WikiLeaks and Sri Lanka: Who are the real criminals?

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Among the hundreds of secret diplomatic cables so far released by WikiLeaks, one sent from the US embassy in Sri Lanka has confirmed that the Obama administration was well aware of the war crimes committed by President Mahinda Rajapakse and his associates during the final stages of the war against Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in early 2009. The document highlights the fact that who is deemed a criminal, or not, is determined entirely by the US and its allies according to the requirements of their economic and strategic interests.

The cable, transmitted by the US Ambassador to Colombo, Patricia A. Butenis in January this year, stated the prospect of any investigation into war crimes in Sri Lanka had been "complicated by the fact that responsibility for many of the alleged crimes rests with the country's senior civilian and military leadership, including President Rajapakse and his brothers and opposition candidate General Fonseka."

The Obama administration and its allies are relentlessly hounding WikiLeaks and seeking to criminalise its founder Julian Assange, whose only "crime" has been to help expose to the world the dirty intrigues and crimes carried out by US imperialism. WikiLeaks has performed a decisive service in allowing ordinary people internationally to gain a glimpse of the secret diplomacy of Washington and its partners, including throughout the Indian sub-continent, from Afghanistan and Pakistan to Sri Lanka.

As a result of US pressure, Assange is now behind bars in Britain, fighting extradition to Sweden on trumped-up charges. By contrast, President Mahinda Rajapakse, who is directly responsible for war crimes, is free to roam the world, and was last week welcomed in London by the British government. Washington has never publicly named Rajapakse, his brothers or former Army Commander Fonseka as being responsible for the atrocities in Sri Lanka, despite a mountain of evidence in the public domain.

The UN has estimated that at least 7,000 Tamil civilians were killed between January and May 2009 as the security forces repeatedly attacked civilians trapped in the government's own "no-fire zone". The International Crisis Group compiled evidence of the killing of an estimated 30,000 to 75,000 civilians, with hospitals deliberately targeted for bombardment. Across Sri Lanka, hundreds more people, including journalists and politicians, are known to have disappeared at the hands of pro-government death squads that operated with impunity.

The US was complicit in these crimes and helped cover up who was responsible for them. In 2006, the US and other major powers effectively backed the Rajapakse government when it restarted the war against the LTTE, even though Rajapakse brazenly violated a 2002 ceasefire. Only once it became clear that the LTTE would be defeated did Washington voice reservations about "human rights violations", but only as a means to pressure on Rajapakse to fall into line with Washington.

In the post-war positioning for influence over the strategically-located island, the Obama administration's prime concern was that China had used the war to build close relations with Colombo. Beijing had provided the Rajapakse regime with weapons and funds to fight the war, in return for

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economic and strategic concessions, including naval access to a major new southern port being constructed at Hambantota.

The State Department issued a vague call last year for an international probe into "human right violations"—as if they were committed by individual soldiers or middle-ranking military officers—while also blaming the LTTE for atrocities. It is now documented that Washington was fully aware that the major crimes were committed under Rajapakse, who is not only president, but also the defence minister and commander in chief of the armed forces.

The US dropped the "human rights" pretence when it became clear that it was not assisting in the effort to woo or coerce Rajapakse, but instead was proving counter-productive. Butenis's cable took the same approach as last December's US Senate Foreign Relations Committee report, which highlighted the danger to US strategic interests of China's growing influence in Colombo. The report declared that the US could not afford to "lose Sri Lanka". A preoccupation with "human rights" would "shortchange US geostrategic interests in the region," it stated.

Since then, the Obama administration has publicly backed a sham inquiry established by Rajapakse himself, called the Commission on Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation. Its purpose, like previous inquiries appointed by Rajapakse into military atrocities and pro-government death squads, is to cover the crimes, whitewash the role of the government and justify the war itself. In June, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared in Washington that Rajapakse's commission "holds promise".

Because the Obama administration is mending its relations with him, Rajapakse, unlike Assange, remains free to strut the world stage. Last week he visited London with a large entourage. While Tamil protests eventually forced the Oxford Union Debating Society to cancel a planned address, Rajapakse was afforded a meeting with UK Defence Minister Liam Fox. According to media reports, the pair discussed British assistance to Sri Lanka, especially in infrastructure projects in the former LTTE-held North, and opportunities for British investment in the country.

By contrast, the British government moved to have Assange arrested as soon as possible. As the British police prepared to detain Assange, Prime Minister David Cameron's spokesman declared: "We unequivocally condemn the unauthorised release of classified information. The leaks and their publication are damaging to national security in the United States, Britain and elsewhere."

This "national security" has nothing to do with the security or safety of ordinary people, but consists of hiding from them the killings, assassinations, coups and other imperialist conspiracies perpetrated by the US and its allies in pursuit of their strategic and corporate interests. Alongside the US, Britain is the second biggest military contributor to Obama's escalating offensive underway in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In their attempts to crush resistance to the neo-colonial occupation of Afghanistan, both governments are responsible for war crimes, including drone assassinations, aerial bombings and military death squads,

The Obama administration has been stung by the WikiLeaks exposures because they place the spotlight on the real criminals. They are part of a ruling elite that is responsible for decades of illegal acts carried out behind the backs of the American working class—from wars of aggression to renditions, torture and other acts of international terror. The Sri Lankan revelations point to the necessity for the international working class to overturn the entire socio-economic order that has produced these filthy imperialist intrigues and wars.

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