

US announces shift on Sri Lankan war crimes investigation

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27 August 2015

US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Nisha Biswal announced in Colombo yesterday that Washington will sponsor a resolution in UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) sessions next month supporting a Sri Lankan government inquiry into alleged war crimes.

The announcement is a major shift by the US which last year sponsored a resolution calling for an international investigation into alleged war crimes by the former Rajapakse government in the final months of its military offensives against Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009. According to UN estimates, at least 40,000 civilians were killed by the Sri Lankan military's indiscriminate bombing and shelling.

Biswal's two-day Sri Lankan visit, which began on Monday, was to express Washington's support for the victory of the pro-US United National Party-led alliance in last week's parliamentary election. She was accompanied by US Assistant Secretary for Human and Labour Rights Tom Malinowski. The US officials met with President Maithripala Sirisena, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera before leaving for India.

Speaking to reporters in Colombo, Biswal said the US would present a joint resolution with the Sri Lankan government and other stakeholders during the September sessions of the UNHRC. Justifying the US decision to drop its support for an international investigation into the alleged war crimes, Biswal declared, "We have recognised that a different opportunity exists today for trying to advance reconciliation [with Tamil parties]."

Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera told the US assistant secretary of state that "measures [had been] taken to address concerns about alleged human rights

violations" and that there would be "domestic mechanisms to probe allegations." He did not elaborate on the nature of the mechanisms.

A domestic, rather than international, investigation will enable the government to cover up the responsibility of those now in power for the atrocities. President Sirisena, was a leading member of the Rajapakse government when the alleged war crimes were committed.

No details have been provided on the planned UNHRC resolution. Biswal said it would be formulated after a report from a UNHRC-appointed panel is presented to the human rights body next month.

The Obama administration's reversal on the human rights investigation is no surprise.

As the Socialist Equality Party has consistently explained, the US-sponsored resolutions on Sri Lankan war crimes had nothing to do with the democratic rights of the masses but were bound up with its broader geo-strategic aims and interests. The US and other imperialist powers previously backed successive Colombo governments' communal war to the hilt, encouraging the Rajapakse administration to restart the military onslaught in 2006 (see: "Sri Lanka's war crimes and the US 'human rights' charade").

Washington only began raising human rights issues in the final months of the Sri Lankan war. China had emerged as a principal supporter of the Rajapakse government, providing funds and military hardware. In the aftermath of the war, China heavily invested in Sri Lanka.

In line with the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia"—the diplomatic isolation and military encirclement of China—Washington moved to undercut Sri Lanka's relations with Beijing and draw Colombo firmly into the network of strategic alliances in the Asia-

Pacific region. The US used the threat of war crimes charges to put pressure on Rajapakse to distance himself from Beijing.

When that failed, Washington orchestrated a regime-change operation in Sri Lanka, enlisting the support of former President Chandrika Kumaratunga and UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe to oust Rajapakse and install Sirisena in the January 8 presidential elections. The US now calculates that the UNP victory and the failure of Rajapakse to win the prime ministership in the August 17 general election, has consolidated its position in Sri Lanka. This is the “different landscape” Biswal is referring to.

Pseudo-left formations such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP) and various NGOs and other middle-class groups rallied behind the US phony “human rights” campaign and backed, in one way or another, the US-regime change operation.

Washington’s manoeuvres have nothing to do with “human rights” but are issues that are turned off or on, according to whether they serve US economic and strategic interests. Washington previously branded Myanmar and its military regime as a pariah state but after the junta moved away from Beijing and turned towards Washington, the country was redefined as a state in transition to democracy.

Biswal enthusiastically congratulated the UNP on its election victory throughout her two-day visit, declaring at the Sri Lankan foreign ministry on Monday: “We’re here at this very momentous occasion to really reaffirm the strong support of the United States for Sri Lanka... towards this path of democracy, of good governance, of peace and of prosperity.” Washington was ready to work with Sirisena, Wickremesinghe and the government, she said.

Washington’s effusive support for the new Sri Lankan government is an unmistakable message to Rajapakse and his supporters that the US will not tolerate any attempt to upset its agenda in Sri Lanka. It is also another signal to Beijing that the US is stepping up its military encirclement of China.

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and other Tamil bourgeois and petty-bourgeois groups have slavishly swung in behind Washington, calling on it to probe Colombo’s war crimes, backing calls for an international inquiry and urging the US to support a

devolution of powers in Sri Lanka for the Tamil elite.

Biswal, however, told the media yesterday that she had discussed the war crimes issue with the TNA and asked them to work with the new government. This was underlined by US Assistant Secretary for Human rights Tom Malinowski who said, “We recognise that this process will take time. Nobody expects miracles.”

The Obama administration wants the TNA leaders to collaborate with the government to stabilise the pro-US government in Sri Lanka so as to integrate the island into its war plans against China and to impose the austerity agenda demanded by the International Monetary Fund on working people—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike.



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