

Report highlights UN “failure” in Sri Lanka

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A review released this month into the activities of UN agencies during the final stages of the Sri Lankan civil war provides a devastating account of their inaction and their cover-up of the war crimes perpetrated by the government and army. The lessons being drawn, however, are aimed at fashioning the UN into a more effective tool of the imperialist powers—as indeed its record in Sri Lanka proves it has been all along.

The Internal Review Panel Report (IRPR) was produced by a panel appointed by the UN Secretary General and headed by Charles Petrie. Drawing on some 7,000 internal documents, the report makes clear that the UN and its agencies, based in New York and Colombo, were well aware of the thousands of civilian deaths caused by the shelling of areas that were held by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the month prior to its defeat in May 2009.

In January 2009, the UN had “inconvertible evidence of the killing of civilians by shelling.” In February 2009, a mission report estimated “at least 5,000 civilians, many of them young children, have been killed and injured.” The toll climbed higher as hundreds of thousands of civilians were crammed into a tiny pocket of land targeted by the Sri Lankan military.

Summing up the UN response, the Petrie report declared: “Seen together, the failure of the UN to adequately counter the government’s underestimation of population numbers in the Wanni [warzone], the failure to adequately confront the government on its obstructions to humanitarian assistance, the unwillingness of the UN in UNHQ and Colombo to address government responsibility for attacks that were killing civilians, and the tone and content of UN communications with the government on these issues, collectively amounted to a failure by the UN to act

within the scope of institutional mandates to meet protection responsibilities.”

In other words, the UN stood by and largely kept silent while a massacre of civilians was underway. In doing so, however, the UN was simply fulfilling its function as an instrument of the major powers. The US and European powers, along with China and India, backed Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse when he unilaterally broke the ceasefire agreement with the LTTE in 2006. They subsequently turned a blind eye to mounting evidence of atrocities and gross abuses of civilian rights.

As the Petrie report points out, there were no meetings of the UN Security Council, the Human Rights Council, or the General Assembly on the appalling situation in Sri Lanka. In a rather telling expression of the relationship between top UN officials and the major powers, the report stated: “The tone, content and objectives of UNHQ’s engagement with member states regarding Sri Lanka were heavily influenced by what it perceived member states wanted to hear, rather than by what member states needed to know if they were to respond.”

All of this began to change after the LTTE’s defeat, when the US and its European allies began to take up the issue of “human rights” in Sri Lanka as a means of exerting political pressure on the Rajapakse government by threatening to expose and potentially take action on its war crimes. Washington was not motivated by the slaughter that had taken place or the internment of hundreds of thousands of Tamil civilians, but was deeply concerned that the Sri Lankan government had in the course of the war drawn too close to rival China.

Shortly after the LTTE's collapse, the Sri Lankan government, with the assistance of China, Russia and India, managed to defeat a UN resolution promoted by the European powers, with US backing, to set up a limited international inquiry into human rights violations. As Washington continued to pursue the issue, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon established an expert panel in March 2010, despite the Rajapakse government's objections, to investigate. Its report, released a year later, catalogued the responsibility of the Sri Lankan government and military for gross abuses of democratic rights and war crimes, including the deaths of up to 40,000 civilians.

The US opted to ignore the UN expert panel report, which established there was "credible evidence" of a "wide range of serious violations" of international law, some of which "would amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity." Washington instead maintained the implicit threat of action on "human rights" to pressure Colombo, while offering the Rajapakse government a way out via its own bogus Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC). In March, the US pushed a resolution through the UN Human Rights Commission to implement the limited recommendations of the LLRC.

Now, three and a half years after the end of the war, the Petrie report piously declares: "The UN's failure to adequately respond to events like those that occurred in Sri Lanka should not happen again. When confronted by similar situations, the UN must be able to meet a much higher standard in fulfilling its protection and humanitarian responsibilities."

But the entire record of the UN in Sri Lanka demonstrates that "human rights" and the so-called "responsibility to protect" are issues selectively used to advance the interests of the major powers. The conclusions of the Petrie report are not to ensure that the UN acts to prevent war crimes and human rights abuses in general. Rather they are aimed at making the UN a more effective tool for the wars and interventions being waged by the US and its allies under the false banner of "human rights."

Commenting on the Petrie report, Ban Ki-moon,

commented: "This finding has profound implications for our work across the world and I am determined that the United Nations draws the appropriate lessons and does its utmost to earn the confidence of the worlds people, especially those caught in conflict who look to the organisation for help."

The secretary-general then underlined the report's relevance by noting that "events today in Syria, where at least 20,000 people, mostly civilians, have been killed since an uprising against President Bashar al Assad began some 20 months ago, are the latest reminder of just how crucial that work is."

In other words, the UN's inaction when thousands of Tamil civilians were being killed is now being used to justify more aggressive interventions—when it suits the purposes of the major powers—in the future. Once again, the United Nations stands exposed, to use Lenin's words about its predecessor, as a thieves' kitchen in which new crimes are planned and the criminals haggle over the spoils.



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