

UN officials say torture is “common practice” in Sri Lanka

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Interim reports by United Nations special rapporteurs this month confirm that torture and other human rights abuses by Sri Lankan police and security forces have continued unabated since the end of the three-decade war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009.

Juan E. Mendez, the UN’s top official on torture and other cruel, inhuman treatment and punishment, and Monica Pinto, the UN special rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, released their findings at a Colombo press conference on May 7.

The reports followed a nine-day visit to Sri Lanka, during which the UN representatives met with Sri Lankan government officials, interviewed torture victims and visited prisons and detention centres. The UN rapporteurs will present full reports to the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in March and June next year, respectively.

Mendez told the press that based on testimonies he took from victims and current detainees “torture is a common practice inflicted in the course of both regular criminal and national security-related investigations...

“Severe forms of torture continue to be used, although probably less frequently [since the end of the war], while both old and new cases of torture continue to be surrounded by total impunity,” he said.

Mendez noted that between 16,000 and 22,000 people had gone missing during the war and its aftermath, describing the disappearances as the “torture of the most horrifying kind.”

The interim reports revealed that:

- * Torture and other forms of physical and mental coercion are a “routine method of work” by police investigators to obtain confessions. The abuse can include punches, slapping and blows with objects, such as batons or cricket bats, as well as suspending

handcuffed prisoners for hours, asphyxiation using plastic bags drenched in kerosene, hanging people upside down, applying chili powder to face and the eyes. Interrogators also sexually violated detainees, including genital mutilation or the application of chili paste and onions.

- * Confessions obtained under torture are used as evidence against victims.

- * The Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) has been used for arbitrary arrests and detention without trial for prolonged periods of up to 18 months. Under the PTA, “magistrates essentially rubber-stamp detention orders made by the Executive Branch and do not inquire into either conditions of detention or potential ill-treatment in interrogation.”

- * Police officers are given wide powers to routinely arrest people, with no judicial oversight of police methods.

- * No clear procedures to inform detainees that they must have access to a lawyer as soon as they are arrested.

- * Detainees are held incommunicado to prevent disclosure of where they are imprisoned.

- * There is seriously deficient prison infrastructure and severe overcrowding. This included, “acute lack of adequate sleeping accommodation, extreme heat and insufficient ventilation,” as well as limited access to medical treatment.

Mendez reported that the Vavuniya remand prison held 170 prisoners in less than 100 square metres, or 0.6 metres per person. Terrorism Investigation Division (TID) jails, he said, lacked ventilation and had only limited access to daylight. “Some inmates spend about 12 hours a day in the dark.”

Mendez and Pinto said there are long delays of trial in all cases, including those arrested for “armed conflict”

or for political reasons, with some detained for 15 years without trial.

While the interim reports provide a limited account of the ongoing human rights violations, the revelations are a damning refutation of claims by President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe that their government defends democratic rights and reveal the hypocrisy of the US, and the UN itself.

Following the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government's alignment with Washington's foreign policy aims and its "pivot" to Asia, senior US officials, including Secretary of State John Kerry, began hailing Sri Lanka as a defender of basic rights. Last month, US ambassador to UN Samantha Power declared that since January 2015 Sri Lanka has become a "global champion of human rights and democratic accountability."

These claims are blatant lies. Sirisena became the Sri Lankan president in January 2015, following a Washington instigated regime-change operation. The US seized on human right violations by former President Mahinda Rajapakse during the war against LTTE as a weapon to isolate him and rally sections of the Sri Lankan ruling elite and upper middle class to oust him.

The US had turned a blind eye as the Rajapakse government trampled on basic democratic rights, imprisoned its opponents and killed thousands of Tamil civilians during the last months of the war.

Washington only began criticising these crimes when China emerged as the main supplier of military hardware and finances to Colombo. In the UN, the US pushed through a resolution calling for an international inquiry into Sri Lankan war crimes.

These "concerns" had nothing to do with defending human rights but were to pressure Colombo into lining up with Washington's "pivot to Asia," a military agenda to encircle China.

After Sirisena was elevated into the presidency, Sri Lankan foreign policy shifted in favour of Washington and India, the US's strategic partner in the region.

Last August the US dropped its calls for an international inquiry into Sri Lankan war crimes and helped secure the passage of a resolution in the UNHRC allowing Sri Lanka to hold a so-called domestic inquiry. These manoeuvres were yet another demonstration of how US imperialism uses "human

rights" to advance its strategic interests.

Responding to the UN rapporteurs' interim reports, Sri Lankan Health Minister Rajitha Senaratne told the media that the cabinet had discussed the claims and would investigate the revelations. This, of course, will be another cover-up.

The military-police apparatus and repressive methods developed during the civil war against workers and poor, Tamil, Sinhala and Muslims alike, will be maintained. Mired in economic crisis, the government is committed to implementing the sharp austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund and will increasingly use these methods to suppress the inevitable eruption of mass opposition by workers and the poor.



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