Tamil parties embrace UN report on Sri Lankan war crimes

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Tamil parties and groups in Sri Lanka and internationally have "welcomed" the September 16 report by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Investigation on Sri Lanka (OISL) on war crimes committed during the island nation's 26-year civil war.

Those backing the report include the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the Tamil National People's Front (TNPF) and the UK-based Global Tamil Forum (GTF). These formations calculate that the report can be used to reach a new political deal with the pro-US Colombo government and bolster the privileges of the Tamil elite.

The OISL investigation was initiated after a US-sponsored resolution was passed in the UN Human Rights Council in March 2014. Washington, which backed the Rajapakse government's war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), was not concerned about the democratic rights of the Tamil people. The resolution was aimed at forcing Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse to end his government's close ties with Beijing as part of the Obama administration's war preparations against China. The TNA and other Tamil parties immediately supported the UN resolution.

In August, however, the US shifted its previous call for an international war crimes investigation and endorsed Colombo's request for a domestic inquiry. The decision came in the wake of Rajapakse's ouster in the January presidential election, and his failed bid to become prime minister in parliamentary elections in August. The US shift was a vote of confidence in the new president, Maithripala Sirisena, and United National Party (UNP) Prime Minister Wickremesinghe who have moved Sri Lanka's foreign policy into line with Washington's geo-strategic moves against China.

The OISL report provides a detailed account of war crimes and human rights violations by successive Sri Lankan governments, particularly focusing on atrocities during the final months of the war in 2009 under the Rajapakse administration. Though specific figures have not been provided, the report estimates that tens of thousands of people were killed during these months.

The TNA immediately responded to last week's OISL report, welcoming the report's call for "hybrid special courts integrating international judges, lawyers, prosecutors and investigators" and the "entire gamut" of the OISL recommendations. It urged the Sri Lankan government to "accept the report and cooperate fully with the TNA and the international community in dealing with the past."

The "hybrid special courts" are political window-dressing for a domestic inquiry that will be tailored according to Washington's strategic needs. This means assisting those in the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government cover up their role in the war crimes and human rights violations.

According to the Tamil media, TNA leader R. Sambandan said that the UN report provided the prospects for "a permanent solution to the long-lasting national question in Sri Lanka." Sambandan's claim is an appeal for Colombo to accept the TNA's long-standing demand for devolution of powers to the Tamil-dominated North and East.

Every faction of the Colombo ruling elite has used anti-Tamil communalism to divide the Sri Lanka working class on ethnic lines and consistently opposed any significant concessions to the Tamil bourgeoisie.

US Secretary of State John Kerry, however, made clear to the TNA during his visit to Sri Lanka in May that it had to work with Colombo in order to achieve a power-sharing deal. Washington does not want any

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disruption of the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration which it helped bring to power.

Significantly, the TNA issued a statement declaring that it would "undertake to carry out our responsibility to lead the Tamil people in reflecting on the past," including "introspection into our own community's failures and the unspeakable crimes committed in our name." This is a thinly-veiled criticism of LTTE's atrocities during the war and for which the TNA was also responsible. Contrary to the TNA's claims, Tamil workers and poor were not to blame for the LTTE's crimes.

The anti-democratic actions of the LTTE were no accident but flowed from its separatist program which represented the interests of the Tamil elite. Organically incapable of making any appeal to the working class, the LTTE resorted to repressive methods to maintain its position in areas under its control. They promoted poisonous Tamil communalism to divide the working class and turned to various international powers, including the US and India, to back their nationalist aims.

In line with Washington's demands, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government has moved to accommodate the TNA. Sirisena has snubbed the faction of his Sri Lanka Freedom Party which attempted to claim the post of parliamentary opposition leader, thus paving the way for Sambandan to assume the position. The TNA backed the US regime-change operation that brought Sirisena to power and voiced their support for the UNP-led government.

There are some tactical differences, however, within the TNA. Suresh Premachandran, leader of TNA partner, the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), told the media that there had to be an international investigation into war crimes. He called for others inside the TNA with the same position to speak up. Like other Tamil bourgeois politicians, his appeal was directed towards the US and other international powers.

A statement from the Global Tamil Forum said it was "in full agreement with the report" and stated a "purely domestic court procedure will have no chance of overcoming widespread and justifiable suspicions fueled by decades of violations." It praised the so-called "hybrid courts." The GTF has a history of backing UK and US imperialism, previously urging support for a separate state but now calling for a compromise with Colombo.

The TNPF, which postures as a hard-line Tamil nationalist group, launched a petition campaign early this month to demand an international inquiry into war crimes. According to the TNPF, it has obtained about 150,000 signatures and sent it to the UN. However, it immediately welcomed the OISL report.

At a press conference on September 20, TNPF leader Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam praised that report but said the proposed "hybrid mechanism" was ambiguous and called for an international investigation. The TNPF calls for self-determination and a separate "traditional Tamil homeland" but appeals to the imperialist powers to achieve this demand. It seeks to divert the deep-going discontent among Tamil workers, poor and youth into the same reactionary nationalist framework that helped fuel the disastrous 26-year civil war.

None of these formations represent the interests of Tamil working class and poor but are cynically using the brutal war crimes to strike a deal with Colombo in line with US geo-strategic interests. The Tamil and Sinhala capitalist classes are united in their attempts deepen their political relations with US imperialism and take on the Sri Lankan working class as it comes into struggle against austerity measures being demanded by the International Monetary Fund.

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