

Sri Lankan president's speech at the UN: lies in defence of war and human rights abuses

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Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse's address to the UN General Assembly on September 26 was another exercise in lies and deception. Facing criticism at home and internationally over his government's renewed war and abuse of democratic rights, he falsely claimed to be fighting defensive actions aimed at forcing the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to the negotiating table.

Delivering his speech in Sinhala to maximise its nationalist appeal at home, Rajapakse declared: "We launched military operations only to exert pressure on terrorists in order to convince them that it will not be possible for them to obtain a military victory. Our goal remains a negotiated, honorable end to this unfortunate conflict."

In fact, Rajapakse is responsible for effectively tearing up the 2002 ceasefire, unleashing a new war of aggression aimed at destroying the LTTE and unleashing military-backed death squads to terrorise the island's Tamil minority. He narrowly won office in November 2005 on a program that included a series of demands he knew the LTTE would never accept, including the rewriting of the ceasefire agreement.

Once in power, Rajapakse unleashed the military in a covert war of murder and provocation, then in July last year unleashed the first of a series of offensives to seize LTTE territory. He fraudulently painted the flagrant breach of the ceasefire as a humanitarian operation needed to reopen the Mavilaru irrigation sluice gate, which had been closed by the LTTE as a protest against the government's failure to keep its promises.

The seizure of Mavilaru was the first in a series of aggressive operations aimed at "liberating the East". Following the fall of Thoppigala in July, the government and military held a huge "Dawn of the East" celebration in Colombo to "salute the armed forces" for the victory over the LTTE throughout the eastern parts of the island. Now the military has turned its attention to the LTTE's

remaining strongholds in the North, and the toll of dead, injured and displaced civilians continues to mount.

While Rajapakse postures at the UN about being open to peace talks, his brother Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse has left no doubt the government is seeking the complete annihilation of the LTTE. Speaking at a military ceremony a week earlier, with the president present, the defence secretary declared: "We are ready to defeat terrorism using military power rather than depending on a political solution, which we find difficult to reach right now. We must defeat terrorism not 50 percent, not 75 percent but 100 percent to find a political solution."

The occasion was also significant. It was an award ceremony to decorate the commanding officers and the sailors involved in the sinking of three vessels, which the navy claimed belonged to the LTTE. The ships were not in Sri Lankan territorial waters, but 1,400 nautical miles from Sri Lanka in international waters. According to the account published in the *Sunday Times* on September 23, no attempt was made to board the vessels or determine their cargo. It was another open act of aggression in the Sri Lankan government's undeclared war.

In the course of his 10-minute speech at the UN, President Rajapakse used the term "terrorist" or "terrorism" no less than 13 times. He was at pains to make common cause with the Bush administration's "war on terrorism", declaring: "There are many member states represented in this Assembly today who have first hand experience of the havoc caused by brutish terrorism which has stretched out its claws to many corners of the globe to mar innocent lives". He boasted of Sri Lanka's "upfront position" in the "global war on terrorism", pointing to his country's endorsement of 11 of the 13 UN Conventions on terrorism.

The sordid political calculations are obvious. By endorsing the criminal activities of the Bush administration in Afghanistan and Iraq, Rajapakse hopes

to keep the backing of the US and other major powers for his own “war on terrorism” against the LTTE. By identifying the separatist LTTE with “terrorism”, he obscures the real origins of the island’s bloody 24-year war in the systematic anti-Tamil discrimination on which the Rajapakse government and all its antecedents, stretching back to independence in 1948, have been based.

As for “terrorist” methods, the Sri Lankan military is just as willing as the LTTE to slaughter innocent civilians in order to heighten communal tensions and instill “terror” into the country’s Tamil minority, all of whom are treated as the enemy by the security forces. In the military offensives over the past year, the armed forces have bombarded civilian areas from the air and using artillery and mortars. When criticised, the government has responded using Washington’s standard lie: the “terrorists” are using civilians as “human shields”. Hundreds of people, mainly Tamils, have “disappeared” or been murdered in circumstances that point to the use of well-organised death squads involving either troops or allied paramilitaries.

Echoing the Bush administration’s bogus claims about the US occupation of Iraq, Rajapakse declared that the army had “freed the Eastern Province from terrorism and restored law and order”. He boasted of “a massive program of rehabilitation and reconstruction in the east” and made a pitch for foreign investment and aid. The reality is that the Sri Lankan military functions like an army of occupation in the areas of the North and East under its control. There are no elected provincial authorities and policies are imposed by the Colombo government and state bureaucracy, with the military having an effective veto over anything that remotely affects “security”.

As for “rehabilitation and reconstruction” in the East, the government has transformed a large area of Sampur into a High Security Zone, which will incorporate a Free Trade Zone for foreign investors, displacing thousands of local residents from their homes, farms and businesses.

Responding to criticisms of Sri Lanka’s appalling human rights record, President Rajapakse restrained himself from using his standard method: to denounce any critic as a LTTE supporter. Earlier this year, defence secretary Rajapakse accused the UN of “bullying” Sri Lanka over democratic rights and claimed that the international body had been thoroughly “infiltrated” by the LTTE over the past 30 years. The president chose not to repeat his brother’s ridiculous allegation before the UN

General Assembly, but he nevertheless claimed that Sri Lanka was being “victimised” over human rights.

Rajapakse went on to declare: “Guided by the principles of Buddhism, we have long respected the rights of our fellow human beings. Therefore it has not been necessary for us to experience global wars or the deaths of millions to learn to recognise their value. My country has no record of inflicting misery on fellow human beings for the purpose of empire building, for commercial advantage or for religious righteousness.”

While hinting at the hypocrisy of Western powers by obliquely pointing to their history of war and plunder, Rajapakse falsifies the historical record in Sri Lanka. It is enough to cite the communal barbarism of the past 24 years, in which the Buddhist clergy have been among the most fervent champions of a war for Sinhala Buddhist supremacy. Rajapakse’s underlying message is clear: we will keep quiet about the crimes of Western imperialism, past and present, as long as the major powers allow the Sri Lankan military to wage war and terrorise the island’s Tamil minority with impunity.

No one in Sri Lankan ruling circles has challenged the lies and falsifications contained in Rajapakse’s speech. The *Daily Mirror*, which is considered the “liberal” voice in Sri Lanka, wrote an editorial on September 28 headed “President presents Sri Lanka’s case cogently”. Far from even chiding the government on human rights, the editorial stood firmly alongside Rajapakse, declaring: “It is evident that terrorists and their supporters utilise this issue for thwarting efforts of countries to deal effectively with terrorism.”

The silence confirms that all sections of the political and media establishment, whatever their tactical differences, back Rajapakse’s renewed communal war and are complicit in his crimes.



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