

US intensifies pressure on Sri Lanka via UN human rights inquiry

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As part of its drive to reinforce its military and strategic “pivot to Asia”—directed against China—the Obama administration is escalating its pressure on the Sri Lankan government to distance itself from Beijing and fall into line with Washington.

An unmistakable signal was sent on April 17, in a speech delivered by US Assistant Secretary State for South and Central Asian Affairs Nisha Desai Biswal on “US Foreign Policy in South Asia: A Vision for Prosperity and Security.”

Setting out the Obama administration’s “vision,” Biswal emphasised Washington’s determination to hold sway over the entire Asian continent. Citing President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry, she stated: “[T]he United States will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future.”

Turning to Sri Lanka, Biswal said it had “fortunately ended its civil war” but “reconciliation has proved challenging.”

Biswal then declared: “Following the UN Human Rights Council resolution on Sri Lanka, we continue to call for credible efforts to ensure accountability and justice. We look forward to resumption of a more comprehensive military relationship once the government of Sri Lanka had made better progress toward reconciliation and accountability.”

Biswal’s remarks are a clear message to President Mahinda Rajapakse’s government in Colombo: end economic and defence relations with Beijing and accept a closer military relationship with Washington, in line with the US strategy for the region.

To achieve its end, the Obama administration is using the threat of possible war crimes charges against Rajapakse and other Sri Lankan leaders over atrocities committed during military offensives against the

separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in early 2009.

On March 27, a US-sponsored resolution was adopted by the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) calling for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to set up such an international inquiry. Rajapakse and his associates have stated that they will refuse to cooperate with the inquiry.

Washington’s push for a “comprehensive military relationship” with the same government and armed forces it is accusing of abuses further demonstrates that the UNHRC resolution has nothing to do with concerns about war crimes and human rights violations.

In reality, Washington supported successive Sri Lankan governments to unleash the brutal war in Sri Lanka, in which an estimated 40,000 civilians were killed during the final months alone. The US decision to seek an international investigation marked a sharp shift of attitude toward the Rajapakse government. Previously it had lent legitimacy to Colombo’s own Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission which whitewashed the military’s crimes.

Biswal’s speech spelled out Washington’s intent to build closer military and economic relations with all South Asian countries, with particular priority to forging a strategic partnership with India, in the name of “contributing to the stability of the Indian Ocean region.”

Biswal spoke of a “long-term geo-strategic convergence” with India in the Indo-Pacific, “the vast littoral arc stretching from South Africa to Australia.” This is part of the Obama administration’s increasingly aggressive drive to encircle China, which depends heavily on Indian Ocean trade routes.

Biswal’s speech was delivered in the lead up to President Obama’s current Asian tour for talks with

leaders in Japan, South Korea, Malaysia and Philippines—all countries with simmering maritime territorial disputes with Beijing.

The US pressure on Sri Lanka is being supported by other imperialist powers, particularly Britain and Canada. Like the US, both governments are hypocritically raising a human rights banner. Together with Washington, they have committed their own war crimes, including backing the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the regime-change operations in Libya and Syria. Britain and Canada have also lined up with Washington's intervention in Ukraine to confront Russia.

British Foreign Secretary William Hague told the British parliament on April 15, that his government fully supports a UN investigation into Sri Lanka and “continues to encourage the Sri Lankan Government to ensure proper implementation of the [UNHRC] resolution.”

On the same day, Canada suspended a \$9 million contribution to the Commonwealth of former British colonies, citing Rajapakse's current presidency of the organisation. Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird said: “Canada remains deeply concerned about the absence of accountability for alleged serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian standards in Sri Lanka.”

Sri Lankan External Affairs Minister G. L. Peiris accused Canada of using financial aid as a “political tool.” His comments were part of the Colombo government's ongoing efforts to whip up nationalist and chauvinist sentiments domestically by alleging a “Western conspiracy” to topple the government and support alleged moves by overseas Tamils to “revive the LTTE.”

Police spokesman Ajith Rohana announced last Thursday that the government had served “red notices” on 40 alleged LTTE leaders and 56 supposed LTTE backers, all living abroad. Earlier, the government blacklisted 16 Tamil groups and 424 people living overseas as “terrorists.”

The government is pursuing this witch-hunt in order to divert the deepening discontent among workers, youth and poor against its relentless attacks on living conditions and social rights.

At the same time, while repeating its refusal to cooperate with any UN investigation, the government is

seeking to deflect the US pressure. It has sought the help of the South African government to initiate a so-called truth and reconciliation process. This is another threadbare move, following Colombo's Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission, to cover up its war crimes.

At Rajapakse's request, South African President Jacob Zuma has appointed former union leader and now businessman Cyril Ramaphosa as a special envoy to mediate between the Sri Lankan government and the main Tamil bourgeois party, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA). TNA leaders, including R. Sambandan, visited Pretoria on April 10 and 11 for initial discussions and Ramaphosa is scheduled to visit Colombo next month.

In 1995, the African National Congress-led government initiated its own Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) into crimes committed under Apartheid rule. It was part of the process of consolidating capitalist rule with the assistance of a black ruling elite and averting a potentially revolutionary upsurge of the oppressed masses in that country. The TRC covered up the real crimes perpetrated under Apartheid and even failed to deliver promised compensation to the victims.

By participating in this discussion, the TNA has once again showed its readiness to strike a power-sharing deal with Colombo, with some government functions handed over to the Tamil elite in the island's north and east. TNA leader Sambandan told the *Sunday Times* that before any “truth and reconciliation” there should be a dialogue on such a “political solution.”

The TNA is seeking US support for its “political solution” and backed Washington's UNHRC resolution for that purpose. However, Washington has shown it is not ready to facilitate any such deal unless the Colombo government lines up with its interests across the region.



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