

More hypocrisy and lies from Sri Lankan president at UN

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In a particularly cynical performance at the UN General Assembly last week, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse paraded before the world as man of peace, a defender of human rights and a champion of the poor. Each claim was a lie.

Rajapakse delivered his speech as his government's armed forces were flagrantly violating the 2002 ceasefire and intensifying operations against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The military is implicated in gross violations of democratic rights, including a string of murders and disappearances. The Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM) recently ruled that the military was responsible for the execution-style killing of 17 aid workers attached to the French-based Action Contre la Faim (ACF) in early August.

As for being "pro-poor", Rajapakse arrived in New York straight from the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) conference in Havana, where he was accompanied by an entourage of 65 ministers, senior bureaucrats and assistants. According to the media, the figure was a world record, raising a few eyebrows even among the most hardened political operators at the NAM meeting. The lavish sums of money spent on the trip, part of his efforts to hold together his shaky ruling alliance, stand in marked contrast to the spending cutbacks for the country's rudimentary services for the poorest layers of society.

Rajapakse began his speech at the UN by pledging his support for the US "war on terrorism". "I wish to reaffirm my government's firm commitment to supporting all global efforts to combat terrorism whenever and wherever it raises its ugly head," he declared. Rajapakse remained silent about the Bush administration's neo-colonial occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, and its preparations for a military assault on Iran.

By tacitly backing Washington's illegal activities, Rajapakse was seeking support from the major powers for his own criminal "war on terrorism" against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the north and east of the country. He used the platform to launch into a diatribe against the LTTE. Far from holding out the prospect for peace, his speech amounted to a declaration of ongoing war.

"Exploiting minority concerns, which we are addressing politically, a ruthless terrorist outfit in Sri Lanka, the LTTE, has been terrorising our people for over two decades. In an age when the world seeks dialogue and peace, the LTTE devotes its

full force to violence, suicide bombings, and massacre of civilians, indiscriminate armed assaults, and conscription of young children for war ...

"Soon after my election, despite the violence unleashed by the LTTE, I therefore expressed the conviction that we need to address the causes of the conflict through a fresh perspective, and a new approach to develop a sustainable solution. We examined this issue with an open mind, and looked at all options available with a view to evolving a national consensus to achieve an honourable peace in an undivided country."

Like his American counterpart, Rajapakse could not address the roots of his "war on terrorism". His brief reference to "minority concerns" obscures the systematic discrimination against the country's Tamil minority, which stretches back to independence in 1948 and for which his own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) bears a special responsibility. For all of Rajapakse's repeated references to Sri Lanka's democratic traditions, successive governments have trampled on basic democratic rights and entrenched Sinhala communal politics as the basis for state rule.

"In addition, my country has been influenced by the core Buddhist values of non-violence, loving, kindness, compassion, equanimity and mindfulness," Rajapakse declared. In fact, his SLFP flouted basic democratic principles by inscribing Buddhism as the state religion in the country's constitution in 1972. In the name of defending "Buddhist values", Colombo governments have waged a vicious communal war that has flagrantly defiled every principle Rajapakse hypocritically claims to uphold.

Like the global "war on terrorism", its Sri Lankan counterpart is an absurdity. Terror is a military tactic, which has been employed by the Sri Lankan military just as ruthlessly as the LTTE. In the current fighting, the government forces have indiscriminately bombed and shelled towns and engaged in a dirty war of abductions, assassinations and disappearances designed to terrorise the Tamil minority. What Rajapakse has unleashed is not a "war on terrorism", but a war to ensure the continued political dominance of the country's Sinhala elite.

Rajapakse did not explain why the war escalated dramatically "soon after my election". He won the presidential poll in a formal electoral alliance with two Sinhala extremist parties—the

Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—which demanded that he take a more aggressive stance against the LTTE. His own program—*Mahinda Chinthanaya* or Mahinda Thought—called for a revision of the 2002 ceasefire and the dismissal of Norway as the formal facilitator of the so-called international peace process.

After months of provocations and covert operations against the LTTE, Rajapakse ordered a major offensive in July to retake the Mavilaru irrigation sluice gate inside LTTE territory in open breach of the ceasefire agreement. The pretext for this “humanitarian” operation was to provide water to farmers downstream by opening the sluice gate. The government had a direct hand in provoking the protest closure by blocking a water project within the LTTE territory.

Over the past two months, the army has unleashed further offensives to capture LTTE territory, including the key strategic positions of Sampur opposite the Trincomalee naval base and Muhamalai at the southern entrance to Jaffna peninsula. All of this, along with repeated air strikes on LTTE areas and camps, has been justified with the lie that the military is engaged in purely “defensive actions” to neutralise the LTTE.

While Rajapakse was at the UN talking about his “vision for peace” and “plans for a consultative process to address the concerns of minorities,” his SLFP was engaged in negotiations to formally bring the Sinhala chauvinists of the JVP into the government. JVP leaders are insisting on conditions that are tantamount to a declaration of war on the LTTE, including tearing up the 2002 ceasefire agreement. With the major opposition party, the United National Party, backing the army offensives, Rajapakse’s “national consensus” is in fact an agreement to wage war.

Rajapakse’s posturing as a defender of human rights was just as ridiculous. Under the current state of emergency, police state powers are being used to suppress media freedoms and carry out arbitrary searches and detentions.

Abductions and killings continue unabated. The Sri Lankan Human Rights Commission recently reported that it had received 419 formal complaints about abductions on the Jaffna peninsula from last December up to August, including 67 in August alone. The Centre for Policy Alternative reported to the UN Human Rights Commission last week that 706 murders had taken place between April and July for which there has been no police investigation.

The Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka and the *World Socialist Web Site* are currently waging an international campaign to demand a full investigation into the execution-style murder of party supporter Sivapragasam Mariyadas on August 7. All the evidence points to the army’s involvement in the killing. (See: “Sri Lankan SEP demands full investigation into murder of Sivapragasam Mariyadas”)

To dispel growing concerns about his government’s record, Rajapakse told the UN that he would appoint “an international panel to observe investigations into certain alleged human

rights violations”. Another lie. Rajapakse made a similar promise following the murders of the 17 Action Contre la Faim aid workers but has since ditched the proposal and handed the inquiry to a local magistrate.

Just three days before Rajapakse’s address to the UN, his government rejected the call for an international probe into the killing of 10 Muslims in Pottuvil, in all likelihood by elite police commandos. Government defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella declared that an international inquiry was unnecessary as Sri Lanka already had the necessary expertise. The only relevant “expertise” that the Sri Lankan police have developed is the ability to cover up the criminal role of the security forces.

Rajapakse’s claims to be “pro-poor” were just as threadbare. “In the first quarter of this year, we recorded a growth of 8.1 percent—the highest in 28 years,” he boasted. “With our determination to further enhance growth with equity, we have adopted a strategy that will provide opportunities for all citizens, while at the same time giving the private sector adequate space, as the engine of growth.”

The president’s comments were simply a declaration that his government intends to continue the pro-market policies of regulation and privatisation that are producing a widening gulf between rich and poor. The official inflation rate hit 17.7 in July, the highest for years—an indication of sharply rising prices for basic commodities. Deteriorating living standards have provoked a wave of strikes and protests.

Rajapakse’s government gazetted an essential services order banning strikes in many industries and mandating the arrest of trade union leaders and other “inciters”. The presidential secretariat yesterday issued a statement withdrawing the regulations, but this action cannot hide the underlying strategy of the government. Confronted with a deepening social crisis for which he has no answers, Rajapakse is resorting to the same reactionary methods as his predecessors: stirring up communalism and prosecuting war to divide the working class as he prepares for further attacks on living standards and democratic rights.



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