

# Sri Lankan president at the UN seeks to justify communal civil war

Wije Dias

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Like other leaders at the recent annual meeting of the UN General Assembly, Sri Lanka's President Mahinda Rajapakse had his moment at centre stage when, on September 24, he addressed the gathering. While the theme of the meeting was the global food crisis and the democratisation of the UN, Rajapakse dispensed with these issues with a few platitudes and moved on to his government's renewed civil war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Rajapakse was on the defensive. The major powers, including those overseeing the collapsed peace process—the US, the European Union, Japan and Norway—have all tacitly backed the Sri Lankan government's tearing up of the 2002 ceasefire and the return to war. However, as evidence of gross abuses of democratic rights by the Sri Lankan government and its military has mounted, so has the international criticism. Earlier this year, Sri Lanka lost its membership of the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Commission despite spending millions of dollars lobbying to retain a seat.

The European Union is now threatening to withdraw its GSP+ trade facility to Sri Lanka on the grounds that the government is breaching UN conventions, particularly in relation to human rights. The loss of GSP tariff concessions would be a huge blow to the Sri Lankan garment industry, which is heavily dependent on preferential treatment in the European markets. Under conditions of an economic slowdown in the EU and the US, the jobs of up to 200,000 garment workers in Sri Lanka could be lost.

In the first place, Rajapakse justified his renewed war against the LTTE by declaring it to be part of the global "war on terrorism" and calling for "clear action" by the UN to combat the "fast spreading menace of terrorism". By backing the crimes of the US and its allies in the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, Rajapakse is appealing for support for his own criminal war in Sri Lanka. Like its US counterpart, the Sri Lankan military has resorted to indiscriminate bombing and shelling, killing hundreds of civilians in LTTE-held areas and driving hundreds of

thousands from their homes.

Rajapakse's speech was riddled with lies designed to cover up the communal character of his government's war against the island's Tamil minority. "All successive governments of Sri Lanka," he declared, "have endeavoured to resolve the problem [of democratic rights for the Tamil minority] for over twenty five years, including through Norwegian facilitation and International Co-Chairs overseeing a so-called peace process that was treated with contempt by the terrorists. On each occasion that talks were held seeking peace, the terrorists of the LTTE walked out on the flimsiest of excuses and reverted to terrorism of the worst kind, indiscriminately targeting innocent civilians".

This is a blatant attempt to stand the historical record on its head. The emergence of the LTTE was not the product of "terrorism" but the frustration and anger generated by decades of systematic anti-Tamil discrimination practised by Sri Lankan governments, which sought to whip up Sinhala supremacism to divide the working class. The LTTE was one of a number of petty-bourgeois nationalist organisations, calling for a separate Tamil state, that emerged in the 1970s in response to the increasing exclusion of Tamils from universities and government jobs, official bias against Tamil speakers and the elevation of Buddhism as the state religion.

While limited clashes between the military and armed Tamil groups had taken place previously, the escalation of the conflict into a fully-fledged civil war took place in 1983. The United National Party government of President J.R. Jayawardene, confronting rising opposition to its market reforms from workers, unleashed a bloody anti-Tamil pogrom in July 1983 that claimed hundreds of lives, then dispatched the army to the North with orders to crush the armed rebellion "within six months". Some 25 years later, successive governments have proven incapable of ending a war that has claimed an estimated 80,000 lives.

Rajapakse's claim that governments have tried to "resolve the problem" is just as fraudulent. Various attempts have been made to reach some sort of power-sharing arrangement with the LTTE and the Tamil elites that it represents, most

recently in 2002. All have foundered, however, on the fact that the political establishment in Colombo is thoroughly steeped in Sinhala chauvinism. The peace talks initiated by the United National Party-led government in 2002-2003 rapidly collapsed amid a vicious communal campaign by Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), denouncing the peace process as a betrayal of the motherland.

Rajapakse narrowly won the 2005 presidential election with the JVP's support on a program that rejected the basis of the so-called international peace process. Having gained office, he allowed the military to engage in a dirty, undeclared war of provocation and assassination and effectively scuttled negotiations by demanding a rewriting of the 2002 ceasefire agreement. In July 2006, Rajapakse ordered the military onto the offensive in flagrant breach of the ceasefire, from which his government finally withdrew unilaterally in January.

Rajapakse spelled out his stance on any further talks, declaring: "Our government would only be ready to talk to this illegal armed group when it is ready to commit itself to the decommissioning of its illicit weapons and dismantling of its military capacity, and return to the democratic fold." In other words, the Sri Lankan government demands complete capitulation—a step that is only likely if the military succeeds in destroying the LTTE's fighting capacity.

Rajapakse boasted of his government's successes in the island's East where the military has overrun the LTTE's main strongholds. "The government's objective is to enable the people to enjoy the benefits of the democratic processes and to speed the development activities in those areas where there is a heavy presence of terrorists. This would be similar to the fast tracking of economic development taking place in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka, where former terrorists now function as democratically elected Provincial Councillors, and a former child soldier conscripted by the LTTE is now the elected Chief Minister, having abandoned terrorism and embracing democracy".

The provincial election in the East this year was a sham. The government flooded the province with some 20,000 troops and other military personnel as well as 27,000 police. Rajapakse's SLFP formed an alliance with the notorious paramilitary group, the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulihal (TMVP), which was formed in 2004 in a split from the LTTE. TMVP thugs were permitted to carry arms and were widely accused by opposition parties and election monitors of intimidation and violence. The "former child soldier" and Chief Minister S. Chandrakanthan, also known as Pillayan, is the leader of the TMVP, which has been criticised by local and international human rights groups for child conscription,

murder and extortion. As for "economic development", the military has driven thousands of people from their homes and land to set up a free trade zone within a protected High Security Zone for foreign investors to exploit cheap labour.

The Rajapakse government has placed the Eastern province under military occupation, nominally governed by a provincial council headed by a vicious militia leader. This grotesque parody of democracy is what Rajapakse is preparing not only for Sri Lanka's North but the rest of the country as well. The government routinely denounces any workers, students or farmers engaged in strikes or protests against its policies as "sabotaging the war effort" and "assisting the terrorists".

Of course, no one in the UN general assembly challenged Rajapakse's lies and absurdities. If muted criticisms are now being raised about "human rights" in Sri Lanka, it is because the war threatens to cut across the interests of other countries. As the Sri Lankan press noted, Rajapakse failed to get an audience with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh who appeared to find time for many others, including US vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin. While quietly backing Rajapakse's war politically and militarily, Singh confronts growing political unrest among Tamils in southern India, outraged over impact of the conflict. Likewise, the US and EU have supported the war but are concerned about its potential to destabilise the region, particularly India where the major powers have significant economic interests.

In Sri Lanka itself, the media has largely reported Rajapakse's speech in glowing terms. Any mild criticism has been limited to his failure to secure stronger international support. Whatever tactical disagreements may exist, the entire political and media establishment in Colombo is responsible for the island's continuing communal bloodbath.



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