

Sri Lanka asks UN to delay human rights inquiry

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Sri Lankan foreign minister Mangala Samaraweera plans to present a resolution to the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) requesting two years to prepare a “mechanism” to investigate war crimes and human rights violations during the military offensives against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Samaraweera called on the US, the UK and Montenegro to support a joint motion to a UNHRC meeting at the end of this month. The *Asian Mirror* reported that the UK has already agreed to back the resolution.

This is another attempt by Colombo to suppress any investigation into serious allegations of abuses involving Sri Lankan security forces during the country’s 26-year communal war. According to UN estimates, more than 40,000 civilians were killed by the military during the final months of the conflict in 2009.

In October 2015, the US and Sri Lankan governments presented a resolution to the UNHRC calling for a “Sri Lankan judicial mechanism, including the Special Counsel’s Office, of Commonwealth and foreign judges” and other officials.

The US-initiated motion reflected Washington’s public support for the newly-elected president Maithripala Sirisena and a shift away from a resolution it presented in March 2014. That motion, which called for an international investigation into war crimes, was directed against former president Mahinda Rajapakse and aimed at pressuring his government to politically distance itself from Beijing.

After Sirisena was elected president in 2015, following a US-orchestrated regime-change operation, he and the new prime minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, shifted foreign policy in line with the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” against China.

The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government, which is facing an economic and political crisis, wants to delay even establishing any “judicial mechanism” to investigate the war crime allegations.

Addressing a UNHRC session on February 28, Samaraweera cynically declared that the government’s “resolve” to “bring justice to the victims of human rights violation” remained firm. Colombo, he added, was proceeding to “set our country on a transformative trajectory in terms of human rights, good governance, rule of law, justice, reconciliation and economic development.”

Samaraweera said the government, however, confronted “the forces of extremism and regression on both sides of the divide [which] are creating road blocks for narrow, short-term political gain.”

While Samaraweera did not name the “forces of extremism and regression,” former president Rajapakse, backed by various Sinhala chauvinist formations, is accusing the government of “betraying war heroes [the soldiers who fought in the war],” “giving federalism to separatists” and encouraging a “revival of LTTE separatists.”

Rajapakse, who hopes to return to power, is attempting to build a right-wing chauvinist movement by exploiting growing popular opposition to the government’s attack on living conditions and diverting it along communalist lines.

The government’s IMF-dictated austerity policies have sparked intensifying unrest among workers, students and the poor throughout Sri Lanka. In response, government politicians, led by Sirisena and Wickremesinghe, are also stepping up their communalist propaganda. They have assured the military that Colombo opposes any war crimes inquiry and is committed to defending its “war heroes.”

Sirisena told an executive committee meeting of his Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) last week he had the “backbone” to reject any foreign judicial investigation. “Two weeks ago the UN Human Rights High Commissioner in his report on Sri Lanka called for a probe by foreign judges. Within 24 hours, I rejected it saying I am not ready to bring foreign judges here,” he said.

Sirisena also told a meeting in Jaffna he would block any charges against the military. “I have clearly said that I am not prepared to serve charge sheets on our soldiers or to have foreign judges to try our security forces,” he said. “It is my duty to protect soldiers.”

Last Friday, Prime Minister Wickremesinghe told a Colombo law conference that the UNHRC demand was “not a practical proposal to set up a hybrid court. This demand came at a time when there was no international confidence in the local judiciary.”

Samaraweera’s posturing at the UNHRC about the government’s “resolve” to address disastrous conditions facing Tamils in the north and east is bogus. The military occupation in those areas continues, hundreds of political prisoners remain in jails, no action has been taken over 65,000 reported disappearances and only a small proportion of the land seized by military during the war has been returned to its owners.

At the UNHRC, Samaraweera presented proposals that the government claimed would promote “reconciliation and accountability.” They included legislation for a convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance; formulation of a policy and legal framework for the government’s proposed Counter Terrorism Act; establishment of a Permanent Office on Missing Persons; and the drafting of a new constitution.

In reality, the new counter-terrorism act will suppress basic democratic rights. Sirisena and Wickremesinghe have also assured their supporters that any new constitution will maintain the current communal discrimination, giving priority to Buddhism and the Sinhala language.

Last Friday, the UN Human Rights High Commissioner report, while voicing “satisfaction” for some improvements, criticised Sri Lanka’s “slow” progress in addressing war crimes. The UN’s criticisms are an attempt to pacify growing discontent over Colombo’s ongoing suppression of any inquiry into

war crimes and the increasingly desperate plight of war victims.

Despite the continuing suppression of democratic rights, the major imperialist powers are still promoting the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration. US deputy assistant secretary of state for international organizations affairs Erin M. Barclay told the UNHRC meeting: “When the council works as it should, its successes are victories for human rights. For example, HRC action catalysed progress for reform and provided technical assistance to improve accountability for past violations in Sri Lanka.”

Like Obama’s White House, the new Trump administration has no interest in human rights in Sri Lanka or any other country. Trump is further ramping up the geo-strategic agenda already established by Washington in South Asia as part of its preparations for war against China.

The Tamil capitalist elite, which continues to support the pro-US Colombo government, has expressed its support for the appeal to the UNHRC. Tamil National Alliance (TNA) parliamentarian M.A. Sumanthiran told a February 27 press conference his organisation had told the UNHRC and its member countries that Sri Lanka “has to be given further time.”

The government’s cynical manoeuvring over war crimes and human rights violations, is a clear warning that it is preparing to unleash more brutal attacks against the democratic rights of the working class and poor—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslims alike—in an attempt to suppress opposition to its social austerity measures.



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