

Commonwealth summit heightens Western pressure on Rajapakse government

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The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) held in Colombo from November 15 to 17, underscored the pressure being applied by the Western powers on the host government of President Mahinda Rajapakse, ostensibly over its mass killings of Tamil civilians in 2009 and ongoing abuses of basic democratic rights.

Rajapakse wanted to use the CHOGM summit to counter the campaign by Washington and its allies, as well as India, to exploit the issue of human rights in order to insist that his government distance itself from China, with which it developed close ties during the final stages of its war against the separatist Tamil Tigers.

In an attempt to prevent any dissent, the Rajapakse government banned all anti-government protests during the summit. A bid by journalists from Britain's Channel 4 to visit the war-ravaged north of the island was stopped by pro-government mobs that blocked their train at Anuradhapura, in North Central province, and blockaded all the stations between Anuradhapura and Kilinochchi.

However, decisions by the Indian and Canadian prime ministers, Manmohan Singh and Stephen Harper, to boycott the summit were a major blow to Rajapakse's efforts. This was compounded when Mauritius Premier Navin Ramgoolam joined the boycott, and British Prime Minister David Cameron attended, but utilised his presence to raise the human rights and war crimes issues.

Both Harper and Ramgoolam cited the Rajapakse government's violation of human rights, particularly in relation to Tamils, as their reason for staying away. Singh, in a letter to Rajapakse, regretted his inability to attend CHOGM for "various reasons," which he did not specify. However, his decision was made to

appease political parties in India's southern Tamil Nadu state and some ministers of his own Congress party. Tamil Nadu-based parties demanded an Indian boycott, citing Colombo's war crimes and its subsequent failure to strike a power-sharing deal with the Tamil elite in Sri Lanka's north.

Rajapakse's government desperately wanted Singh's participation, as the leader of the main regional power, in order to boost its image regionally and internationally. The government calculated that if Singh attended it would help counter Western criticism of its treatment of Tamils.

The actions of Singh, Harper, Ramgoolam and Cameron have nothing to do with defending the democratic rights of Sri Lanka's Tamils. Harper decided to line up with the US to exploit the human rights issue to put pressure on Rajapakse, as part of the Obama administration's "pivot" to the Indo-Pacific to counter China's growing influence. Harper is also seeking to boost his government's electoral support in Canada's large Tamil exile community.

Cameron's intervention, driven by similar pro-US strategic considerations, caused the greatest trouble for the Colombo government. Following the inaugural CHOGM session on Friday, Cameron visited Jaffna, the capital of the Tamil-majority northern province, where he was mobbed by about 250 Tamil protesters who said their relatives had been murdered by the Sri Lankan authorities.

In Jaffna, Cameron also went to the office of *Uthayan*, a Tamil daily, which has been subjected to several violent attacks by pro-government thugs, including arson and the killing of staff. He later met the newly elected Northern Provincial Chief Minister C.V. Wignewaran, who represents the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the main party of the Tamil elite.

Cameron was accompanied by journalists from British media outlets, including Channel 4, the BBC and ITV.

Channel 4 had broadcast three documentaries exposing the war crimes carried out by the Sri Lankan military in 2009 during the final stages of its war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). On the eve of CHOGM, the TV network released its latest film, which stated that 40,000 Tamil civilians had been killed and documenting the military's slaying of Shoba, alias Isaipriya, a high profile female presenter on the LTTE's TV channel. Video footage shows that she was captured alive, appearing to have no physical injuries.

Cameron described the documentary, *No Fire Zone*, as "chilling." It also exposed the lie, published, on the Sri Lankan Ministry of Defence web site, that Shoba was killed, along with 31 other LTTE leaders, during an "offensive" by the Sri Lankan Army commanded by Major General Kamal Gunaratne.

At a Saturday press conference, Cameron demanded "a credible mechanism to investigate the [war crime] allegations" and warned that if Sri Lanka failed to respond by next March, Britain would use its position on the UN Security Council to call on the UN Human Rights Council to launch "an international investigation." He added that he had told Rajapakse: "I don't think this particular issue will go away. It is now in the international domain."

In a defiant response, Rajapakse told the closing media conference: "He can say whatever he wants. People living in glass houses must not throw stone at others." Responding to a question on whether Cameron was mounting pressure on Sri Lanka, Rajapakse declared: "Pressure won't do anything ... It's much better to wait rather than demand or dictate."

The Colombo government has continuously denied any civilian killings during the war, despite obvious evidence to the contrary, and conducted its own sham inquiry, called the Reconciliation and Lessons Learnt Commission.

Colombo's stance was openly supported at CHOGM by Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, who praised the Rajapakse government in his summit speech, saying: "Sri Lanka's willingness to host this Commonwealth [meeting] shows its commitment to democratic pluralism and freedom based on law and ought to reassure all its citizens that just as today is

better than yesterday, tomorrow will be better than today."

Commenting on reports of alleged torture by Sri Lankan security forces, Abbott blatantly condoned torture, telling journalists that while his government "deplores the use of torture we accept that sometimes in difficult circumstances difficult things happen." In his closing media conference, Rajapakse thanked Abbott for his support.

Abbott's praise is directly related to the strategic and economic interests of Australian imperialism. The Rajapakse government has been closely collaborating with Canberra in stopping Sri Lankan asylum seekers from trying to reach Australia by boat. Abbott said he wanted to strengthen that "good and close co-operation." On the final day of the meeting, he announced that Australia would give two naval patrol boats to Sri Lanka and sign a memorandum of understanding on combating "people smuggling."

This move, following a similar agreement made by the previous Australian Labor government, amounts to further assisting the Rajapakse government in capturing Tamils and other Sri Lankans trying to flee its persecution and oppression.

Likewise, New Zealand Foreign Minister Murray McCully, who attended CHOGM, pursued the interests of his country's dairy industry. He said New Zealand would not support an independent investigation into the war crimes allegations. During a visit to the island's north, he laid the foundation stone for a milk chilling plant in Mullaitivu and later signed a dairy co-operation agreement involving an investment of \$2 million.

Despite this backing from two US allies, CHOGM was a major embarrassment for the Rajapakse government, highlighting its police-state methods of political and media repression, as well as its systemic cover up of its war crimes.



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