

Anti-Indian propaganda intensifies in Sri Lanka after UN vote

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Since India voted in favour of a US-sponsored resolution on Sri Lankan human rights abuses at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) last month, sections of the political and media establishment in Colombo have initiated a campaign of anti-Indian propaganda.

The UNHRC resolution made the very limited demand of the Sri Lankan government that it implement the recommendations of its own Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC). The LLRC report was a whitewash of the atrocities carried out by the military in the final months of the civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009 during which tens of thousands of civilians were killed.

The Colombo government is hostile to any investigation into the war crimes and human rights abuses for which it is responsible. It has denounced the UNHRC resolution as part of a foreign conspiracy against the country. Now an anti-Indian slant has been added to this xenophobic campaign despite New Delhi's attempts to play down the significance of its vote.

India's support for the resolution marked a shift. In 2009, it opposed a motion that demanded a limited international investigation into Sri Lankan human rights violations. India supported last month's resolution not out of concern for the rights of the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka, but to appease popular anger over the abuses in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

In addition, like the US, the Indian government views the resolution as means for pressuring Sri Lankan

President Mahinda Rajapakse to distance himself from China. The Indian ruling elites view China as a regional rival and have been strengthening ties in South Asia, as well as with Washington. The US is mounting an aggressive offensive throughout the Indo-Pacific region to combat Beijing's influence.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh sought to mollify Rajapakse by sending him a letter arguing that New Delhi had intervened to soften the wording of the resolution in Sri Lanka's favour. Despite Singh's gesture, friction between the two governments has increased, with the Sri Lankan government under pressure from extreme Sinhala chauvinist tendencies to harden its attitude toward India.

External Affairs Minister G. L. Peiris told the *Daily Mirror* that India's vote "came as a shock" to Sri Lanka and "did considerable damage." He claimed that other countries voted for the resolution or abstained because of India's stance. Nevertheless, Peiris said, the government would continue to engage with India.

Rajapakse himself has not directly attacked India. However, he has repeatedly declared that Sri Lanka would not bow to the dictates of any country and warned that those who voted for the resolution would have to face "consequence of terrorism."

On April 3 and 4, the Sri Lankan parliament debated the UNHRC resolution. Petroleum Minister Susil Premajayantha hinted at retaliation against India. He criticised the leasing of the Trincomalee oil tank complex to the Indian-controlled Lanka-Indian Oil Company and blamed the previous United National Party-led government for the lease agreement.

The Sinhala extremist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), a partner in the ruling coalition, has been more strident. JHU leader Champika Ranawaka told the *Nation* on April 8: “By voting against Sri Lanka, India has dealt a killer blow to India-Sri Lanka relations.”

Ranawaka, who is the country’s energy minister, told the *Colombopage* web site on the same day that Sri Lanka would object at the next International Atomic Energy Agency session to a nuclear power plant being built by a Russian company at Koodankulam on Tamil Nadu’s coast, about 20 kilometres from Sri Lanka.

After angry denials in India that the plant posed a risk, the Sri Lankan government backed off and issued a statement on April 12 declaring that Ranawaka’s remarks had been misinterpreted.

The anti-Indian line was echoed by the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). After the UNHRC vote, JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe told the *Daily Mirror* that India had “never supported Sri Lanka at any moment in its efforts to solve the ‘national question’.”

The only “solution” that successive Sri Lankan governments have had to the “national question” is anti-Tamil discrimination and a protracted communal war. Far from opposing the war, Indian governments have supported Colombo against the LTTE. When Rajapakse restarted the war in 2006, the Indian government not only gave political support but also provided military assistance.

At the same time, New Delhi has attempted to stem anger in Tamil Nadu by calling for a “political solution” to the war. Its proposal for a devolution package is nothing more than a power-sharing arrangement between the island’s Sinhala and Tamil elites at the expense of working people. The Sinhala chauvinist JVP, however, objects to any concessions to Tamils.

The Sri Lankan media have also been whipping up anti-Indian hostility. The *Island* editorial on March 23 accused the Indian government of trying to “extricate” itself from domestic political problems at “Sri Lanka’s

expense.” The newspaper accused Indian politicians of allowing the LTTE “to step up its operations in Tamil Nadu.”

On April 2, the *Island* ran a lead article with the headline: “Tigers [LTTE] return from India in destabilisation mission.” The article cited police claims that 150 LTTE cadres had arrived and “their target was to sabotage and disrupt the on-going reconciliation process by creating trouble in those areas [Sri Lanka’s north and east].”

Indian Home Minister P Chidambaram rejected the allegations as “completely baseless.” He declared on April 3: “There is no LTTE camp anywhere in India, including Tamil Nadu.”

On April 6, “unidentified persons” in the eastern town of Batticaloa town vandalised several statues, including one of Mahatma Gandhi. India immediately expressed its concern about the incident. Sri Lankan police claimed to be investigating the attack, yet it took place in a well-patrolled high security zone.

By instigating anti-Indian and anti-Tamil communalism, the government is seeking to divide rising anger and discontent over the impact of its austerity measures. Ministers have already responded to protests by fisherman and peasants this year over rising fuel prices by branding them as part of the “international conspiracy” against the country.



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