

US, UN snub Tamil National Alliance delegation

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The trip by a Tamil National Alliance (TNA) delegation from Sri Lanka to the US late last month was hailed by Tamil parties and media as a decisive step forward in the recognition of the rights of the Tamil people. It ended ignominiously, however, with diplomatic snubs by senior American and UN officials, demonstrating once again the futility of the TNA's appeals to the major powers to force the Sri Lankan government to make concessions.

On October 23, the TamilNet website reported the comments of the Tamil National People's Front, a rival coalition, which enthusiastically congratulated the TNA on its forthcoming visit to the US. The Front declared the visit to be "a significant historic first" that had the "potential for improving the political status of the Tamil people who have suffered within a majoritarian democracy for several decades."

The TNA delegation was never aimed at securing US and UN support for the democratic rights of ordinary Tamils. Rather it was a continuation of the grovelling pleas of the Tamil elites for assistance in elevating their political status in Sri Lanka. The TNA, which functioned as the parliamentary mouthpiece for the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), has been desperately attempting to reintegrate itself into the Colombo political establishment following the LTTE's military defeat in May 2009.

The visit did not turn out as expected. The TNA did not meet with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, nor was Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Robert O. Blake available. Blake had issued a pro-forma invitation to the TNA to visit the State Department during his visit to the island in September. But only a relatively junior official, Wendy Sherman, who has served as Under Secretary for Political Affairs since September, was assigned to speak to the

delegation.

After the debacle at the State Department, the TNA delegation attempted to meet with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, but suffered another snub. The scheduled appointment was cancelled at the last moment without any explanation, and one of Ban's under secretaries, Lynn Pascoe, was wheeled out to speak to the TNA delegation.

No official statements were released either by the TNA, the US State Department or the UN. However, a revealing reference was made last Friday by State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland. In the course of a routine media briefing, she reported that Wendy Sherman had met with the TNA delegates in order to emphasise that the US had "high expectations for the Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission report which is due later in the month—not only that the report will be of highest quality, but that the Sri Lankan Government will take steps to implement it."

Sherman's comments would have made immediately clear to the TNA delegation that Washington had not the slightest intention of providing any, even nominal, assistance. The Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission is a crude attempt by the Sri Lankan government to cover up the atrocities carried out by the military in the course of its war against the LTTE. The fact that the US is treating such a sham as legitimate signals a shift away from its previous calls for an international inquiry into Sri Lankan war crimes.

Washington and its allies raised limited criticisms of the Sri Lankan military's actions not out of concern for the Tamil minority but because it was a useful means for putting pressure on Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse and his government. In the final months of the war, the US was worried about the growing

influence of China, which had provided significant financial and military support to the Rajapakse government during the war. The Obama administration used the implied threat of a war crimes trial to warn Rajapakse against getting too close to Beijing.

The failure of the TNA's diplomatic mission has led to smug crowing in the Colombo media. Prior to the trip, the Sri Lankan government and media warned the US and UN against any high-level meeting with the TNA. An editorial in the October 30 *Sunday Times* bitterly declared: "The US government's involvement in talks with the TNA in Washington may border on interference in Sri Lanka's internal affairs." In the wake of the visit, External Affairs Minister G.L. Peiris warned that the TNA would pay a price, saying: "The TNA going and talking to other governments is going to harden public opinion in this country."

A November 7 editorial in the *Daily Mirror* with the headline, "TNA's Tour De West and the plight of the Tamils", mocked the TNA. It claimed that the US had fobbed the Tamil delegates off with the suggestion that they "seek a feasible solution to the issues of the Tamils with the support of India" and advised them to "bury the war crime charges against the Sri Lankan armed forces".

If it turned to India, the TNA would receive a similarly cool reception. Its visit to Washington coincided with the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Perth, Australia, where India played the leading role in deflecting criticism of Sri Lanka's record on human rights. The meeting unanimously agreed that the next CHOGM gathering in 2013 would be hosted in Colombo by President Rajapakse, scotching any suggestion that the venue would be changed. The decision was hailed in Colombo as a diplomatic triumph for the government.

The US decision to snub the TNA indicates that it has buried the issue of war crimes charges against the Sri Lankan military. The shift was first signalled in December 2009, when a report to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee concluded that the "US cannot afford to lose Sri Lanka." It recommended "a broader and more robust approach to Sri Lanka that appreciates new political and economic realities in Sri Lanka and U.S. geo-strategic interests." That would involve "a multidimensional approach" that was "not

driven solely by short-term humanitarian concerns."

None of this has changed the TNA's orientation. Despite the slights, snubs and broken promises, the TNA continues to look for the support in the "international community" as it pleads with the Rajapakse government for a "political solution." Such a deal would give the island's Tamil elite a limited role in conjunction with their Sinhala counterpart in policing Tamils as part of their joint exploitation of the working class.

The TNA's cowardly subservience flows directly from its role as the political representative of the Tamil bourgeoisie. Like the LTTE, it is organically incapable of making any appeal to the working class, which is the only social force capable of mounting a consistent struggle for the democratic rights of working people. Terrified of the threat posed to its privileged position by any mass movement, the TNA continues to make futile appeals to the Colombo government and the major powers for a small share of political power.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on Tamil workers and youth to draw the necessary political lessons. Successive Colombo governments, with their promotion of Sinhala chauvinism and anti-Tamil discrimination, were responsible for the protracted civil war that devastated the island. However, the communal politics of the LTTE and TNA directly contributed to the catastrophe by keeping the working class divided and blocking a challenge to bourgeois rule.

Basic democratic rights can only be defended as part of the struggle to unify and mobilise workers and behind them the oppressed rural masses in the fight for a workers' and peasants' government. That is the basis of the SEP's call for a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam, which is an integral part of the broader struggle for the Socialist United States of South Asia.



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