

Sri Lankan president asks Trump to end war crime investigations

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Sri Lanka's Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government is desperately seeking the support of US President-elect Donald Trump to cover up Colombo's war crimes and prop up its continued rule.

Late last month, President Maithripala Sirisena revealed that he had written to Trump seeking his help in pressuring the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to drop war crime allegations against Sri Lanka. On December 2, Mike Pence, Trump's future vice president, phoned Sirisena during which they discussed "strengthening relations" between the two countries.

Addressing a party meeting on November 28, Sirisena declared: "I have sent a special message to US President-elect Donald Trump asking him to give us the fullest support at the UNHRC... I am asking him to help completely clear my country [of war crimes allegations] and allow us to live freely."

Sirisena said he would send a special envoy to meet the new US president and follow up his request. The Sri Lankan president admitted that he had made "a similar appeal" to the UN secretary-general-designate, Antonio Guterres, who is due to take up his post in January.

UN experts and independent bodies have estimated that tens of thousands of Tamil civilians were killed during the final weeks of the brutal military offensive against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009. Nearly 200,000 civilians perished during the almost 30-year communal civil war waged by successive Sri Lanka governments. Seven years since the conflict ended, hundreds of troops still occupy the former war zones in the north and east ruthlessly imposing Colombo's dictates on the local Tamil population.

Washington supported Colombo throughout the bloody conflict, even providing logistic support. It only began to criticise the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse during the final weeks of the war because of its close ties with China, which had become the principal provider of

financial assistance and military hardware to Colombo.

The Obama administration, which was developing its confrontational "pivot to Asia," against China, wanted Colombo to distance itself from Beijing. In an attempt to pressure Rajapakse to break these relations, the US sponsored a resolution at the UNHRC demanding an international investigation into Sri Lankan war crimes.

When Rajapakse failed to respond, the Obama administration in late 2014 supported a regime-change operation to oust Rajapakse and install Sirisena as president. This involved United National Party leader and now Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, former President Chandrika Kumaratunga along with various trade unions, civil society groups and pseudo-left organisations which painted Sirisena as a champion of "good governance."

As soon as Sirisena became president and began initiating a shift towards Washington, the US co-sponsored another UNHCR resolution, dropping demands for an international war crimes investigation and supporting a domestic inquiry instead.

The cynical manoeuvre was another example of how the US, which has waged war in country after country during the past 25 years, selectively uses "human rights" issues in order to advance its hegemonic interests.

Sirisena's efforts to persuade Trump to pressure the UN to drop all war crime allegations are aimed at appeasing the Sri Lanka military and Sinhala chauvinist groups who are hostile to any investigation of atrocities carried out during the war.

Former President Rajapakse, who backs the Sinhala communalist campaign, used the occasion of Trump's election victory to congratulate the billionaire and complain about the Obama administration's sponsorship of war crime resolutions in the UNHCR.

Rajapakse suggested the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government contact Trump over the war crime

allegations. Sinhala Buddhist chauvinist groups were also elated over Trump's election, praising his nationalist rhetoric and demanding that Colombo seek support from the new US administration.

During his election campaign, Sirisena said he would end all discrimination against minorities in Sri Lanka and promised "justice" for war victims. On becoming president, Sirisena insisted that there had been no war crimes in Sri Lanka. The Tamil National Alliance, the main Tamil bourgeois party, politically supports the Sirisena administration and remains silent over Sirisena's appeal to Trump.

It is not yet clear whether US Vice President-elect Mike Pence's phone call to Sirisena last week was in direct response to Sirisena's pleas to Trump. According to an official Sri Lankan government press release, Pence promised to "work towards arranging a visit by President Sirisena to Washington for a meeting with President-elect Donald Trump."

Other matters discussed during the call included, "[ensuring] the progress of relations between the two countries based on common values of democratic governance and Sri Lanka's strategic location in the middle of Asia." The press release also said there was discussion on "cooperation directed at securing the safety of sea lanes, countering drug smuggling and working together in disaster management as partners."

That Pence and Sirisena discussed Sri Lanka's "strategic location" and "securing the safety of sea lanes" is highly significant. Sri Lankan workers, youth and the poor must recognise the dangerous implications of these developments. Under the banner of "maritime security," Washington has expanded its naval presence in Asia as part of its preparations for war against China.

Behind the backs of the population, the Sri Lankan government hopes that its willingness to increase involvement in Washington's diplomatic and military aggression against Beijing, will encourage Trump to support the shutdown of any UNHCR investigation into Colombo's war crimes.



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