

US-backed “human rights” resolution to pressure Sri Lanka to break ties with China

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Last week, a “Core Group on Sri Lanka” presented a resolution to the ongoing UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) meeting in Geneva. The resolution focuses on human rights issues, including war crimes during the 30-year civil war between the Sri Lankan military and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Entitled “Promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka,” the resolution, with any modifications, will be put to the vote in the UNHRC on March 22.

The Core Group includes the UK, Canada, Germany, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Malawi. Although Washington is not a member of the group, it was behind the resolution, having promoted it last December, following discussions with UK diplomats and Tamil groups in Sri Lanka, including the pro-US Tamil National Alliance.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken addressed the UNHRC meeting last week via video, calling for his country’s readmission to the UN body.

Blinken hypocritically declared that President Biden’s administration is “placing democracy and human rights at the centre” of its foreign policy.

“We encourage the Council to support resolutions at this session addressing issues of concern around the world, including ongoing human rights violations in Syria and North Korea, the lack of accountability for past atrocities in Sri Lanka, and the need for further investigation into the situation in South Sudan.”

US imperialism is the world’s supreme war criminal. In the last three decades alone, it has launched one war after another in the Middle East, the Balkans, Afghanistan and elsewhere, killing hundreds of thousands of innocent men, women and children.

What US Secretary of State Blinken really meant was the Biden administration, just like its predecessors, will cynically use human rights violations to bring other countries into line with Washington’s geo-strategic interests. Blinken also condemned human rights violations by China and Russia in his video address.

Blinken’s speech and the Core Group resolution have nothing to do with defending human rights in Sri Lanka but are to “persuade” President Gotabhaya Rajapakse to break relations with Beijing and fully embrace Washington’s confrontation with China.

Washington is concerned that the cash-strapped Colombo regime is becoming more dependent on Chinese investments and loans. The debt-ridden Sri Lankan economy is in unprecedented turmoil, seriously impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and confronting falling exports and the devaluation of the country’s currency.

The Core Group resolution calls for a “comprehensive accountability process for all violations and abuses of human rights committed in Sri Lanka,” including those by the LTTE. It also declares “the importance of preserving and analysing evidence relating to violations and abuses of human rights in Sri Lanka with a view to advancing accountability” by the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Such evidence would be used to “support relevant judicial proceedings” in member states of the UN, i.e., the prosecution of perpetrators of war crimes.

Although not included in the resolution, UN High Commissioner of Human Rights Michelle Bachelet’s report on Sri Lanka in January specifically referred to a failure of “accountability” and proposed referring this to the International Criminal Court. Bachelet also called for targeted sanctions, including the imposition of travel bans and freezing the assets of those “credibly accused of human rights violations” in Sri Lanka.

Addressing last week’s meeting, Bachelet offered support for judicial proceedings in other countries against “the perpetrators of grave human rights violations in Sri Lanka.”

Successive Sri Lankan governments and its military committed numerous war crimes during the 30-year war against the LTTE which began in 1983. The Sri Lankan ruling elite and the media used the LTTE’s terrorist and anti-democratic acts to cover up Colombo’s atrocities.

President Mahinda Rajapakse resumed the war in 2006 with the backing of the US and other imperialist powers, as

well as India, after a four-year fragile “ceasefire.” His brother, the then defence secretary and now president, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, supervised these bloody military operations.

In the final months of the war, around 40,000 Tamil civilians were killed, according to UN estimates, and hundreds of young people who surrendered to the military were simply “disappeared.” Washington has never been seriously concerned about these war crimes.

Colombo was heavily dependent on Beijing for financial assistance and supplies of weapons to prosecute its brutal war. The then Obama administration—with Biden as vice president—began its “pivot to Asia” to encircle and isolate China and was hostile to these relations.

Washington used the UNHRC to bring a resolution on Sri Lanka and pressure it to distance itself from Beijing. When that failed, it orchestrated a regime-change operation to oust then President Mahinda Rajapakse and to replace him with Maithripala Sirisena.

Sirisena and his prime minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, reoriented Sri Lanka’s foreign policy towards Washington and its strategic partner India. The new regime immediately began integrating the Sri Lankan military with US military planning against China. In return, Washington helped Sri Lanka suppress calls for an international war crimes probe and swung its support behind a resolution proposing a so-called “domestic judicial mechanism.”

Following the return to power of Gotabhaya Rajapakse and Mahinda Rajapakse as president and prime minister respectively in the 2019 and 2020 elections, Washington and New Delhi have consistently raised concerns about Colombo’s developing relations with Beijing.

Colombo hopes to appease Washington and New Delhi by declaring that it only has economic relations with China. The Rajapakse regime, however, is heavily dependent on the military to bolster its autocratic rule and vowed to protect it from any war crime investigations.

Addressing the UNHRC last week, Sri Lankan Foreign Affairs Minister Dinesh Gunawardena rejected Bachelet’s report. “The recommendations and conclusions [in the report],” he declared, “reflect the preconceived, politicised and prejudicial agenda which certain elements have relentlessly pursued against Sri Lanka.”

While Gunawardena said nothing about on the Core Group resolution, President Rajapakse wrote to UNHRC member countries seeking their support for Sri Lanka. The diplomatic battle unfolding in the UNHRC over the resolution on Sri Lanka underscores the deepening geopolitical tensions between the US on one side and China and Russia on the other.

China’s Permanent Representative in Geneva Ambassador

Chen Xu commended Sri Lanka for its “efforts to actively promote and protect human rights, advance sustainable economic and social development, improve people’s living standard, protect the rights of the vulnerable groups, advance national reconciliation and combat terrorism.”

Without naming any country, Chen said that China opposes the “politicisation and double standards on human rights, as well as using human rights as an excuse in interfering in other countries’ internal affairs.”

China is keen to maintain—and bolster—its influence in Colombo as part of its efforts to counter US threats and in doing so has no concerns about human rights violations in Sri Lanka. Russia’s UNHRC envoy made similar statements opposing any interference in “Sri Lanka’s internal affairs.”

Because of its regional and global influence, Colombo is eager to win Indian support and defeat the UNHRC resolution. But like Washington, New Delhi is hostile to Rajapakse’s relations with China and in 2015, backed the US regime-change operation to remove Mahinda Rajapakse as president.

Last month, however, Colombo angered New Delhi by reneging on an agreement to hand over Colombo Port’s Eastern Terminal as a joint venture amid growing opposition among workers against the privatisation of state-owned assets.

Extreme-right nationalist elements that support the Rajapakse regime also whipped up an anti-Indian campaign against the agreement. Keen to secure a foothold in the strategically-located port, India blamed China, claiming it was behind this campaign to repudiate the agreement.

Without taking a position on the Core Group resolution Mani Pandey, India’s envoy to the UN, said his country supports “the aspirations” of the Tamil minority. He called on Colombo to take the necessary steps for “reconciliation,” and implement the 13th amendment to the constitution of Sri Lanka—a power-sharing arrangement with the Tamil elite. While Colombo is averse to any such power-sharing arrangement, India has continuously used the Tamil capitalist parties in Sri Lanka to pressure successive governments.

The escalating efforts to bring Sri Lanka into line point to the advanced nature of US war planning against China. Washington is making clear to the Rajapakse regime that it must end its political balancing act and fully align itself with US imperialism’s war preparations.



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