

# Sri Lanka: Government-backed protesters besiege UN office over war crimes investigation

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The Sri Lankan government of President Mahinda Rajapakse blatantly assisted protesters who, led by a cabinet minister, took more than 120 UN office staff hostage in Colombo for up to seven hours on Tuesday. A protest blockade of the office was still continuing yesterday.

Housing Minister Wimal Weerawansa, the leader of the Sinhala extremist National Freedom Front (NFF), called the siege to demand the abolition of a panel appointed by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to conduct a limited probe of war crimes committed during the final stage of last year's military offensive against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Weerawansa led about 2,000 supporters, including Buddhist monks, shouting communal slogans and burning effigies of Ban Ki-moon. The group broke into the UN office complex and blocked the entrance, preventing the UN staff from leaving. Police provided no protection for the UN, even though its office is located in an official "high security zone" where all protests are banned.

Police later escorted several UN staffers through the blockade. However, according to reporters, Weerawansa phoned the defence secretary, the president's brother, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who ordered the police to leave the site. Eventually, foreign affairs secretary Romesh Jayasinghe asked NFF leaders to allow UN officials to leave.

The provocative protest is an expression of the nervousness and opposition within Sri Lankan ruling circles and among communalist groups over any investigation into human rights violations during the war. The siege was called amid developing rivalry between the major global powers for influence over Sri Lanka. The US and EU have backed the UN panel, while China and Russia have opposed it.

Between January and May last year, indiscriminate bombing and shelling by the military killed and maimed thousands of

Tamil civilians. The UN itself estimated that about 7,000 were killed. On the basis of eye-witness accounts, the International Crisis Group concluded there was credible evidence that the military intentionally shelled civilians, hospitals and humanitarian operations, and that 30,000 to 75,000 civilians had been killed or were still missing.

Rajapakse's government has vehemently rejected the UN panel, refusing to cooperate with it or issue visas for panel members. Weerawansa declared that the siege was called to defend the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, President Rajapakse, other leaders and "war heroes" (soldiers) from being dragged to a war crimes tribunal, and accused UN Secretary General Ban of "taking the side of extremist and terrorist forces".

On Tuesday the government claimed it had "dealt with the protest ... in compliance with both domestic as well as international obligations". However, the president later further incited the protesters by declaring that "various international forces are obstructing the country when it is fully geared for development after the eradication of terrorism".

The open display of mob violence, backed by the government, the police and Sinhala extremists, was also aimed at intimidating working people. By agitating against the UN panel, the government is trying to whip up communalism as it prepares to implement IMF austerity measures. It is trying to use the war panel issue to divert growing opposition to its attacks on living conditions.

Despite the protest, UN panel chairman Marzuki Darusman told the *Daily Mirror* yesterday that his committee would meet later this month and begin its work. His announcement came as US pressure on the Colombo government increased.

Commenting on the UN siege, State Department spokesman Mark Toner said the US supported "people's right to free expression" but added that a "robust accountability process"

was needed “to help the island reconcile after decades of war”. He reiterated that the US welcomed “Ban’s announcement of a panel of experts to provide advice on relevant best practices for investigations into alleged violations of international human rights and humanitarian law”.

The US supported the Rajapakse government’s war, along with the EU and other Western powers. They only began criticising human rights violations as China developed closer relations with the Colombo government. These powers have no concern whatsoever for the democratic rights of the Sri Lankan people, including Tamils. Rather, they are vying for strategic influence in South Asia.

In a further move to intensify pressure on the Rajapakse government, the US announced on June 30 that it had accepted a petition filed by the AFL-CIO, the US trade union body, on behalf of Sri Lankan unions, seeking a review of workers’ rights in the country. This is linked to an annual review of US tariff concessions for Sri Lankan garment exports. The US is the second largest market for Sri Lankan garments and the current 12-month agreement expires in December.

The AFL-CIO has no sympathy for labour rights in Sri Lanka or any country. It is mounting its own nationalist and protectionist efforts to divert the discontent of American workers over mass unemployment, while helping the Obama administration prosecute the interests of American imperialism.

The EU, which is Sri Lanka’s biggest export market, worth \$1.56 billion annually, is already withdrawing similar concessions to the country. On Monday, the European Commission announced that Sri Lankan imports to Europe would lose GSP+ tariff concessions from August 15. Garment and fisheries products will be most affected as the tariff rises from zero to 18 percent.

The EU cited 15 counts of Sri Lankan rights violations, including the non-implementation of constitutional provisions guaranteeing human rights, the retention of emergency regulations related to detention without trial, and non-cooperation with UN human rights bodies.

The Sri Lankan government immediately rejected the EU’s demands. Media Minister Keheliya Rambukwella said: “We are not accepting the EU conditions. Our position is very clear. We have already made alternate arrangements to help the exporters who may be affected by this.” Nevertheless, business circles have expressed concern over the loss of crucial markets.

By contrast, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang last week conveyed support for Sri Lanka, saying: “China believes that the Sri Lankan government and its people are

capable of handling various issues.” He added that Beijing hoped the UN and international powers would help Sri Lanka to “stabilise its internal situation and accelerate economic development”.

Earlier, the Russian foreign ministry issued a statement questioning Ban’s right to appoint the UN panel. It added: “What also makes us cautious is the fact that this decision was taken without regard to the position of a sovereign state and a member of the UN—Sri Lanka.”

These statements indicate intensifying great-power rivalry in South Asia. Members of the US foreign relations committee last year warned that Washington could not afford to “lose” Sri Lanka, which is strategically located in the Indian Ocean.

While the Rajapakse government recently tried to smooth relations with Washington, a stalemate persists. Foreign Affairs Minister G.L. Peiris went to the US to lobby Ban and to hold talks with Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, in an unsuccessful bid to head off the UN panel plan. The Rajapakse government is now seeking the support of China and Russia to block the panel.

There are, nevertheless, differences within the Sri Lankan elite. Former army commander General Sarath Fonseka, after falling out with Rajapakse and deciding to contest the presidency, expressed his willingness to patch up relations with the US and EU. Sections of the business establishment rallied behind Fonseka during the presidential election, concerned by the prospect of losing markets and geo-political backing in the West. After being defeated in the election, Fonseka was arrested and is still in detention, facing a military court-martial, despite being an elected member of parliament.

On Monday, Fonseka told parliament that he was prepared to testify before the UN panel and “uphold the reputation of the military”. He claimed that he was not afraid of the panel, because “the war was waged in line with international covenants and conventions”.



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