Pressure mounts on Sri Lanka over human rights abuses

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The Sri Lankan government is under mounting international pressure over its responsibility for war crimes during the country's protracted civil war that ended with the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009.

Sri Lanka is due to be discussed next Monday at the current UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) annual meeting, where a US-backed resolution is due to be tabled. While details have not been made public, the resolution is expected to go further than previous ones in calling for international monitoring of human rights in Sri Lanka.

Last month, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navanethem Pillay issued a report that cautiously criticised the Sri Lankan government for not adequately addressing human rights violations. While claiming that there had been "significant government progress rebuilding infrastructure" destroyed during the war, the report expressed concern about the continuing heavy military presence in previous LTTE territory and the "inconclusive" nature of investigations into serious allegations of human rights abuses.

The limited nature of Pillay's report was underlined by its praise for the recommendations of the government's own Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC). That commission, which was only set up to deflect an international inquiry, whitewashed the government and military and made a series of vague proposals, including the investigation of extra-judicial killings and the disarming of paramilitary groups.

Last March, the UNHRC passed a US-sponsored resolution calling on the Sri Lankan government to implement the LLRC's recommendations. Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse responded with a "national action plan" that put the defence ministry, which is directly responsible for war crimes, in charge of human rights investigations.

The Sri Lankan government and military flatly deny any responsibility for war crimes and blame all civilian deaths on the LTTE. In the final months of the war, virtually all reporters and non-government organisations were banned from the war zones. Nevertheless, several authoritative inquiries have put the civilian death toll due to the military's offensives in the tens of thousands.

A UN expert panel estimated that at least 40,000 civilians were slaughtered by the military during the last months of the war. Many of the casualties occurred in areas that the military had proclaimed as "no fire zones" and as a result of deliberate attacks on aid posts and hospitals—a war crime in international law. The panel also identified other serious human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings, disappearances and arbitrary detentions.

Pillay's report pointed to the inadequacies of inquiries in such high-profile cases as the killing of five Tamil students in January 2006 in Trincomalee, and the execution-style murder of 17 aid workers in Muttur in August 2006. In both cases, evidence pointed to the involvement of the armed forces. Six years later, the government has not released the report of the inquiry into the murders and falsely claims investigations are ongoing.

Pillay raised concerns about the strong evidence pointing to the continuing abduction and killing of critics of the Rajapakse government. This "spike" in disappearances comes on top of some 5,676 cases that remain unsolved and for which no one has been held accountable. Of the thousands of young Tamil men and women detained without trial as "LTTE" suspects, 782 are still undergoing "rehabilitation" and another 262

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are in judicial custody.

Those who have been “freed” are being “continually monitored after release”. They have to “register regularly with either the local civil affairs office of the military or the local army camp.” Military and intelligence agencies visit their homes and workplaces to carry out further interrogation.

In the immediate aftermath of the LTTE’s defeat, the military incarcerated nearly 300,000 men, women and children in huge detention camps. Of those, 271,200 have been “resettled”, while 18,000 continue to live with host families. Those that have been resettled are constantly monitored and have to inform the army if they plan to hold a gathering “irrespective of size or the social or apolitical nature of the event.”

Despite its very limited character, government officials and ministers denounced Pillay’s report as lacking objectivity and impartiality. In what is now a familiar refrain, they accused Western countries of having fallen for the lies promoted by LTTE supporters in the Tamil diaspora. The Sri Lankan ambassador in Geneva condemned Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch for plans to screen a film on the fringes of the UNHCR meeting that is said to include evidence of the killing of the young son of a Tamil leader.

The US and its allies, which fully backed Rajapakse’s communal war, have no genuine concern for democratic rights in Sri Lanka. Rather, Washington is exploiting the issue of “human rights” to further its own strategic interests in the region. In particular, the Obama administration is using the threat of international action on human rights abuses to press Rajapakse to distance his government from China.

The US has publicly backed Pillay’s report, which includes a call for an international investigation into human rights abuses in Sri Lanka; a proposal that the Rajapakse government bitterly opposes. Whether such a call is contained in the US-backed resolution to the UNHCR meeting is not yet clear. US assistant secretary of state Esther Brimmer said the resolution would be a “cooperative effort with the Sri Lankan government.” In other words, if Colombo toes Washington’s line, there will be no international inquiry.

On February 18, the European Union announced it supported the US resolution. India, on which the US is counting for support, has not made its position clear. New Delhi wants to maintain good relations with Colombo, but at the same time has to appease political parties in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, where there is widespread anger over the abuse of Sri Lankan Tamils.

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which represents the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka, has also backed the proposed UNHRC resolution and has sent four of its parliamentarians to Geneva. The TNA is seeking support from various Tamil exile groups, including the British Tamil Forum and the self-proclaimed Transitional Government of Tamil Eelam, which also have their representatives in Geneva.

The TNA’s overriding concern is not the plight of Tamils in Sri Lanka, but securing the support of the major powers for a power-sharing arrangement with the Colombo government that would devolve limited powers to the North and East of the island. Such an arrangement would allow for the joint exploitation of the working class and oppressed masses by the Sinhala and Tamil ruling elites.

Sri Lankan workers—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike—must reject the cynical manipulation of the issue of “human rights” by the US and its allies, including among the Tamil elites. The working class, not US imperialism, has to deal with the Rajapakse government and its war crimes. Workers must unite across ethnic lines, rally the rural poor and oppressed behind them, and fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies. That means the struggle for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the fight for a socialist South Asia and world. That is the program for which the Socialist Equality Party stands.

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