US criticises Sri Lanka at UN Human Rights Council

Sujeewa Amaranath
13 November 2012

Major powers, including the US, UK and India, used a UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) review of Sri Lanka in Geneva last week to raise muted criticisms of human rights violations by President Mahinda Rajapakse's government.

The comments were not motivated by any concern for basic democratic rights in Sri Lanka but by continuing dissatisfaction with the Rajapakse government's relations with China. The US and India want Colombo to distance itself from Beijing in order to advance their strategic and economic interests in South Asia.

In March, the UNHRC passed a US-sponsored resolution demanding the implementation of limited proposals made by the Sri Lankan government's own Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Committee (LLRC). President Rajapakse appointed the LLRC to whitewash his regime's war crimes and deflect international criticism over the atrocities committed during the final stages of the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

A UN expert panel on Sri Lanka estimated that at least 40,000 civilians were killed during the last phase of the war in 2008-09. After the war ended with the LTTE's defeat in May 2009, about 300,000 civilians were herded into squalid military-controlled camps. About 11,000 young Tamils were incarcerated without trial, branded as suspected LTTE members.

While absolving the government of any responsibility, the LLRC recommended that it disarm paramilitary groups, place detainees on trial, investigate "disappearances" and grant limited autonomy to the Tamil-majority northern regions of the island.

The Rajapakse government initially said it would not abide by the UNHRC resolution demanding the implementation of these proposals, but it later pledged to do so and submitted a bogus "national action plan" to the UN agency.

At last week's UNHRC session, Rajapakse's special envoy, Mahinda Samarasinghe, falsely claimed that the government was honouring its promise. He said the resettlement of refugees was completed, legal procedures had been adopted to safeguard the rights of Tamils, disappearance cases had been almost fully resolved, and a court of inquiry was investigating allegations about the killing of civilians.

The reality, however, is that the island's north and east remain under virtual military rule. None of the hundreds of extra-judicial disappearances and killings has been seriously investigated. Nor will those responsible for the massacre of tens of thousands of civilians during the final military offensive or any other stage of the war be pursued. Political prisoners are still held in torturous conditions in prisons. War refugees have been "resettled" without basic facilities.

The US Ambassador to the UN, Eileen Chamberlain Donahoe, repeated the Obama administration's call for the implementation of the March resolution proposals, and expressed concern over the current impeachment moves against Sri Lanka's Chief Justice, Shirani Bandaranayake. The UK, Germany, Canada and Norway also criticised Sri Lanka's response.

An article in the *Financial Times* on October 31 pointed to the real concerns of the US and its allies. After describing China's growing economic and political role in Sri Lanka, it noted: "Western governments and New Delhi fear creeping Chinese influence in the strategically-located island." The article described Sri Lanka as "a closely watched swing state where the US and India are vying with China for influence."

China, Russia and Cuba, on the other hand, warned against "creating a rift" within the UNHRC by

© World Socialist Web Site

targeting a “particular” country. The Chinese and Russian governments are acutely aware that Washington is exploiting “human rights” to further its own interest in the region at their expense.

India, which together with Spain and Benin reported back to the UNHRC on Sri Lanka, also made mild criticisms. The troika urged Sri Lanka to “fully and transparently investigate alleged grave breaches of international humanitarian law during the conflict.”

India utilised the forum to press the Rajapakse regime to implement the 13th Amendment of the Sri Lankan constitution. The amendment, adopted as part of the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord, provides for the devolution of limited powers to the northern and eastern provinces.

The Indian government calculates that an autonomy deal involving the Tamil capitalist parties, including the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), will allow New Delhi to strengthen its position in Sri Lanka and also dissipate opposition to the oppression of Tamils in Sri Lanka among the population of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

Openly Sinhala chauvinist sections of Sri Lanka’s ruling coalition—the Jathika Hela Urumaya and Jathika Nidahas Peramuna (National Freedom Front)—have started a campaign demanding the repeal of the 13th Amendment. President Rajapakse’s brother, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the defence secretary, is backing this push.

After last week’s UNHRC session, the Sri Lankan government simply pledged, once again, to implement the LLRC proposals. President Rajapakse is keen to mend the strained relations with the West. However, he fears any investigation into war crimes and also does not want to risk losing aid and investment from China amid the deepening global economic crisis, which has hit Sri Lankan exports.

When addressing local audiences, Rajapakse indulges in anti-Western rhetoric, accusing the major powers of supporting the re-emergence of Tamil “terrorists.” His chauvinist allies in the ruling coalition openly carry on anti-Indian and anti-Tamil propaganda. This agitation seeks to divert rising popular discontent as the government imposes International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity measures. It is also aimed at strengthening the regime’s police-state apparatus.

The main opposition parties are similarly mired in Sinhala chauvinism. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which backed the communal war, has reiterated its opposition to the 13th amendment and accused Rajapakse of succumbing to “India’s pressure.”

The opposition United National Party (UNP), which also fully supported the war, is presently feigning concern about discrimination against Tamils. This traditional big business and pro-Western party has found close allies in the pseudo-left groups, the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the United Socialist Party (USP).

NSSP leader Wickramabahu Karunaratne last week defended his party’s alliance with the UNP, declaring that the joint opposition was “committed to defend the 13th Amendment and press for the implementation of the LLRC recommendations.” None of these recommendations will secure the democratic rights of working people or end the systematic discrimination against Tamils. The limited autonomy envisaged by the 13th Amendment is aimed at strengthening the position of the island’s Tamil elites. In the guise of defending democratic rights, the NSSP and USP are lining up with sections of the ruling class who are orientated to US imperialism.

The working class must oppose the machinations of the major powers, while rejecting the Rajapakse government’s nationalist and communalist agitation. The only viable perspective for the working class is to unite across communal lines to fight for a socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the struggle for the united socialist states of South Asia and the world.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site