

Sri Lankan president rejects fresh war crimes evidence

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Confronted by new photographic evidence of one of his regime's war crimes, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse has denied the military's culpability for the killing of V. Balachandran, the 12-year-old son of V. Prabhakaran, the former leader of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

In an interview with the *Hindu*, an Indian daily, on March 2, Rajapakse claimed: "Had it happened, I would have known [it]. It is obvious that if somebody [from the armed forces] had done that, I must take responsibility. We completely deny it. It can't be."

Rajapakse's flat denial reveals nervousness about the mounting documentation of the human right abuses committed by his government during the war that ended with the LTTE's defeat in May 2009. According to Rajapakse, one should simply accept his assurance that his armed forces committed no war crime and that therefore he was not responsible for the killing.

The latest video produced by Channel 4, a London-based TV channel, screened two new photos believed to be of Balachandran's last moments. One photo showed him in army captivity in a small bunker made of sandbags. The other showed him eating a snack in the same location. These two pictures are related to another photo, contained in a video released last year entitled *No Fire Zone: The Killing Fields of Sri Lanka*, in which Balachandran's dead body lay on the ground with five bullet wounds in the chest.

Channel 4 video director Callum Macrae said the three photos completed the story that the army captured Balachandran, and might have questioned him about the whereabouts of his father, before shooting him. The new photos confirmed that Balachandran was not killed in crossfire, as the Sri Lanka military claimed, but was shot in captivity, Macrae said.

The latest video, with the new photos added, was

screened in the Geneva headquarters of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHCR) to the delegations attending the current UNHCR annual meeting, where a US draft resolution calls for international monitoring of ongoing human rights violations in Sri Lanka.

Macrae quoted an assessment by prominent forensic pathologist, Derrick Pounder, of the picture of Balachandran's dead body: "There is a speckling (on the skin) from propellant tattooing, indicating that the distance of the muzzle of the weapon to this boy's chest was two to three feet or less. He could have reached out with his hand and touched the gun that killed him." Forensic experts concluded that there was "no fabrication" involved in the photo.

Rajapakse's denial in the face of documentary evidence underscores his government's contempt for evidence of gross human rights violations, including war crimes and abrogation of basic democratic rights. His government has stridently opposed any investigation into these allegations, for the obvious reason that it could reveal the truth.

Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president's brother, declared that the documentary "had been obviously produced at the behest of the UK Global Tamil Forum and others still supporting the LTTE's macabre Eelam project."

Regardless of the evidence, President Rajapakse and his defence secretary routinely brush aside any accusation of war crimes, as a "conspiracy" by "terrorists". On May 19, 2009, just a day after the LTTE was defeated, the president claimed that the Sri Lankan military was engaged in a "humanitarian operation" with "zero casualties". Anyone killed during the war was a victim of the "LTTE terrorists", he insisted.

A UN expert panel report released in December 2011

found there was credible evidence that the military had killed at least 40,000 civilians, attacked hospitals and schools and shelled so-called no fire zones—actions which amount to war crimes. Extra-judicial killings and disappearances had also been carried out with impunity.

To appease mounting criticism in the country and internationally, Rajapakse appointed the hand-picked Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) to whitewash the war crimes. It made limited findings, proposing to investigate disappearances and extra-judicial killings, disarm paramilitary cliques, gradually demilitarise the island's north and east, and devolve some powers to the Tamil capitalist elite. Rajapakse then shelved the commission's report.

Rajapakse and his government are now facing another UNHCR resolution, sponsored by the US, insisting that Colombo implement the LLRC's proposals. Washington and its allies have criticised the Sri Lankan government for not taking steps to do so, in line with a UNHCR resolution passed last March.

The US and other major powers supported the Rajapakse government's war efforts but then cynically exploited its human right violations to put pressure on Rajapakse to distance himself from China.

In his *Hindu* interview, Rajapakse appealed to the Western powers to “not merely look at one side,” adding: “They [the US and EU] must not listen to one group and opposition.” He is seeking to mend fences with these powers, yet his government has increasingly relied on Chinese loans to keep the Sri Lankan economy afloat.

Rajapakse lamented: “Sri Lanka is like a volley ball. Everyone is taking turns punching it to cover up their sins.” He did not specify who was “punching” and “covering up sins”. Rajapakse has in the past resorted to obliquely criticising the Western powers for their own war crimes, as a means of whipping up nationalist sentiment and depicting his government as the victim of an “international conspiracy”.

Despite this posturing, Rajapakse has made no mention of the US military intervention in Libya last year to oust and murder Muammar Gaddafi, the crippling economic sanctions imposed on Iran, the Western military support for the anti-government rebels in Syria, or the unlawful drone attacks on Pakistan.

The latest evidence of war crimes and human rights abuses highlights the criminality of the Rajapakse

government, which has maintained and extended the police state apparatus as the means of suppressing opposition by the working class against its austerity program.



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