

UN Human Rights Council passes resolution on Sri Lanka

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On March 22 the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) meeting in Geneva passed a US-sponsored resolution on human rights violations in Sri Lanka. The toothless, non-binding resolution has nothing to do with addressing abuses in Sri Lanka but is aimed at advancing US interests in the South Asian region.

The resolution urges the Colombo government to implement the recommendations of its own Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC), to take steps “to ensure justice, equity, accountability and reconciliation.” It calls for an “action plan” and for the UN Human Rights Commissioner to work “in consultation with, and with the concurrence” of the Sri Lankan government in implementing the LLRC proposals.

In other words, the UN resolution calls for an “action plan” from the very government that is responsible for the military’s killing of tens of thousands of civilians in the communal war with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), as well as other gross abuses of democratic rights. President Mahinda Rajapakse set up the LLRC to fend off international criticism and whitewash the government and the military.

The Sri Lankan government lobbied heavily against any resolution calling for even limited action on human rights. Minister Mahinda Samarasinghe said the government should be given “time to further consolidate the clear progress” of reconciliation and peace made since the end of the civil war in May 2009.

Samarasinghe’s comments are a sham. Successive Colombo governments waged the communal civil war to ensure the political and economic domination of the Sinhala elites. What has been established in the North and

East of the island is a permanent military occupation that tramples on the basic rights of the Tamil minority.

The resolution was finally passed by 24 to 15 votes. Significantly, India voted in favour, and China and Russia against. Eight countries abstained.

Following the vote, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared that the United States “together with the international community, sent a strong signal that Sri Lanka will only achieve lasting peace through real reconciliation and accountability.” These remarks are completely hypocritical given the Obama administration’s responsibility for war crimes in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Libya.

The US has exploited the issue of “human rights” in Sri Lanka to put pressure on the Colombo government by leaving open the possibility of war crimes trials. Washington’s primary concern is to curtail the growing influence of China, which provided crucial military and economic support to the Rajapakse government during the war.

Washington has adopted a carrot and stick approach to Colombo. While pushing the UN resolution, Clinton declared Washington’s readiness to work with the Sri Lankan government and announced plans to meet External Affairs Minister G.L. Peiris in May.

On March 23 the US State Department removed a ban on selling maritime and aerial surveillance equipment to the Sri Lankan military. The *Sunday Times* reported that Sri Lanka had also been offered a significant exemption from US sanctions on Iran. Sri Lanka, which obtains most of its oil from Iran, would have to reduce imports from Iran by just 15 percent this year.

India's support for the UN resolution marks a shift from 2009, when it voted with Russia and China against a resolution calling for an international inquiry into the human rights abuses. New Delhi is engaged in a delicate balancing act. It wants to maintain close ties with the Rajapakse government and minimise Chinese influence. At the same time, India is seeking to strengthen its strategic partnership with the US and placate political parties in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, where there is widespread public outrage over the treatment of Sri Lankan Tamils.

After the vote, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh wrote to Rajapakse in an effort to appease him. Singh declared that India had "spared no effort" to introduce "an element of balance in the language of the resolution." He was no doubt referring to the phrase "in consultation with, and concurrence," which hands the Colombo government a means of blocking UNHRC actions.

China and Russia opposed the UN resolution as interference in Sri Lanka's internal affairs. Both countries are well aware that the US has selectively and cynically exploited the issue of "human rights" to advance its interests in Sri Lanka and other parts of the world at their expense. The *Daily Mirror* reported that the Chinese delegation at the UNHRC campaigned heavily against the resolution.

Within Sri Lanka, the government has used the issue to stir up nationalist and anti-Western sentiment, claiming that the country is the target of an "international conspiracy." The ruling coalition including the Sri Lanka Freedom Party has organised demonstrations under the slogan "Save the motherland" in various parts of the country in recent weeks. Another round of rallies is planned from March 31.

This reactionary patriotic campaign is directly aimed against the emerging struggles of workers, peasants and the poor, who have been accused of betraying the motherland. Protests and strikes have erupted against the government's implementation of International Monetary Fund austerity demands, including substantial increases in fuel and electricity prices.

After the UN resolution was passed, President Rajapakse told a public meeting that "Sri Lanka, as an

independent country will not give into any arbitrary interference in its affairs." The government "will not allow terrorism or any force supporting terrorism to raise their heads again in the country to destabilise the hard-earned peace."

Rajapakse's real concern is that, if it suited Washington's interests, his government could quickly become an international pariah in the same manner as the Gaddafi regime in Libya. Moreover, he and his ministers could suddenly find themselves facing trial for war crimes. For all his public rhetoric about resisting "international interference," Rajapakse is quietly seeking to strengthen relations with the US and EU.

The main opposition parties—the United National Party (UNP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—fully supported Rajapakse's war against the LTTE and helped cover up the military's war crimes. The UNP, which is pro-US in its orientation, has offered to help the government implement the LLRC proposals. The JVP has accused the government of not doing enough to prevent "international interference" and described the UN resolution as a "serious blow to the country."

The bourgeois Tamil National Alliance (TNA) welcomed the UN resolution, calculating that the support of the US, Europe and India would help secure a so-called political solution to the communal conflict. The TNA is seeking a power-sharing arrangement with the Colombo government that would grant limited provincial autonomy and secure certain privileges for the Tamil elites.

The working class should reject both the bogus US posturing on human rights and Rajapakse's reactionary campaign to "defend the motherland." The basic democratic rights of working people—Tamil and Sinhala—can be defended only as part of a unified revolutionary struggle for a workers' and peasants' government and socialist policies. The Socialist Equality Party fights for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally.



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