

Sri Lanka's war crimes and the US 'human rights' charade

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The Obama administration has declared that it will present a third consecutive resolution on Sri Lanka to the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) meeting in March, calling for a probe into human rights violations. The focus will be on abuses during the final months of the Sri Lankan government's war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that ended in May 2009.

Successive Sri Lankan governments are directly responsible for war crimes during the 26-year conflict with the LTTE, but under President Mahinda Rajapakse the civil war took an even more brutal turn. The 2011 report of a UN expert panel estimated that around 40,000 civilians were killed in the months before the LTTE's defeat.

Rajapakse and his ministers flatly rejected the UN report and deny that any war crimes took place in what they describe as the military's "humanitarian operation" to "liberate" the Tamil population. Despite its denials, the government is desperately appealing to US officials to hold back the resolution and is seeking international support to block its passage. Within Sri Lanka, Rajapakse continues to whip up patriotic and anti-Tamil sentiment by claiming his government is the victim of "an international conspiracy" for regime-change in Colombo.

While Rajapakse is undoubtedly implicated in crimes, no credence should be placed in Washington's bogus "human rights" campaign. The US is no more concerned about war crimes in Sri Lanka than it was in Iraq, or Libya or Syria. The "human rights" charade is simply the ideological banner used by US imperialism for its intrigues, provocations and wars of aggression around the world. In fact, the Rajapakse government and the Colombo media justify the Sri Lankan military's use of torture, arbitrary detention, killing of

civilians and other human rights abuses by pointing to what the US carried out in its occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Moreover, Washington fully backed the Rajapakse government when it tore up the ceasefire agreement with the LTTE and renewed military offensives in 2006. While denouncing the LTTE, the US, along with India and China, provided vital military assistance to the Sri Lankan army and remained silent amid mounting evidence of its atrocities. The US implemented its own ban on the LTTE by hunting down its supporters and fund raisers, and strong-armed the European Union into doing the same.

The US and its European allies only began to raise concerns about the Sri Lankan military's "human rights" abuses as it became apparent that the LTTE was heading for defeat. The Obama administration was preoccupied, not with the fate of hundreds of thousands of Tamil civilians, but the rising influence of China, which had emerged as the supplier of military hardware, loans and aid to the Rajapakse government.

A December 2009 US Senate Foreign Relations Committee report, "Sri Lanka: Recharting US strategy after the war," warned that "this strategic drift [by Sri Lanka toward China] will have consequences for US interests in the region." It bluntly concluded that the US cannot afford to "lose" Sri Lanka and called for "an integrated strategy that leverages political, economic, and security tools" to secure US interests. John Kerry, now secretary of state, chaired the Senate committee.

The Obama administration's stance on Sri Lanka was bound up with the developing shift in US foreign policy known as the "pivot to Asia"—a comprehensive strategy of undermining Chinese influence throughout the region and encircling China militarily to ensure ongoing US hegemony. The Obama administration has

been restructuring and building up US military forces in Asia and stoking up dangerous flashpoints, such as the maritime disputes in the East China and South China Seas, as a means of isolating China.

Over the past four years, Washington has maintained a steady pressure on Colombo. Its previous UNHRC resolutions gave credence to the Rajapakse government's own bogus Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission, which whitewashed the Sri Lankan military's war crimes. Now, however, the US has taken a harder line, hinting at the establishment of an international probe—a move that could lead to putting Rajapakse in the International Criminal Court's dock on war crimes.

While acutely aware of the US threat, Rajapakse confronts a deepening economic and social crisis and depends heavily on China for economic aid and investment. In a bid to shore up his shaky position, Rajapakse has stepped up his claims of an “international conspiracy,” declaring that the West is plotting to put him in the “electric chair.” Those who oppose or criticise the government are branded as “traitors to the nation.”

The opposition led by the right-wing United National Party (UNP) has lined up with the US “human rights” offensive and is waging its own phony campaign for “democracy” against the autocratic Rajapakse government. The UNP, which was responsible for launching the war against the LTTE in 1983 and has defended all of the military's crimes, nevertheless now declares that “the country must not pay for the government's mistakes.” This signals UNP support for tougher measures against Rajapakse over human rights abuses.

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which functioned as the LTTE's parliamentary mouthpiece, has issued a statement backing an international war crimes investigation. In return, the bourgeois TNA is seeking Washington's support for a power devolution package that would secure the privileges of the country's Tamil elite. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, which helped Rajapakse come to power and backed his war, now criticises the government's “human rights” record for opening the country to potential US intervention.

The most cynical supporters of the US “human rights” juggernaut are the pseudo-left organisations—the

Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP)—which slavishly function as cheerleaders for the UNP and TNA. NSSP leader Wickramabahu Karunaratne last week declared that he would go to the UNHRC gathering in Geneva next month to add his voice to Washington's supposed calls for justice and democratic rights in Sri Lanka.

The working class should reject the machinations of the US and its allies in Colombo and internationally. At the same time, workers must condemn the war crimes of the present and past Sri Lankan governments. Their attacks on the basic democratic rights of Tamils were always part and parcel of the onslaught on the social position and rights of the working class as a whole.

The entire Colombo political establishment is responsible for the war crimes and the police-state apparatus that has been built up during the war. Ever since so-called independence from British imperialism in 1948, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie has whipped up and exploited anti-Tamil chauvinism to divide the working class and maintain its reactionary rule.

The working class must advance its own strategy and program to oppose US imperialism. This involves the independent mobilisation of workers in Sri Lanka, South Asia and around the world on the basis of a unified struggle for a socialist perspective. Above all, this means fighting for the political independence of the working class in Sri Lanka from every faction of the bourgeoisie, which are all utterly subservient to imperialism.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on the working class to reject all forms of nationalism and chauvinism, in order to unite Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers in a common struggle against capitalism and its political defenders. The SEP fights for a Socialist Republic of Eelam and Sri Lanka as part of a union of socialist republics in South Asia and internationally. We urge workers and youth to join and build the SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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