

UN delays war crimes report on Sri Lanka

Manusha Fernando
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The UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) agreed last week to delay the release of an international inquiry report on Sri Lankan human rights violations from March until September on the recommendation of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Raad Al-Hussein. The decision follows a request by Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera for a postponement.

The delay is a clear concession to the newly-installed Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena and was clearly given the green light from Washington, which had been exploiting the issue to put pressure on previous President Mahinda Rajapakse. The Sirisena government has rapidly shifted its foreign policy alignment away from China and towards the United States and its aggressive “pivot to Asia” against Beijing.

The report was prepared by an international commission appointed by the Human Rights Commissioner following a resolution approved at the UNHRC meeting last March. The resolution sponsored by the Obama administration called for an international inquiry into human rights violations during the final months of the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009.

The Rajapakse government was responsible for terrible war crimes. According to an expert UN committee, the Sri Lankan military killed an estimated 40,000 Tamil civilians in its indiscriminate bombardment of LTTE-held territory, including of hospitals and aid distribution centres. It was also responsible for other gross violations of democratic rights, including extra-judicial killings and disappearances.

The US fully backed the communal war waged by successive Colombo governments, including its renewal in 2006 under Rajapakse, and turned a blind eye to the military’s atrocities. However, with the

LTTE’s defeat imminent, Washington became increasingly concerned at Beijing’s growing influence in Colombo and used the “human rights” issue to push Rajapakse to break from China.

After backing two previous resolutions supporting internal Sri Lankan inquiries, the US last year stepped up the pressure by pushing for an international investigation inquiry last March. Such an inquiry threatened possible war crimes charges against senior government and military figures, indicating that the US was losing patience with Rajapakse.

When Rajapakse called an early presidential election last November, Sirisena quit the government and joined up with opposition parties to stand as their candidate. This political manoeuvre was prepared through months of intriguing that clearly involved the Obama administration. After Rajapakse’s defeat last month, the Sirisena government quickly moved to strengthen ties with Washington.

The decision to delay the UNHRC report followed Sri Lankan foreign minister Samaraweera’s visit to Washington where he met with US Secretary of State John Kerry and UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon to get their support. The US and Britain have already signaled their support for the delay. A spokesman for the UN secretary general declared he would “positively engage with the new Government and support its efforts.”

UN Human Rights Commissioner Al-Hussein said that “many victims of human rights violations in Sri Lanka, including those who have bravely come forward to provide information to the inquiry team, might see this is as the first step towards shelving, or diluting, a report they have long feared they would never see.” He offered the flimsy reassurance that his decision was a “onetime postponement” and only to give Colombo government more time.

Samaraweera, however, is pushing for a “domestic

mechanism” to work with the UNHRC to investigate human rights violations which he admitted had taken place during the war. He also promised to take action against those responsible for violating human rights and claimed his government would re-establish “good governance” and democratic rights.

Like the previous Rajapakse government, neither Sirisena nor his allies, including the pro-US United National Party (UNP), has the slightest interest in democratic rights. Sirisena was a senior minister in the Rajapakse government until November. The right-wing UNP started the war in 1983 and is notorious for its attacks on democratic rights.

Speaking at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, Samaraweera urged the international community, including the human rights community, “to be patient,” noting that “this is a time of fragile transition [in Sri Lanka].”

The reference to “fragile transition” highlights the unstable character of the Sirisena government as well as the political situation in Colombo. The new government fears that Rajapakse could exploit the release of the UNHRC report to whip up patriotic sentiment during parliamentary elections due in June and make a comeback that could threaten the government. Rajapakse’s supporters have already started a campaign on the chauvinist slogan of “Defend the Motherland.”

At the same time, Sirisena rests on a disparate collection of parties that include the Sinhala extremist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) which was part of the Rajapakse government and fully supported its war and war crimes. He is also looking for support from the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which is using the human rights issue to press for a power-sharing arrangement between the island’s Sinhala and Tamil elites.

Even as the Colombo government requested a postponement, the TNA-dominated Northern Provincial Council (NPC) passed a resolution calling for the publication of the UNHCR report. The tensions within the Colombo government and among its allies will sooner or later lead to political crises.

The Sirisena government’s call to delay the UNHRC report is another clear demonstration that it has no intention of holding to account those responsible for war crimes and gross human rights abuses. For all its

posturing about “democracy,” Sirisena, like Rajapakse, will be just as ruthless in suppressing any opposition in the working class to the austerity agenda being demanded by international finance capital and to which his government is committed.



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