

US sponsors new UN resolution on Sri Lankan human rights

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After a visit to Colombo last month, a delegation of senior US officials declared that Washington would table another resolution on human rights violations in Sri Lanka at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) session in early March.

The delegation, led by Deputy Assistant Secretary of State James Moore, concluded its three-day visit on January 28 after meeting with Sri Lankan Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, external affairs officials and opposition United National Party (UNP) and Tamil National Alliance (TNA) leaders.

Moore announced that the US had “decided to sponsor a procedural resolution [in the UNHRC] building on the 2012 resolution promoting reconciliation and accountability in Sri Lanka” but provided few details. The US-backed 2012 resolution, which had the support of the European powers and India, simply called on the Sri Lankan government to implement the proposals made by its own Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC).

The LLRC was appointed by President Mahinda Rajapakse in a bid to deflect criticism, including from the US, of human rights violations by the Sri Lankan military during the final months of the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which was defeated in May 2009.

The LLRC was a whitewash of the war crimes for which the government and military were responsible. A UN report estimated that tens of thousands of Tamil civilians were killed in the final months of the Sri Lankan military offensive, which included the deliberate targeting of hospitals and aid supplies. It also found evidence of the pro-government death squads carrying out ex-judicial murders.

Even the LLRC’s limited proposals for a probe into the “disappearances”, as well as the disarming of

armed militias and a power-sharing deal with the Tamil elites, are anathema to the government and the military. Avoiding any open criticism, Moore declared that “some progress” had been made on implementing the recommendations, but there was “still a great more to do”.

In reality, the Obama administration’s concern is not with the implementation of the LLRC’s proposals or democratic rights in Sri Lanka. The US supported Rajapakse’s renewed war against the LTTE and only began raising the issue of “human rights” in the final weeks as a means of pressuring the Sri Lankan government to distance itself from China.

The US diplomatic efforts in Colombo are part of the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia”—an aggressive push throughout the region to strengthen military alliances and partnerships in order to undermine Chinese influence. China became the major supplier of arms to Sri Lanka during the civil war. Last September, visiting Chinese defence minister Liang Guanglie declared that Beijing wanted to develop closer military ties with Colombo. A few days later, senior Chinese Communist Party leader Wu Bingguo visited Sri Lanka and signed economic agreements, underlining Sri Lanka’s reliance on Chinese aid and investment.

The purpose of the US delegation’s visit was to keep the pressure on Rajapakse. US officials have expressed concern about the recent impeachment and sacking of the country’s chief justice, Shirani Bandaranayake. Her removal—in violation of Supreme Court rulings—is aimed at strengthening Rajapakse’s grip over the courts and his hold on power.

A further US warning to Colombo was the decision last month to refuse to accept Major General Sudantha Ranasinghe for military training in the United States. As commissioner for rehabilitation, Ranasinghe was in

charge of the detention without trial of thousands of Tamil youth as “LTTE suspects”.

At a press conference, US official Vikram Singh, a member of the delegation, declared that the rebuff to Ranasinghe “doesn’t mean that [military] assistance is not forthcoming [from the US] in any way. And it’s not a judgment on Sri Lanka.” These comments will not fool anyone. If one of Sri Lanka’s top generals can be banned, it is an obvious threat that the US could take other, more serious, measures against military officers and politicians over “human rights” issues.

The Sri Lankan government is clearly nervous about the continuing US pressure. In his Independence Day address on February 4, President Rajapakse did not directly mention the proposed UNHCR resolution but called for “respect for UN principles”, especially non-interference with the “sovereignty of countries”.

After leaving Sri Lanka, the US delegation headed for India to enlist New Delhi’s support for the UNHCR resolution. India voted against a 2009 resolution backed by the US and European powers that called for an international inquiry into war crimes in Sri Lanka, but supported last year’s limited resolution.

New Delhi is yet to indicate its position on the latest US move. However, the state government and opposition parties in the southern state of Tamil Nadu are pressing the Indian government to back the new resolution. New Delhi is engaged in a delicate balancing act: not wanting to alienate the Colombo government, on the one hand, but concerned about growing Chinese influence and the destabilising impact in Tamil Nadu of the plight of Sri Lankan Tamils, on the other.

The central focus of the Tamil elites in Sri Lanka is to enlist international support for a power-sharing arrangement with Colombo that would give them limited autonomy in the North and East of the island. Last week, TNA leaders went to South Africa to seek its backing. In a statement issued before leaving, the TNA called for “stern action” by the UNHRC against the Sri Lankan government for failing to engage in “reconciliation” talks.

The Sri Lankan ex-left organisations—the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the United Socialist Party (USP)—fully back the TNA campaign. NSSP leader Wickramabahu Karunaratne appeared alongside TNA leaders at a Colombo press conference last Monday and

supported their call for an “independent international investigation” into human rights violations and the “devolution” of power to the North and East.

The NSSP is responsible for promoting the deadly illusion, fostered by the TNA, that the democratic rights of Tamils can be secured by appealing to US imperialism and other powers. The TNA is only interested in protecting the economic and political interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie, while the US is simply paying lip service to “human rights” in order to undercut its rival, China.

Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers should reject this fraud and unite around the fight for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally. This the perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka.



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