UN chief calls for inquiry into Sri Lankan war crimes

K. Ratnayake
10 June 2009

Amid signs of growing pressure from the Western powers and media, UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon last Friday revived calls for an internationally-monitored investigation into the war crimes committed by the Sri Lankan government during the final stages of the military offensive to wipe out the separatist Tamil Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Ban urged the Sri Lankan government to accede to a UN-backed inquiry after what the UN called "an informal discussion with Security Council members on Sri Lanka". His statement indicates that the conflict that has emerged between the major powers on the situation in Sri Lanka is continuing, bound up with their competing strategic and economic interests in South Asia.

"It is crucially important that the Sri Lankan government follow up on all the promises that they have made," Ban told journalists following the Security Council's discussion on the outcome of his May 22-23 visit to Sri Lanka. "I would like to ask the Sri Lankan government to recognise the international call for accountability and full transparency," he said. "Whenever and wherever there are credible allegations of violations of humanitarian law, there should be a proper investigation."

Ban's comments came just over a week after China, Russia, India and other countries defeated a May 27 UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) resolution by the European governments, led by Britain and France, and supported by the US, calling for an investigation of violations of human rights and international law by both the military and the LTTE.

Questioned by journalists, Ban confirmed that he was calling for an inquiry conducted with UN participation, saying: "Any inquiry, to be meaningful, should be supported by the members of the United Nations, and also should be very impartial and objective."

Ban's move followed a campaign in sections of the Western media to condemn the UNHCR vote. The most aggressive was the Murdoch-owned *Times* of London, which has accused the UN of burying estimates that 20,000 civilians died in the final military assault on the northern "no-fire zone". The *Times* casualty calculation was based on UN data, photos from battle zone and eyewitness accounts. The previous UN estimate was that 7,000 Tamil civilians died from January 20 to May 7 due to the military's shelling and bombing.

In its May 29 editorial, the *Times* denounced the Sri Lankan-sponsored UNHRC resolution that was adopted, describing it as "an utter disgrace". The editorial pointedly compared the Sri Lankan atrocities to "Srebrenica, Darfur and other massacres", where Western interventions have been triggered or demanded, and declared that "the UN has no right to collude in suppressing the appalling evidence of the cost".

While the editorial professed humanitarian concern for the plight of Tamil civilians, it pointed to the actual big power conflicts involved. Referring to the UNHRC vote, it declared: "Support for this deeply flawed resolution came from the usual suspects—China, Russia, India, Pakistan and a clutch of Asian and Islamic nations determined to prevent the council ever investigating human rights violations in their own or any country."

As the editorial indicates, the Western powers are pressing for a war crimes probe not because they sympathise with Tamil victims of the war. They all supported the Colombo government's war, providing military hardware, finance and political backing. Having done so, they are seeking to reinforce their own interests in the strategically-located island, and stem China's growing influence.

At his media briefing last Friday, Ban faced some critical questioning. One correspondent asked whether the UN's record on the Sri Lankan crisis showed "a level of impudence on the United Nations' part, that you are continually going to the Sri Lankan government as a petitioner?" The journalist continued: "There doesn't seem to be any 'right to protect' being asserted here [by the UN]—you are coming late to the conflict—there are allegations that there may be excesses of 20,000 people who

© World Socialist Web Site

died."

Ban tried to evade the allegation and said he had acted from the beginning by contacting Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapakse over the human rights issue. While in Sri Lanka Ban issued a joint statement with Rajapakse that spoke of reaching a "lasting political solution" to deal with the Tamil minority.

Ban used the media briefing to caution the Colombo government: "I ... warn against the risk of triumphalism in the wake of victory, after this military conflict. This will really hinder the ongoing efforts by Sri Lankan government and people, and international community, in helping heal the wounds."

Ban was referring to the unending celebrations by the Colombo government that have only underscored the communal nature of the war victory. The Rajapakse government's so-called "war on terror" was in fact carried out to bring the whole country under the unchallenged writ of the Sinhala capitalist class.

The US and EU have proposed a "political solution", which would mean making some concessions to the Tamil elite. This has nothing to do with the democratic rights of the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka. These powers are concerned that the Rajapakse government's methods will result in continuing communal conflict inside the country, creating political instability that will also affect neighbouring India.

At the UNHRC, China, Russia and India supported the Rajapakse government's resolution, which declared that the outcome of the Sri Lankan war was an "internal matter". While these countries have waged their own wars and human rights violations to suppress minorities, they are seeking to advance their own influence in Colombo.

China is establishing close ties with Sri Lanka. Beijing signed an agreement yesterday to provide a $US500 million loan to the cash-strapped Colombo government for a Chinese company to build low-cost houses. The aid came while Sri Lanka was still awaiting an answer on its application to the International Monetary Fund for assistance worth $1.9 billion, which Britain and the US have threatened to block.

Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama conveyed Colombo's appreciation when he met with Lieutenant General Ma Xiaotian, Deputy Chief of the General Staff of China's Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) in Singapore last week. Both were participating in a regional security forum.

Under questioning at his June 5 media briefing, Ban said he had "been urging the Sri Lankan President on this matter" [a war crimes inquiry] and "he assured me that he will institute the necessary procedures to ensure the transparency and accountability of this [process]."

Emboldened by the backing for its UNHRC resolution, however, the Colombo government contemptuously rejected any renewed suggestion of an investigation. Foreign secretary Palitha Kohona told the Colombo-based *Sunday Times:* "The government of Sri Lanka firmly stands by its earlier position that no such probe will be initiated, both local and otherwise."

Defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse was more emphatic. In a *Sunday Times* interview, he declared: "I am not worried because we will not allow such a thing. It was proven at an international forum, when the international community said in one voice that Sri Lanka has defeated the worst terrorist organisation in the world and we must commend them on that and not punish them."

Rajapakse, the president's brother, added: "They should not talk about these investigations and waste our time, waste money and resources because we have no time for that.... We will not co-operate or accept any of these investigations because there is no reason for that."

However, the fact that the call for a war crimes inquiry has been raised again indicates that the US and European powers will continue to press the issue as part of their strategy in growing geo-political rivalry in Sri Lanka and South Asia as a whole.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site