

Sri Lankan president at the UN denies war crimes

K. Ratnayake
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Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse's trip to New York and speech at the UN General Assembly last week had two main purposes: to cover up for war crimes committed during the country's civil war and to appeal for foreign investment to rebuild its devastated economy.

Rajapakse's speech at the UN was his first since the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May last year. Facing widespread international criticism and calls for a war crimes investigation, last year he sent then Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake to the annual General Assembly meeting.

Addressing the UN, Rajapakse repeated the lie that his government and the Sri Lankan military committed no war crimes. Despite the government's claims that the army killed no civilians, the UN and various human rights organisations have provided ample evidence that thousands, if not tens of thousands, of Tamil civilians died as a result of the military's artillery and aerial bombardment.

Following the LTTE's defeat, the army herded more than a quarter of a million civilians—men, women and children—into detention centres where they were held for months before resettlement began. Around 40,000 people are still being detained in these so-called welfare villages. Those who have been “resettled” have been returned to their villages and towns with scant financial assistance under what amounts to a permanent military occupation.

Rajapakse denounced the LTTE as “one of the most brutal, highly-organised, well-funded and effective terrorist organisations” in the world. Appealing for support from the US and European countries, he declared: “[M]any of the atrocities, the West has come to experience in recent times, the people of Sri Lanka were

themselves the victims of, for nearly 30 years...”

Just as the US and its allies have waged their neo-colonial wars under the bogus banner of fighting terrorism, so Rajapakse justified his communal war as a “war on terror”. The LTTE, a bourgeois nationalist organisation advocating Tamil separatism, emerged as a result of decades of anti-Tamil discrimination by Colombo governments. Its individual acts of terrorism against Sinhala civilians were certainly reactionary and provided grist for the mill of Sinhala supremacist propagandists. But they were also a desperate response to the broader state repression directed against the island's Tamil minority.

In the lead up to the LTTE's defeat, the US and European powers, which had backed Rajapakse's war, began to raise concerns over human rights abuses and calls for a limited investigation into possible war crimes—by both sides. As commentators in Colombo were quick to point out, Washington was proposing to hold the Sri Lankan military to account for crimes similar to those carried out by US forces in Afghanistan on a routine basis. The real purpose behind the US call was to put pressure on the Rajapakse government, which in the course of the war had come to depend on China for economic, military and political aid.

During his speech, Rajapakse repeated a proposal made previously to change international law to take into account so-called wars against terrorism. “[I]t is worth examining the capacity of current international humanitarian law to meet contemporary needs... The asymmetrical nature of conflicts initiated by non-state actors gives rise to serious problems which need to be considered in earnest by the international community,” he said.

The proposal is a rather obvious appeal to the US and its allies to join Sri Lanka in pushing for a change to international law to authorise all governments—“big or small”—to use methods that are currently illegal under the Geneva Conventions. Like the US military in Iraq and Afghanistan, its Sri Lankan counterparts resorted to detention without trial, torture and extra-judicial killings to terrorise the Tamil population and government opponents.

Rajapakse’s mission to the UN appears to have fallen flat. He had planned to meet various government leaders, including from Australia, UK, Brazil, France, South Korea and Russia, to solicit political and economic support. However, Rajapakse was only able to meet leaders from Turkey, Qatar, Jamaica, Iran and Norway.

Rajapakse’s meeting with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon was regarded in Colombo as a key event. With the backing of the US and European powers, Ban has appointed an expert panel to advise him on human rights violations in the final months of the Sri Lankan war. During his meeting with Rajapakse, Ban restated that the panel was not a formal war crimes investigation—a comment that was immediately seized on in Colombo as a diplomatic triumph.

Rajapakse had also been hoping to reverse the European Union’s decision to suspend its GSP+ tariff concessions for Sri Lanka unless various human rights criteria were met. On his way to New York, Rajapakse stopped in Berlin to meet German Chancellor Angela Merkel but had no success in altering the EU decision. The loss of EU trade preferences will hit the battered Sri Lankan economy hard because Europe is the top export market for the country’s sizable garment industry.

Rajapakse’s claims to be “building a lasting peace, healing wounds, ensuring economic prosperity and guaranteeing the rights of the whole nation to live in harmony” are completely fraudulent. Continuing, widespread anti-Tamil discrimination will fuel communal tensions and conflict. As for “economic prosperity,” the country is heavily in debt as a result of the war and global financial crisis. The government is under pressure to impose drastic austerity measures to reduce the budget deficit.

The second aspect of Rajapakse’s trip to New York was to secure investment and aid. His entourage of 130 people included ministers, parliamentarians and around two dozen business leaders. The Sri Lankan embassy organised for the president to meet American business executives at the Helmsley Hotel. Around 150 attended, according to an embassy release, “from a variety of industries, including the hospitality and tourism industry, the beverage industry, and the aerospace and defence community”.

In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, Rajapakse boasted: “Sri Lanka—with a literate population, relatively low labour costs, and a sizeable corps of trained accountants—is drawing the interest of outsourcing firms, including major Indian business-process outsourcing companies seeking ways to expand outside India, where wages also have been rising.”

In the same article, Ashroff Omar, chief executive of the multi-national apparel exporter Brandix Lanka, underlined the significance of Sri Lanka as a cheap labour platform. He explained that it currently costs about \$US150 a month to employ a “trained” Sri Lankan garment worker, compared with \$400 in China. He added that in couple of years China’s labour cost would be about \$600 a month while the costs in Sri Lanka would be around \$200.

It appears that Rajapakse was no more successful in attracting investment offers than he was in mending relations with the US and the European powers. As the economic crisis worsens, the Sri Lankan government will inevitably attempt to shift new burdens onto working people as it seeks to lower costs and make the country “more competitive” with other cheap labour platforms.



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