

Sri Lanka gets US support on bogus human rights inquiry

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Sri Lankan External Affairs Minister G. L. Peiris visited Washington last week to patch up relations with the US and fend off continuing demands for an international investigation into the war crimes carried out by the Sri Lankan military in the final stages of its war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

As part of his five-day visit, Peiris met with UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon to oppose his plans to appoint an independent panel into the Sri Lankan atrocities. The Sri Lankan foreign minister reportedly told Ban that the panel was “politically unacceptable” to Colombo, arguing that Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse had just appointed an inquiry—the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission—to examine the country’s civil war from 2002 on.

The Sri Lankan government has flatly denied that any civilians died in the months before the LTTE’s defeat in May 2009 and bitterly opposed any international inquiry into the events. Its denials have been contradicted by a growing mountain of evidence to the contrary, including a lengthy report by the Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG) released last month, which estimated the number of dead and missing civilians at between 30,000 and 75,000. The report accused the Sri Lankan military of deliberately shelling and bombing hospitals, humanitarian operations and other civilian targets inside LTTE-held territory.

The Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission will be just as much a sham as previous inquiries appointed by President Rajapakse into military atrocities and the activities of pro-government death

squads. A Presidential Commission of Inquiry into human rights violations was appointed following local and international outrage at the execution-style killing of 17 aid workers from the French-based Action Contre la Faim (ACF) in August 2006. That inquiry was folded up in mid-2009 without issuing any reports.

During presidential and parliamentary elections this year, the government exploited the limited international criticisms of its human rights abuses to claim that the country was the subject of an “international conspiracy”. Pointing to the obvious hypocrisy of the US and European powers, government ministers asked why Sri Lanka should be subjected to investigation when the murder of civilians in Afghanistan and Iraq was not. In other words, if the US was able to get away with war crimes, why not Sri Lanka?

Having won both elections, President Rajapakse has made a tactical shift, well aware that Washington’s main concern is not war crimes, but the growing influence of China, which provided his government with diplomatic, financial and military assistance during the war. The appointment of Peiris, who is known for his pro-Western orientation, as foreign minister was a step toward mending bridges. The government has made several other gestures—easing the country’s state of emergency and granting a pardon to journalist J.S. Tissanayagam, who was convicted of trumped-up charges under the notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act.

While he did not manage to dissuade UN secretary general Ban, Peiris received support from US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Washington last Friday. Clinton declared that the Sri Lankan Lessons Learnt

and Reconciliation Commission “holds promise”. She added: “We expect that it will be given a broad enough mandate with the resources necessary to be able to follow the trail of any evidence that is presented.”

Clinton also patted the Rajapakse government on the back for resettling Tamil refugees after the war. She made no mention of the fact that the Sri Lankan military detained more than a quarter of a million civilians—men, women and children—in military-run “welfare villages” that operated as giant open air prisons. Instead she enthused: “There has been tremendous progress and many thousands and thousands of such internally displaced persons have returned home.”

In turn, Peiris indicated that Sri Lanka might “engage in a dialogue with the United Nations” as long as its bogus commission was allowed to proceed “without hindrance” from the international community. Peiris reportedly promised Clinton that the remaining 45,000 detainees would be resettled within three months. Contrary to Peiris’s claims that people are being resettled “with dignity,” they are being returned to towns and villages under military occupation with little or no financial assistance from the government.

Peiris hinted at the real discussions that took place behind closed doors with Clinton. He mentioned a Foreign Relations Committee report prepared for the US Senate last December on the significance of Sri Lanka to US strategy. Referring to China’s growing influence in Colombo, the report declared that the US could not afford to “lose” Sri Lanka, which was strategically positioned near vital Indian Ocean sea lanes.

Peiris declared that the Sri Lankan government looked forward to “a multidimensional relationship with the United States” on the lines of the Senate report, saying it “called for a broadening and a deepening of the relationship between our two countries at this time”. His reference to “a multidimensional relationship” is a carefully chosen one. The report complained that the previous US approach had given too much weight to human rights considerations, arguing that “US policy toward Sri

Lanka cannot be dominated by a single agenda”. It called instead for “a broader and more robust approach... that appreciates new political and economic realities in Sri Lanka and US geostrategic interests”.

Both Clinton and Peiris clearly recognise that the Senate report is the basis for improved relations between the two countries. Washington will play down human rights and support Colombo’s window dressing on the issue, as long as Sri Lanka reestablishes its previously close ties with the US on crucial strategic issues. Pointing to the developing relationship, Peiris invited “American companies to come in and to participate vigorously in the rebuilding of infrastructure” in Sri Lanka.

The Rajapakse government undoubtedly wants the US to use its influence with the European Community, which decided earlier this year to end Generalised System of Preferences Plus (GSP+) tariff concessions on imports from Sri Lanka by August, citing unresolved human rights abuses. Peiris has attempted to convince the EU, so far without success, to reverse its decision. If the GSP+ concessions were withdrawn, the results could be devastating, particularly for Sri Lankan garment manufacturers, whose largest markets are in Europe.

The Obama administration’s deliberate downplaying of the gross human rights abuses in Sri Lanka is a green light for the Rajapakse government to intensify its continuing attacks on basic democratic rights as it prepares to impose on working people the austerity demands made by the International Monetary Fund as the condition of last year’s \$US2.6 billion loan to the government.



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