Sri Lankan coverup of WikiLeaks war crime revelations

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The Sri Lankan political and media establishment has reacted to WikiLeaks revelations, which confirm that the government was responsible for war crimes by suppressing the contents of the leaked US diplomatic cables and defending the military's actions.

Two American cables were particularly damning. The first sent by the US Ambassador to Sri Lanka, Patricia Butenis, last January stated that the issue of war crimes was "complicated by the fact that responsibility for many of the alleged crimes rests with the country's senior civilian and military leaders, including President Rajapakse and his brothers and opposition candidate General Fonseka".

An earlier cable, sent in October 2006 by then US ambassador Robert Blake, detailed the involvement of the government and the military with paramilitary groups that carried out hundreds of abductions and murders, including of politicians and journalists. Increasingly strapped for cash after restarting the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Rajapakse government turned a blind eye to the criminal activities, such as prostitution and extortion, used by the paramilitaries to finance themselves.

The release of these cables has been greeted by a combination of studied silence and outright defence of the Rajapakse government. Apart from one or two Tamil newspapers, the Colombo media has not published the full text of the Butenis cable. The Blake cable, which exposes two of the paramilitaries that form part of Rajapakse's coalition, has not even been published in part.

Responding to the Butenis cable, Sri Lanka's external affairs minister G. L. Peiris joined the US in declaring that such leaks were illegal. "Communications between governments are confidential and must remain so," he said. Peiris, however, had nothing to say about the content of the cable—namely that, according to the US ambassador, the country's top military and civilian leaders are responsible for war crimes.

The US, which backed the Rajapakse government and its renewed communal war, only began to raise the issue of human rights abuses in the final months of the war that ended with the LTTE's defeat in May 2009. Washington's primary concern was not the thousands of Tamil civilians being killed. Rather, it sought to exploit the threat of a war crimes investigation to pressure the Rajapakse government to distance itself from China. The US has since all but dropped the issue, even though it is well aware of Rajapakse's culpability.

The Sri Lankan government is only able to brazen out the WikiLeaks revelations in the knowledge that the opposition parties will not demand any action on war crimes.

The most significant silence is that of the bourgeois Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which acted as the LTTE's mouthpiece during the war but has since been seeking to reintegrate itself into the Colombo political establishment. Questioned by the WSWS last week, TNA parliamentarian Suresh Premachandran dismissed the cables as "nothing new" in order to justify the party's lack of comment.

The TNA's silence confirms that it has no intention of demanding those responsible for war crimes be held accountable. In fact, Butenis revealed in her cable that she had spoken to TNA leaders, who downplayed the "accountability" issue. TNA MP Pathmini Sithamparanathan told her that "current bread-and-butter issues" were more important. In reality, the TNA's stance makes clear that the party will not defend working people on bread-and-butter or any other pressing issues.

Despite a phony campaign in defence of democratic rights, the right-wing United National Party (UNP) has also made no statement. The UNP backed the government's renewed war and has vehemently denied that Rajapakse or the military are responsible for the killing of Tamil civilians. In the presidential election last January the UNP backed General Sarath Fonseka, the army chief in charge of the military offensives, as the joint opposition candidate.

The opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which also backed Fonseka, reported the accusation in the Butenis cable in the party's *Lanka* newspaper only to dismiss it as unfounded. The article pointed to the hypocrisy of the US in accusing the government of war crimes while carrying out

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its own in Iraq. It also accused the US of "adopting charges about war crimes" as a means of pushing "Sri Lanka behind their tactical aims".

Certainly Washington has attempted to exploit the war crimes evidence for its own purposes, but the limited US criticism of the Rajapakse government's abuse of democratic rights confirms what has been detailed in other reports. The Brussels-based think tank, the International Crisis Group, concluded from its research that the Sri Lankan military had killed tens of thousands of Tamil civilians in the final months of the war, including in deliberate attacks on hospitals and aid centres inside LTTE-held territory.

The JVP not only pushed for and backed Rajapakse's renewed war but denounced those who made any, even mild, criticism of the military as "traitors to the motherland". It backed Fonseka as a "war hero" and is still in an alliance with the general who was arrested on trumped-up charges of corruption after the presidential election. While posturing as "anti-imperialist," the JVP leaders had no qualms in meeting with US diplomats last year to try to enlist American support against the government witchhunt of Fonseka and opposition parties.

The Colombo media has assisted in covering up the government's responsibility for war crimes. The right-wing *Island* newspaper has pursued a similar line to the JVP, pointing to the hypocrisy of the US for carrying out war crimes in Iraq, while criticising the Sri Lankan government. One article declared: "The US, which has come under an avalanche of criticism triggered by WikiLeaks, is trying to take cover behind national security." Several editorials have hit out at Washington over "war crimes" and "colonial subjugation".

However, the *Island* is no less hypocritical than the Obama administration. While criticising the US war in Iraq, it defends the criminal actions of the Rajapakse government in its communal war. The essential thrust of the *Island's* argument over the past year has been to legitimise the war crimes in Sri Lanka, by pointing to the similarity of the actions of the US military in Iraq and Afghanistan—including indiscriminate bombings, torture and arbitrary arrest without trial.

The *Daily Mirror*, the feeble voice of Sri Lankan liberalism, has taken a slightly different tack. In an editorial entitled "WikiLeaks vs Diplomacy", the newspaper, following Washington's line, argued for the sanctity of international diplomacy, declaring: "As predicted by the US government the 'Leaks' have put many diplomats and the relationships they have built up in jeopardy."

The only thing that has been placed in jeopardy is the sordid behind-the-scenes-operations of American diplomacy as it prosecutes its economic and strategic interests around the world, and the various governments and parties with which it consorts. In the case of Sri Lanka, that includes the crimes for which the government and military leaders are responsible.

The editorial praised Rajapakse's war as "a humanitarian operation", declaring: "Defeating the world's brutal terrorist outfit should be praised, one needed extra stamina to bear the pressures during the humanitarian operation, and we needed the political will to pursue the war to the end and the president is the only leader we had to do all that." Its only criticism was that the government lacked the "good diplomacy" to avoid US criticisms—in other words, to ensure a complete cover up war crimes.

Of particular political significance is the silence of the two pseudo-left parties—the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP). They have issued no statement, either defending WikiLeaks from the ongoing international witchhunt or commenting on the Sri Lankan cables.

It may appear surprising at first sight that the NSSP and USP, which both posture as defenders of democratic rights, have nothing to say on the issue. In reality, the parties are nothing but secondary political satellites of the Colombo establishment. They seek to dupe working people into believing that the UNP, the TNA or some other party of the ruling class will defend, or can be pressured to defend, their rights. The silence of the NSSP and USP is therefore completely in line with the response of the UNP, the TNA and the rest of the ruling elite.

The response to the WikiLeaks revelations—from the government right through to the NSSP and USP—has underscored the lack of any constituency in the Sri Lankan political establishment for the defence of democratic rights. The line-up is a warning to workers—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike—that the reaction will be similar as they come forward to defend their basic rights and living standards against the government's severe austerity measures.

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