

US presents new UNHRC resolution on Sri Lankan human rights

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The United States, with Britain, Montenegro, Macedonia and Mauritius as co-signatories, this week presented another resolution on human right violations by the Sri Lankan government to the current UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) meeting in Geneva. Though the draft resolution does not call for an immediate international probe into Sri Lanka's war crimes, it conveys a sharp warning to the Colombo government that it should align itself with US strategic interests in Asia against China.

This is the third resolution sponsored by Washington in three years, and it contains some additional clauses to those passed previously. The US is once again cynically raising the abuses perpetrated by President Mahinda Rajapakse's government during the final months of its war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE), a separatist Tamil bourgeois organisation, which was defeated in May 2009.

There is mounting evidence of war crimes by the government, including the killing of LTTE leaders after they surrendered. According to UN estimates, about 40,000 civilians were killed during the final months of the conflict. Washington's concern over human rights is a fraud, however. Washington backed Rajapakse's war, along with the major European powers, China and India. Globally, the US is the principal perpetrator of war crimes—invading countries, instigating regime-change operations, killing thousands of people and violating international laws to assert its hegemonic position.

Like previous US-sponsored UNHRC resolutions, the draft requests the Sri Lankan government to implement its own Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission recommendations. This commission, appointed by Rajapakse, whitewashed the war crimes, and made limited proposals for the devolution of powers to the

Tamil elite in the island's north and east and for the disarming of paramilitary forces.

To increase the pressure on Rajapakse, the US is exploiting his government's involvement in ongoing attacks on journalists and instigation of Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinist organisations against minority religious communities. The resolution calls for investigation of assaults on places of worships and journalists.

The resolution also calls for the release of an inquiry report on the army's shooting of protesters in Weliweriya on August 1. Three people were killed when the military fired on demonstrators demanding a clean water supply.

In addition, the resolution calls for the provision of the "resources and authority necessary to govern" to the Northern Provincial Council, which is dominated by the capitalist Tamil National Alliance. The Rajapakse government has effectively blocked funding to the council, which has police and land powers under the country's constitution.

In a significant step-up from earlier resolutions, the draft calls for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights "to investigate alleged violations and abuses of human rights and related crimes" in Sri Lanka. It also "welcomes" a report by UN Human Rights Commissioner Navanethem Pillay that proposed "an independent and credible international investigation in the absence of a credible national process."

The commissioner's office is instructed to present an oral report for the UNHRC's next session in September and a comprehensive report to next March's annual meeting. This is a warning that if the government fails to implement the resolution's recommendations, an "international investigation" could be triggered.

After possible amendments, the resolution will be presented for a vote at the end of March.

On February 26, US Secretary of State John Kerry delivered a further threat to Colombo. Releasing the State Department's annual human rights report for 2013, Kerry referred to Sri Lanka and insisted on a probe into its violations. "We will do it in Sri Lanka, where the government still has not answered basic demands for accountability and reconciliation," he declared.

Implying that Sri Lanka presents a challenge to US interests, Kerry stated: "Countries that deny human rights and human dignity challenge our interests as well as human interests."

The State Department report lists human right violations in Sri Lanka and notes the dominance of Rajapakse's family in the government, commenting: "Two of the president's brothers hold key executive branch posts, as defence secretary and economic development minister, and a third brother is the speaker of Parliament."

Kerry's utterances are duplicitous and deceitful. The Obama administration has not the slightest concern for human rights or war crimes. Its only interest since the defeat of the LTTE has been China's growing influence in Sri Lanka. Beijing backed Rajapakse with weapons and funds to fight the war, and now provides his regime with desperately needed financial assistance.

Overturning this relationship in the strategically located island in the Indian Ocean is crucial for Obama's "pivot" to Asia to curb China's rise by diplomatically isolating and militarily encircling it.

Putting on a brave face in Geneva, Sri Lankan Foreign Affairs Minister G. L. Peiris condemned the High Commissioner's report and the US resolution. As the Rajapakse government has done since 2009, Peiris flatly denied all war crimes allegations and rejected any independent investigation.

Addressing foreign correspondents in Colombo last week, Rajapakse said: "We are uncomfortable with the whole resolution ... there should not be a resolution at all." His government's hypocrisy is also boundless. It eagerly relied upon the support of the major powers, including US, for its war on the LTTE, but is now appealing for the US to back off.

At the same time, in a bid to shore up his position at home, Rajapakse is exploiting the US campaign to

posture as a determined leader standing up against "an international conspiracy" for regime change in Colombo. The government and the Colombo media have resurrected accusations of a LTTE project to "divide the country."

Rajapakse's government needs this bogus campaign to divert the growing discontent of workers, the rural poor and youth over its relentless assault on living conditions and democratic rights as it seeks to implement the dictates of investors and the International Monetary Fund.

Concerned not to alienate the US, sections of the Sri Lankan ruling class are expressing dismay at the government's response. The right-wing United National Party (UNP) is demanding that the government implement its promises to the "international community," giving a clear signal that the UNP is ready to back US interests in the region.

Writing in the *Colombo Telegraph*, Dayan Jayatilake, a former Sri Lankan envoy to UNHRC, asked the government not to "reject the draft [resolution] out of hand" and "fall into the trap set for this country." He continued: "The US-UK call at this point of time is for us to clean up our act. Sri Lanka would be a better place if the government constructively engaged and cooperated with this call."

The message from Washington is increasingly clear. If Rajapakse distances himself from China, the US would immediately drop its human rights accusations, just as it has done with other governments, such as Burma, that embrace its interests. If he fails, the US will move to oust him, and even place him in the dock on war crimes charges.



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