

UN body call for international probe into Sri Lankan human rights violations

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The UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) last Thursday passed a US-sponsored resolution calling for an international investigation into human rights violations in Sri Lanka during the Colombo government's war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and related war crimes.

The resolution, which was vigorously pushed by Washington, marks a shift of US policy towards a more aggressive stance against the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse. It is a warning to Rajapakse that he and other senior government and military figures could find themselves charged with war crimes if the government does not distance itself from China. Previous US resolutions on Sri Lanka passed at the UNHRC sessions in 2012 and 2013 were limited to calling for an internal investigation into human rights violations.

The US-backed resolution is also sending a message to Beijing that Washington is intensifying its "pivot to Asia" aimed at isolating China diplomatically and encircling it militarily. Last month, a UN Commission of Inquiry into the North Korean regime, a formal Chinese ally, recommended that the international criminal court charge its leaders with crimes against humanity.

The US resolution received 23 votes in the UNHRC session while 12 opposed, including China and Russia. Twelve countries abstained and significant among them was India, which had backed two previous resolutions. The resolution "requests" the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) "undertake a comprehensive investigation into alleged serious violations and human rights and related crimes."

The proposed investigation has been limited to the period covered by the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC). The LLRC was

appointed by Rajapakse to whitewash the military's war crimes covering 2002 to May 2009—the period between peace talks with the LTTE and its military defeat. By choosing this period, the resolution specifically targets the Rajapakse government, which broke the truce in 2006, not previous governments.

The resolution calls on the inquiry "to establish the facts and circumstances of such alleged violations and of the crimes perpetrated with a view to avoiding impunity and ensuring accountability." The UNHRC resolution also points to a range of post-war abuses, including "the attack on unarmed protesters in Weliweriya" last August, but does not call for these to be investigated.

A UN expert panel in 2011 estimated that about 40,000 civilians were killed in the final months of the war and catalogued other violations, including abductions, torture and disappearances. The report indicated that high government officials—including President Rajapakse, his brother Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse and top generals—were implicated in war crimes. Nonetheless, the government continues to insist that the military carried out no atrocities or human rights abuses.

The Colombo government certainly committed war crimes and is continuing attacks on the democratic rights of working people, Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims alike. But the posturing of the US and its allies, such as Britain, France and Germany, as opponents of human rights abuses in Sri Lanka is a fraud. All of them backed Rajapakse's renewed war in 2006 and have a long list of war crimes of their own to answer for.

The US and European allies began raising the human rights issue in the final months of the war when it became clear that the LTTE was headed for defeat. The

Obama administration was determined to undermine China's influence in Colombo, which had expanded as a result of Chinese military and economic support to the Rajapakse government.

The US is now intensifying pressure on countries such as Sri Lanka that have not lined up with the "pivot," even as it has aggressively intervened in Ukraine to engineer a fascist-led coup. US President Obama is due to visit Japan, the Philippines, South Korea and Malaysia in April as part of the US diplomatic offensive against China.

US Secretary of State John Kerry immediately seized on the UNHRC resolution to declare that "justice and accountability cannot wait." In other words, having waited for nearly five years, Washington is not prepared to wait any longer for Rajapakse to move away from China. The message is simple: shift now, or face the prospect of war crimes charges and possibly sanctions.

China opposed the resolution, not only as a sign of support for Sri Lanka, but also because, like Russia, it is deeply concerned that the US will use a bogus human rights campaign to intervene within its borders. Washington has longstanding ties to Tibetan and Uighur separatist organisations.

India's envoy in Geneva, Dilip Sinha, justified his country's abstention by declaring: "It has been India's firm belief that adopting an intrusive approach that undermines national sovereignty and institutions is counterproductive."

India considers Sri Lanka as part of its regional sphere of influence and is hostile to China's close relationship with Colombo. While seeking closer relations with the Rajapakse government, New Delhi is also concerned to placate voters in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, angry over the abuse of Sri Lankan Tamils.

India voted for previous US resolutions, but facilitated their watering down as a means of currying favour in Colombo. It has continued the balancing act this time by abstaining—not wanting to alienate the Sri Lankan government by voting for the resolution, but also not wanting to alienate its strategic partner, the US, and Tamils in India, by voting against it.

India's opposition to "an intrusive approach that undermines national sovereignty" also reflects fears that the resolution could become a precedent that could

be used against India or Indian interests in the future.

Other than formally rejecting the resolution at the UNHRC session, the Rajapakse government has not issued a statement. At a hurriedly-called press briefing, External Affairs Minister G. L. Peiris condemned the resolution then ridiculously claimed the 12 votes against and 12 abstentions meant the country had scored a victory.

In recent weeks, the government has been intensifying its campaign in Sri Lanka, declaring the country is the victim of "an international conspiracy." Not wanting to alienate Washington, Rajapakse and his ministers never name the conspirators.

However, the vote for an international inquiry has provoked concerns in ruling circles. An editorial in the *Sunday Times* criticised those who ignored the resolution as "living in fool's paradise." The editorial continued: "[T]he hard, cold fact of the matter is that the UNHRC voted to start an investigation into allegations of war crimes in Sri Lanka. It has put the country on the rack, a diplomatic torture instrument where its political leaders will be, metaphorically, tied and stretched. It is an unprecedented event in Sri Lanka's post-Independence." It accused the government of failing to grasp the Realpolitik of international affairs.

The working class should not support the war criminals in Colombo, or the war criminals in Washington, who have waged war against Libya, have fuelled civil war in Syria and are now engaged in a military build-up against China. To halt the US drive to war, workers in Sri Lanka have to unite with the working class in South Asia and internationally on the basis of international socialist perspective to abolish the capitalist system—the root cause of these conflicts.



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