

UN releases war crimes report on Sri Lanka

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17 September 2015

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein yesterday finally released the Sri Lanka war crimes investigation report prepared by his office. The nearly 300-page report declares that “serious war crimes” and “human right violations” were committed by the Sri Lankan military and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) during the island’s 26-year war.

Around 200,000 people, mainly members of the ethnic Tamil minority, were killed during the conflict that commenced in 1983. According to an earlier UN report, an estimated 40,000 Tamil civilians trapped in the war zone, were killed during the final months of the military offensive in 2009.

Yesterday’s Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Investigation on Sri Lanka (OISL) report was prepared in response to a US-sponsored resolution passed at the March 2014 session of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). The resolution had nothing to do with genuine concerns about Colombo’s human rights violations but sought to advance Washington’s strategic interests.

The US and its Western allies fully endorsed Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse’s resumption of the war in 2006. They only began to criticise his government’s human rights violations during the final months of the military onslaught, in response to China becoming Sri Lanka’s main supplier of weapons and aid.

US “human rights” posturing sought to pressure Rajapakse to end close ties with Beijing and bring Colombo into line with Washington’s “pivot” to Asia—its aggressive geo-strategic and military encirclement of China.

For the same political reasons, Washington ultimately initiated a regime-change operation to oust Rajapakse as president. This backroom campaign, which involved former President Chandrika Kumaratunga and pro-US United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, was completed with the January election of former Rajapakse government minister Maithripala Sirisena as president.

Since then, the Sirisena administration, with Wickremesinghe as prime minister, has rapidly moved Sri Lankan foreign policy toward the US and its regional partner India, while distancing the country from China. Following last month’s general election, which saw Wickremesinghe’s UNP win the highest number of parliamentary seats, the US shifted away from its previous calls for an international war crimes inquiry.

On August 26, US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Nisha Biswal announced that Washington supported a Sri Lankan domestic inquiry into war crimes. A “domestic inquiry” would provide the current government, including Sirisena and Wickremesinghe and their allies, with the opportunity to whitewash their own involvement in these crimes, while ramping up the pressure on Rajapakse, who remains in parliament and made an unsuccessful bid for the prime ministership in last month’s elections.

The OISL report confirms that brutal crimes and repression were carried out against the Tamil people. It states that “witnesses gave harrowing descriptions of the carnage, bloodshed and psychological trauma of bombardments in which entire families were killed.” It also notes that Sri Lankan security forces carried out widespread “unlawful killings” of civilians, Tamil politicians, aid workers and journalists.

During the last days of the war in 2009, the army surrounded the LTTE in a 300-square-km (115-square-mile) section of jungle in the northeast, where 250,000 people were trapped. Hospitals and humanitarian facilities in the densely-populated area were repeatedly shelled by the security forces in violation of international law.

The report also refers to the extrajudicial execution of identified LTTE cadres, including several of its leaders, who had surrendered after being assured by the government that they would not be killed.

“Although some facts remained to be established, based on witness testimony as well as photographic and video imagery, there appears to be sufficient information in several cases to indicate that they were killed after being

taken into custody,” the OISL investigation states.

After the war, hundreds of thousands of civilians were incarcerated in huge camps in Vavuniya. These people and others arrested as suspected LTTE members were subjected to torture and rape. No one was convicted, the report states.

The OISL investigation also accuses the LTTE of causing “further distress by forcing adults and children to join their ranks and fight on the front lines.” While the LTTE was responsible for anti-democratic acts and using terrorist methods, the chief responsibility for the war and its associated crimes lies with the Sinhala ruling elite in Colombo.

Although the report confirms that war crimes were committed, no perpetrator is named. The authors say it was a “human rights investigation, not a criminal investigation.”

The report calls for a “hybrid special court integrating international judges, prosecutors, lawyers and investigators” to put on trial those alleged to have committed war crimes and crimes against humanity. It proposes that “military and security force personnel and any other officials who are involved in human rights violations” be removed from their positions.

Notwithstanding what it reveals about Sri Lankan war crimes, the report and Al Hussein’s remarks echo the shift in Washington’s policy toward Colombo. “This report is being presented in a new political context in Sri Lanka, which offers ground for hope. It is crucial that this historic opportunity for truly fundamental change is not allowed to slip,” Al Hussein said in Geneva yesterday.

The OISL report’s overview states: “The Presidential election of 8 January 2015 marked a watershed in Sri Lanka’s political environment. The common opposition candidate, Maithripala Sirisena, defeated the incumbent President Rajapakse with the support of a broad coalition from all ethnic communities and across the ideological spectrum. A new Cabinet was formed with the former Opposition Leader, Ranil Wickremesinghe, as Prime Minister.”

The overview praises various constitutional amendments that it claims, “limit the powers of the executive Presidency, re-imposes Presidential term limits, and restores the Constitutional Council to recommend appointments to the judiciary and independent commissions.” These measures are not about ensuring the democratic rights of the masses, rather they constitute a political façade created by the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government to hoodwink the population.

While the OISL report will be discussed in the UNHRC on September 30, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of International Organization Affairs Erin M. Barclay said this week that Washington “will engage” with the Sri Lankan government “to develop a resolution that will gain the consensus support of this Council.” In other words, the US will work to politically protect the new regime in Colombo.

The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration responded to the OISL report with a jubilant statement. The government, it declared, “is pleased and encouraged by the High Commissioner’s recognition of the efforts of the new government since the presidential election of January 2015 in dealing with issues of concern for the people of Sri Lanka relating to human rights, rule of law, good governance, justice, institutional and legal reforms and reconciliation.”

These utterances are entirely bogus. Colombo’s ruling elites have embraced Washington’s aggressive military encirclement of China and are now preparing to implement the austerity measures, directed against the Sri Lankan masses, demanded by the International Monetary Fund.

The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government’s references to “reconciliation” mean arranging a deal with the bourgeois Tamil National Alliance (TNA) for a joint social assault on the jobs, living standards and democratic rights of the working class—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim alike. The TNA has already expressed its willingness to accommodate a US-sponsored deal with the new Colombo regime.

The UN probe into the Sri Lanka civil war is another clear demonstration of how US imperialism, which is responsible for countless war crimes, including most recently in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria, exploits bogus “human rights” campaigns to advance its strategic interests.



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