

Tamil party in Sri Lanka calls for international war crimes inquiry

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7 March 2015

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the party of the Sri Lankan Tamil elite, has expressed “concerns” over the postponement of a report on war crimes in Sri Lanka prepared by a UN-committee.

At Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera’s request, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Raad Al Hussein, agreed to “suspend” the inquiry report for six months. It was due to be tabled at the current meeting of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). US Secretary of State John Kerry gave the green light for the delay after Samaraweera met him in Washington last month.

A TNA delegation, including its leader R. Sambandan, met the visiting UN Under-Secretary General at the Department of Political Affairs, Geoffrey Feltman, in Colombo last Saturday and told him the party had no faith in a “domestic inquiry” by the Sri Lankan government. The TNA cited the broken promises of inquiries by the previous government of President Mahinda Rajapakse.

In requesting the report’s delay, Samaraweera promised that President Maithripala Sirisena’s new government would initiate a domestic inquiry that met “international standards.”

The TNA-dominated Northern Provincial Council passed a resolution on February 11 demanding a continued international investigation. “The UN Security Council should refer the situation in Sri Lanka to the International Criminal Court for prosecutions based on war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide,” it proposed. Alternatively, it urged a prosecution in a country, such as the US, where the courts exercise “universal jurisdiction over alleged events and perpetrators.”

This is the first time that the TNA has made such calls. It is not to champion the democratic rights of

Tamil people or seek justice for war victims. Rather, the TNA is attempting to put maximum pressure on Sirisena’s new government to secure a significant devolution of power to the Tamil elite in the administration of the island’s north and east.

The UNHRC decision to delay its report has shattered illusions propagated by the TNA and other Tamil groups that the global powers have genuine interests in pursuing the war criminals and defending democratic rights. Yet again, what has been demonstrated is that war crimes and human rights issues are no more than tools in the hands of the US and its allies to advance their strategic interests.

The UNHRC inquiry was initiated last year via a US-sponsored resolution. Washington backed the military offensive against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) to the hilt, culminating in the LTTE’s defeat in May 2009. Washington then hypocritically exploited the war atrocities and abuses committed by Rajapakse’s government to pressure it to end its close economic and strategic relations with China.

The Obama administration wanted Sri Lanka to line up behind the US military and strategic “pivot” to Asia, directed against China, along with other countries in the region. Washington was heavily involved, behind the scenes, in the regime-change machinations surrounding the presidential election in January that brought Sirisena to office. The US is now heavily supporting his government.

In its 11-page Northern Provincial Council (NPC) resolution, the TNA summed up the discriminations, pogroms, mass murders and military campaigns between 1948 and 2009 as acts of genocide by Sri Lankan governments. The resolution also noted the continuation of repressive actions after 2009.

The resolution was passed unanimously. Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) members agreed to vote for it after the TNA removed a section that pointed to the EPDP's responsibility for war crimes. The EPDP, which was a partner in the Rajapakse government, has expressed support for Sirisena's administration since the election.

Successive Colombo governments since 1948 have intensified the discrimination against Tamils, deprived them of their democratic rights, instigated communal attacks, killing Tamil people, triggered the war against the LTTE and maintained a military occupation of the north and east. At least 200,000 people were killed during the 26-year war, according to UN statistics, and hundreds of thousands were displaced. Systematic communal attacks on Tamils have, above all, been aimed at dividing, weakening and suppressing the working class, in order to defend capitalist rule.

However, the perspective of the TNA, which formerly acted as an LTTE mouthpiece, has always been to arrange a power-sharing deal with the Colombo ruling elite, and to win the backing of US and India for such an arrangement. In 2009, the TNA entered into discussions with Rajapakse. In the 2010 presidential election, it backed the former army commander, General Sarath Fonseka, even though he oversaw the final offensives that crushed the LTTE, killing tens of thousands of civilians.

Once the US, with India's involvement, sponsored a regime-change operation to back Sirisena, Rajapakse's former health minister, in this January's presidential election, the TNA urged Tamil people to vote for him. After Sirisena's election, the TNA joined his government's top advisory body, the National Executive Council (NEC).

Sirisena has taken cosmetic steps to keep the TNA on board with his unstable government, which lacks a parliamentary majority. A civilian governor was appointed to replace the north's military governor, but the military occupation remains in place.

After the NPC resolution was adopted, Chief Minister C.V. Wigneswaran met with Sirisena and reportedly told him that it was not directed against his government. Wigneswaran asked Sirisena to do something under his 100-day program that would be taken favourably by Tamils. In return, Sirisena promised to release 1,000 acres from the militarised-

High Security Zones in Jaffna created during the war by seizing land from Tamil civilians.

The TNA's stance, particularly the NPC resolution, has been seized on by parties in the Colombo elite, especially Sinhala chauvinist groups, as another occasion to stir up communalism. Opposition leader Nimal Siripala de Silva labeled the NPC resolution a "threat to national security." A Sinhala extremist party, the Jathika Hela Urumaya, which is a partner in the government, declared it was a "blow to national harmony." The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) condemned the resolution as an attempt to "promote communal disharmony."

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and State Minister for Defence Ruwan Wijewardena have repeatedly reassured these elements that the government will not reduce the military's strength in the north or remove military camps. Thus, the military occupation will continue. Mired in Sinhala chauvinism, the Colombo establishment is hostile to making any major concessions to its Tamil counterparts, let alone to the democratic rights of working people.

At his meeting with Sirisena, Wigneswaran said the resolution was an "expression of the emotions and feelings of the Tamil people" and his party wanted to keep the Tamil question on the "international radar." In other words, the TNA is raising the war crimes issue to deflect the anger among Tamil people while seeking the support of the international powers to advance the interests of the Tamil elites.



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