign media reported some findings of the criminal investigation in 2015, but authorities claim they are not aware of its current status. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe told Parliament on Wednesday that the Criminal Investigations Department would investigate the allegations in the *NYT* article.

The government has engaged the CHEC to execute the ambitious \$1.4 billion-international financial city off Colombo's sea front, reclaiming land spanning 500 acres.

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