

UNHRC threatens international probe of Sri Lankan war crimes

K. Ratnayake
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UN Human Rights Commissioner Navanethem Pillay warned last week that unless the Sri Lankan government took “comprehensive measures” to address human rights violations committed during the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) it could face an international investigation.

Pillay issued the warning on September 25 in an oral report to the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) that reviewed human rights in several countries. Pillay visited Sri Lanka in August to assess steps taken by Colombo to address a US-sponsored resolution passed in March by the UNHRC. The resolution called for the implementation of the limited recommendations of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC), a body established by Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse to cover-up the war crimes committed during the final military offensive against the LTTE in 2009.

Pillay told the UNHCR that there had been “no new or comprehensive effort [by Colombo] to independently or credibly investigate the [war crimes] allegations” and called on the Sri Lankan government to “engage in a credible national process with tangible results, including the successful prosecution of individual perpetrators.” Unless this was done by March 2014, she continued, “the international community will have a duty to establish its own inquiry mechanisms.”

A UN expert commission has estimated that at least 40,000 people were killed during the final offensives against the LTTE. Sri Lankan security forces are implicated in other crimes, including abductions and disappearances carried out in association with various paramilitary groups.

Pillay also referred to other attacks on democratic rights in Sri Lanka, including the massive military

presence in the North, surveillance of released political prisoners, sexual harassment of women and girls, the increasing role of security forces in civil administration and economic activities, and attacks on media freedom.

The Sri Lankan delegation to the UNHRC immediately rejected the report, declaring that Pillay had no mandate to issue a deadline for investigating the 2009 war crimes. Colombo continues to deny any human rights violations and claims that the military was engaged in a “humanitarian operation” in its final offensives against the LTTE.

The US delegate to the UNHCR, Eileen Donahoe, backed Pillay’s report, stating that “absent meaningful progress on accountability, calls for an international inquiry will persist.” Donahoe also called on the Rajapakse government to establish an “independent and credible investigation into allegations of violations of international human rights and international humanitarian law.”

These calls are entirely cynical. US imperialism continuously violates international law and human rights in pursuit of its geo-political strategic interests. Just three weeks ago, the Obama administration was about to launch a massive and unprovoked military assault on Syria, on the pretext that Bashar al-Assad’s government had used chemical weapons on civilians. Washington is arming and training Al Qaeda militia and other Islamic terrorist groups as part of its regime-change operations in Syria.

The US and other imperialist powers supporting Pillay’s statements have no interest in exposing war crimes and defending democratic rights in Sri Lanka. Rather, Washington is attempting to exert political pressure on the Rajapakse government to weaken its close relations with Beijing. The Obama administration is demanding Sri Lanka fall into the line with its “pivot

to Asia”, which involves a military encirclement of China.

While Washington fully backed the Rajapakse government’s war, it became increasingly concerned as China emerged as the principal provider of arms and weapons for Colombo’s war against the LTTE. Beijing, moreover, remains a major source of loans and investment in Sri Lanka. Along with Russia, China provides important political support for the Rajapakse government in the UNHRC.

Although India backed the US resolution on Sri Lanka, its response to Pillay’s report was less forthright, calling for Sri Lanka to continue working with the UNHCR. India wants Sri Lanka to distance itself from China, but is cautious that too much political pressure on Colombo will only push it closer to Beijing.

Two days before Pillay’s statement, Rajapakse spoke at the UN General Assembly claiming that though there had been “visible progress made [on human rights]”, Sri Lanka was being subjected to “unequal treatment.”

He also blamed the “unilateral actions” of some countries and declared that the “world needs no policing by a few states, particularly when the UN is mandated to ensure international security.” Embargoes and economic sanctions on various countries, he added, were “disturbing.”

Rajapakse’s speech was featured prominently in the Sri Lankan media. An editorial in the *Island* claimed that the president had shown “courage” in delivering “some home truths at the UN General Assembly, even at the risk of ruffling the feathers of the world powers.”

Rajapakse’s fear of sanctions and “policing” by a few countries has nothing to do with challenging the major powers. His routine claims of an “international conspiracy” against Sri Lanka and his posturing as an anti-westerner are in order to hoodwink the people. Like the previous government, the Rajapakse administration has backed the bogus US “war on terror” and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Rajapakse had no problems in appealing for support from the US, the EU, Japan and India, for his war against the LTTE.

Last month, Sri Lankan defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president’s brother, revealed to the *Australian* newspaper aspects of the crucial support provided by Washington during the war. “Between

2006 and 2008 we destroyed 12 of these floating armouries [for the LTTE]. What made this possible? The Americans were very, very helpful. Most of the locations of these ships were given to us by the Americans,” he explained.

US Pacific Command provided satellite information on ships allegedly carrying arms for the LTTE, including some weapons that the Sri Lanka military did not possess. Destroying these arms, the defence secretary said, was a “turning point” in the war. US allies, Israel and Pakistan, also provided arms to Sri Lanka without any restrictions, he added.

Caught up in the rising tensions between the major powers, the Rajapakse government’s ability to balance between the US and India on one hand, and China on the other, has become increasingly difficult. Pillay’s threat of a possible international investigation into Sri Lankan war crimes, applying pressure to Colombo on behalf of the US, highlights this situation.



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