

Sri Lankan government denounces UN war crimes findings

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UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and his appointed panel of experts to investigate war crimes in Sri Lanka have become the object of a campaign of denunciation in Colombo, not only by the government, but also the media and main opposition parties.

President Mahinda Rajapakse opposed the UN expert panel from the outset and refused to allow its members to enter the country or speak to Sri Lankan officials and military officers. The panel's report was finalised and handed to the Rajapakse government on April 14, prior to its public release this week.

The panel's findings, which focussed on the period prior to the end of the country's long-running civil war in May 2009, are damning. Based on a careful review of documents, reports, video and photographs from UN agencies, non-government organisations and individuals, the report concluded that there were "credible allegations" that the Sri Lankan government was responsible for serious violations of international law, some of which "would amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity."

Contrary to government claims that no civilians were killed, the UN panel concluded that tens of thousands of Tamil civilians trapped in territory held by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) had been killed between September 2008 and May 2009. While accusing the LTTE of human rights violations, the report found that the vast majority of the deaths were the result of the Sri Lankan military's bombing and shelling of "no-fire zones", including designated hospitals and aid stations.

Even before the panel report was released, the Sri Lankan government denounced its findings. Government spokesmen made no attempt to rebut any of the detailed evidence contained in the report, but dismissed it as unfounded and biased. They claimed the government is the subject of an "international conspiracy", aimed at tarnishing the reputation of Sri Lanka and its military.

On Rajapakse's instructions, the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party is preparing a patriotic frenzy at its May Day rally on Sunday. President Rajapakse set the tone when he told party organisers that the event had to show our "collective strength against those allegations." Posturing as a martyr, he declared: "On behalf of the country, if they ask me to sit on the electric chair, I will happily do it." He has ordered all ministers to stay in the country to mobilise

support for the May Day rally.

The *Sunday Times* described the preparations underway: "Manufacturers are busy turning out scores of effigies of ... Ban Ki-moon. Some are depicting him as a 'bakamoona' [Sinhala for owl] punning on his name. Placards decrying him and his organisation are coming off in hundreds at printing presses. Floats depicting the UN headquarters are being built. Provincial Councils and local authorities have been asked to adopt resolutions. Pro-government groups are busy collecting signatures to mass petitions [condemning the panel report]."

Along with other ministers and MPs, media minister Keheliya Rambukwella has ridiculed the report, saying it indirectly reflected "the voice of the LTTE". The Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), a Sinhala extremist party that is part of the ruling coalition, gave a taste of what can be expected on Sunday. It held a demonstration in Kandy on Monday at which effigies of Ban Ki-moon were burned.

Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse—the president's brother, who is directly responsible for the military's war crimes—has joined the fray. He declared in an interview with the *Sunday Times* that the UN has been "hijacked by some countries", a reference to the US and European powers. In an oblique warning to Washington, he added: "This will push us to other countries to protect us"—such as Russia and China.

It is certainly true that the US and European powers have backed the UN panel to advance their own economic and strategic interests. Washington tacitly supported Rajapakse's renewed war and ignored the Sri Lankan military's atrocities and breaches of the 2002 ceasefire. As fighting reached its climax in early 2009, the US and its European allies raised the issue of human rights to undermine the Rajapakse government's growing ties with rival China.

It is also true that the US and European stance on Sri Lanka is utterly hypocritical given the atrocities carried out by their military forces to shore up the neo-colonial occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. One war crime does not justify another, however. The value of the UN panel report is that it provides detailed evidence of the Sri Lankan government's responsibility for the

slaughter of civilians. Its real weakness resides in its main recommendation: to leave the investigation of these crimes in the hands of the criminals in Colombo.

The entire Sri Lankan political and media establishment is involved in a cover-up of these war crimes. Not surprisingly, the state-owned media outlets are simply mouthpieces for the government. Their crude propaganda features photos of the LTTE killing ordinary people, and contrived video footage and photographs of the security forces patting small children on the head and giving a helping hand to old people.

All of the major newspapers have backed the government's rejection of the UN report. In an editorial on April 19, *Lankadeepa* highlighted the LTTE's human rights abuses and denounced Ban Ki-moon for not taking tough action against it. On April 22, *Lakbima* declared that the panel's recommendations should not be implemented, and featured a front-page photo of people signing a petition condemning the UN report.

The *Daily Mirror*'s editorial yesterday called on the country to "wake up to the real agendas behind the [UN] threat and the serious consequences thereon." It threatened anyone opposed to the government's campaign, stating: "Our men who believe their only job [is] to play subservient slave to western agendas must be made accountable for the unfortunate predicament the country faces today."

No-one in the media has examined the content of the UN report or attempted to refute it.

The main opposition parties—the United National Party (UNP) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—have similarly attacked the report. After criticising the government for "creating an environment for such a report", a UNP statement declared: "As a responsible party which loves its motherland we are totally against the interference of outside forces in the internal affairs of our country."

The same statement boasted that when the UNP was in power, its leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, then prime minister, had not signed the Rome Convention on the International Criminal Court. As a result, it continued, no Sri Lankan could be brought before an international court on war crimes charges.

The JVP has taken a similar stance—blaming the government for allowing the UN to intervene, and declaring that the intervention must be defeated. A JVP statement commented: "We emphasise that the imperialist intervention against Sri Lanka should be defeated and the anti-social and undemocratic role of the present regime that paves the way for such interventions should also be defeated."

The stance of the UNP and JVP makes a mockery of their claims to oppose the anti-democratic methods of the Rajapakse government. While protesting against the anti-democratic abuses

against opposition politicians, the UNP and JVP defend the war crimes of the government and military against the island's Tamil minority. Both parties are mired in anti-Tamil chauvinism and backed Rajapakse's war to the hilt.

The response of the ex-lefts of the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), which joined the UNP's bogus campaign for democratic rights, is particularly revealing. In a Sinhala language column, NSSP leader Wickremabahu Karunaratne made a contorted argument that India was behind the UN report. He offered no evidence, but no matter. The headline, "Ban Ki-moon's report prepared according to the needs of Delhi", allowed the NSSP offer its own version of the government's international conspiracy theory.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers to reject outright the reactionary campaign being whipped up by the government, the media and the entire Colombo political establishment. It is not a matter of defending the UN report and its recommendations, which will certainly be used by the major powers for their own purposes. The working class has a political responsibility, however, to defend the democratic rights of all working people—Tamil and Sinhala alike—and to demand that Rajapakse and his fellow war criminals be brought to justice.

It is particularly obscene that Rajapakse and his party are exploiting May Day—the day on which workers traditionally express their international solidarity—as a platform for their divisive, communal politics. Rajapakse is using this campaign not only to deflect attention from his war crimes, but also from his savage austerity measures that have sent prices soaring and impacted heavily on working people. The SEP urges workers and youth to attend our May Day meeting this Sunday at 3.00 p.m. at New Town Hall in Colombo to discuss the fight for a socialist alternative to defend the democratic rights and living standards of the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally.



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