

US threatens international probe into Sri Lankan war crimes

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During a five-day visit to Sri Lanka this month, US Ambassador-at-Large on War Crimes Issues Stephen Rapp, strongly hinted at Washington's readiness to back an international inquiry into war crimes by the armed forces in the final stages of the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009.

Rapp met with M.A. Sumanthiran, a Tamil National Alliance (TNA) parliamentarian, in Colombo on January 7 and indicated that the US might put a stronger resolution to this year's United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) session in Geneva during March. As reported in the *New Indian Express*, Sumanthiran said that Rapp told him that the Sri Lankan government had not done anything about war crimes and "therefore, the US is thinking of going to the next stage of calling for an international investigation."

Such a move would mark a significant shift by the US, which until now has gone along with the official cover up by the Sri Lankan government. An international inquiry threatens to expose the extent of the atrocities carried out by the Sri Lankan armed forces for which President Mahinda Rajapakse and other senior government and military leaders bear responsibility.

Having sponsored two resolutions on Sri Lanka at UNHRC sessions in previous years, the US is stepping up its pressure on Colombo, exploiting the war crimes issue. The US-backed resolution passed last March called on Rajapakse's government to implement the recommendations of its own Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC).

The LLRC was a government whitewash, established by Rajapakse during 2010 in a bid to deflect criticism, including from the US. It made limited proposals to

disarm paramilitary forces, probe disappearances and extrajudicial killings and forge power-sharing arrangements with the Tamil capitalist elite. Yet, Rajapakse's government shelved even those proposals.

The UN estimates that at least 40,000 people were killed by the Sri Lankan military during the final months of the war. Rajapakse has flatly denied that any war crimes were committed, cynically maintaining that the troops were engaged in "humanitarian operations" to protect people from "terrorists."

Washington fully backed the Rajapakse government's war against Tamils. Since the military defeat of the LTTE in May 2009, however, the Obama administration has cynically utilised the war crimes issue to put pressure on the Colombo government to distance itself from China and align more closely with the US.

A US embassy statement on Rapp's visit did not refer to an international investigation, but noted that Rapp "listened to eyewitness accounts about serious human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law, including those that occurred at the end of the war." It added: "In that context the government of the US encourages the government of Sri Lanka to seek the truth through independent and credible investigations, and where relevant, have prosecutions."

The embassy published on its official tweeter page a photograph of Rapp and US Ambassador Michele Sisson at St. Anthony's ground near Puthumatalan in northern Sri Lanka, with a caption: "Army shelling killed hundreds of families." Puthumatalan is where the Sri Lankan military mounted its final assault. Despite protests by Colombo, the US embassy refused to remove the photograph and insisted that the tweet message carried its official approval.

Rapp went to Jaffna in the Northern Province, where he met Provincial Governor Major General G.A. Chandrasiri, Chief Minister C.V. Vigneswaran, TNA provincial councillor Ananthi Sasidran and two Roman Catholic bishops. In Jaffna, he pointedly visited the office of *Uthayan*, a pro-TNA daily, which has faced repeated violent reprisals from pro-government thugs operating closely with the military.

Bishop Rayappu Joseph told reporters he asked the US diplomat for an international war crimes investigation, including into whether the military used cluster munitions and chemical weapons in densely populated areas.

Those representing the Tamil elite, including the TNA, bishops and overseas remnants of the LTTE, are appealing to the major powers, particularly the US, to exert pressure on the Rajapakse government for a power-sharing deal, with a transfer of more administrative functions to a merged north and east province, where most Tamils live.

Nisa Desai Biswal, US assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asia, was to arrive in Sri Lanka after visiting New Delhi this week but her trip was delayed. One purpose of her visit to India was to seek its support for a US resolution in the UNHRC.

Like the US, the Indian establishment is concerned about China's growing influence in Sri Lanka. China has become the highest loan and aid provider to Sri Lanka, and is among the top arms suppliers to the country. Rajapakse signed a strategic partnership with China last June and discussions are underway to establish a free trade agreement.

The Rajapakse government has responded to Rapp's visit with caution. Fearing any investigation into its war crimes, it is keen to develop close ties with the US and other Western powers, while maintaining its financially beneficial relationship with Beijing.

Justice Minister Rauf Hakeem urged Washington "to reconsider its position on Sri Lanka and back efforts towards achieving reconciliation in the country." China's daily *Xinhua* reported that Hakeem appealed to the US to "look at alternate mechanisms like encouraging a Truth Commission in order to see reconciliation being achieved in Sri Lanka."

Last Thursday, a group of government supporters held a protest in Colombo against Rapp's visit, accusing the US of "double standards" by ignoring its

own human rights violations and trying to victimise Sri Lanka for its defeat of the "terrorist" LTTE. These chauvinist elements refer to the war crimes committed by the US only in order to justify similar actions by the Rajapakse government.



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