

UN body covers up Sri Lankan government's war crimes

Wije Dias
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The UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) passed a resolution in Geneva on Wednesday that blocks any independent inquiry into the Sri Lankan military's war crimes and hails the government for its victory in the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The two-day special session was convened at the behest of the European powers, led by Britain and France. They backed a limited resolution by Switzerland calling for an investigation of violations of human rights and international law by both the military and the LTTE during the war in Sri Lanka.

The Sri Lankan government, with the backing of China, Russia and India, proposed a counter-resolution that whitewashed its conduct of the war, the army's killing of Tamil civilians and the compulsory internment of nearly 300,000 Tamil refugees. After two days of acrimonious wrangling, the UNHRC adopted the Sri Lankan government's resolution 29 to 12, with 6 abstentions.

The resolution makes a mockery of any claims that the UNHRC is a defender of basic democratic rights and international law. The Colombo government and its backers insisted that the civil war was an internal matter. The resolution "reaffirmed the principle of non-interference in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of states."

Written in the language of the Sri Lankan government's propaganda, the resolution condemned the LTTE for using civilians as "human shields", welcomed the "liberation" of the North of the island, "commended" the government for addressing the needs of Tamil refugees, welcomed its "continued commitment to the promotion and protection of all human rights" and urged the "international community" to provide financial aid for the Sri Lankan economy.

The resolution stands reality on its head. For months, the Sri Lankan army has engaged in a relentless offensive to capture the last patch of LTTE-held territory, with criminal indifference

to the fate of more than 250,000 Tamil civilians trapped in the war zone. According to UN estimates, more than 7,000 civilians were killed in the period from late January to mid-May, many by the military's indiscriminate bombardments. Many more were injured and maimed.

Far from "liberating" the Tamil civilians, the army has herded them into huge detention centres surrounded by razor wire and guarded by heavily armed soldiers. Military intelligence agents and various pro-government paramilitaries have free rein in these centres to seize and detain so-called "LTTE suspects" in unknown prisons. The detainees, many of whom are suffering from malnutrition, disease and injury, do not have adequate access to adequate food, medical care and basic facilities.

Various international organisations, including the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), have expressed deep concern at the conditions in the internment camps and called for the government to lift its restrictions on access. The UNHRC resolution, however, gives the seal of approval to the government's treatment of the detainees and its decision to provide only "access as may be appropriate" to international aid agencies.

The resolution covers up the real sources of the war, which lie in decades of systematic official discrimination against the island's Tamil minority, and lends credence to Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse's bogus promise to bring about "lasting peace and reconciliation". The resolution will only strengthen the hand of right-wing, communal layers of the Colombo political establishment that are intent on consolidating the Sinhala supremacist state by placing the North and East of the country under military occupation.

Sri Lanka's human rights minister, Mahinda Samarasinghe, was obviously elated at the outcome, declaring it to be "a clear endorsement of our effort to eliminate terrorism". Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama boasted that the vote "shows that Sri Lanka stands on top in terms of wide support from the states across the globe."

Editorials in the Colombo press today hailed the decision as another great victory for Sri Lanka. After hailing the “masterly strokes of diplomacy” by Sri Lanka’s Geneva ambassador Dayan Jayatiloka, the *Daily Mirror* declared that the “stunning victory” demonstrated that the “Asians and Africans have started to realise their true potential”.

The *Island* editorial entitled “Victory over diplomatic terrorism” declared: “David sent Goliath reeling in Geneva... the world has overwhelmingly backed Sri Lanka vis-à-vis a dastardly attempt by the Western bloc and its hangers-on to give her a bad name and hang her.” In previous comments, the right-wing newspaper has wholeheartedly backed President Rajapakse for standing up to what it termed Western neo-colonialism.

The vote had nothing to do with either standing up to neo-colonialism or Sri Lanka’s masterly diplomacy. All of those that backed the UNHRC resolution, including Russia, China and India, continue to support, in one way or another, the US-led neo-colonial occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. All of them voted for Sri Lanka’s resolution as a means of advancing their own economic and strategic interests, as well as insurance against any attempt to focus on their own internal human rights abuses.

As for the Sri Lankan “David” standing up to the West, it would have been completely impossible without a few Goliaths in its corner, especially China. The decision by Beijing to cast aside its usual low-profile diplomacy and back a direct challenge to the European powers and the US is a significant indication of China’s growing determination to assert its influence. Sri Lanka is not alone in viewing Beijing as a counterweight to a waning Washington, particularly as the global economic crisis deepens, thus encouraging China to be even more assertive.

China has provided not only political support to the Rajapakse government but financial and military aid as well. Beijing is now the largest donor to Sri Lanka, outstripping the US and Japan. It has been a major supplier of arms, including the reported provision of six fighter jets free of charge. In return, China has been given oil exploration rights to the Sri Lankan seabed and the right to build and operate a port at Hambantota in the south of the island that could be crucial to Beijing’s plans to secure its trade routes to Africa and the Middle East.

Russia and India also backed the UNHRC resolution to bolster their own influence in Colombo. New Delhi is concerned about fending off any UN interference in its own “internal affairs”, especially Kashmir, and countering the

growing standing of rival China in what India regards as its own sphere of influence.

The European powers, backed behind the scenes by the US, were clearly stung by their rebuff in the UNHRC. A European Union (EU) statement expressed “regret” that the UN body could not agree on “an acceptable outcome... addressing serious human rights violations and the humanitarian crisis” in Sri Lanka. Canadian representative Terry Cormier declared: “We regret that our reasonable proposals were refused and that the credibility of the council has been further undermined by the result.”

Notwithstanding this posturing over human rights violations in Sri Lanka, the US and its European allies have always used the issue of “human rights” highly selectively to advance their own interests. Apart from being responsible for war crimes in the US-led occupation of Afghanistan, the EU was one of the four so-called international co-sponsors of the Sri Lankan peace process—along with the US, Japan and Norway. For more than two years, the co-sponsors ignored the Sri Lankan government’s breaches of the 2002 ceasefire and human rights abuses until the issue became a convenient political lever over the Colombo government as it became clear in recent months that the war was drawing to a close.

The sordid spectacle of the major and minor powers haggling in the UNHRC over their respective interests, all under the banner of differing “principles”, recalls Lenin’s well-known description of the League of Nations as a “thieves’ kitchen”. Moreover, while the Human Rights Council does not have the same status or powers as the UN Security Council or General Assembly, the diplomatic skirmishing is a sign of sharpening global tensions and a fault line between the major powers that presages more dangerous future conflicts.



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