

US-backed UNHRC resolution puts Sri Lanka on notice

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On Tuesday, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) passed a new resolution on Sri Lanka and called on the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to monitor human rights violations in the country.

The resolution was presented by the UNHRC's "Core Group on Sri Lanka," whose members include the UK, Canada, Germany, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Malawi. The US State Department issued a statement declaring that it was a co-sponsor.

Entitled "Promoting reconciliation, accountability, and human rights in Sri Lanka," the purpose of the resolution is to pressure President Gotabaya Rajapakse's government to break relations with China and more actively integrate with Washington's military-strategic preparations against China. The resolution was supported by 22 countries, with 11 in opposition and 14 abstentions.

Senior Sri Lankan leaders, including President Rajapakse himself, heavily lobbied the UNHRC members to oppose the resolution. The US and UK intensely campaigned to isolate and reduce support for Colombo. The media reported that it was the lowest number of votes for Sri Lanka, when similar UNHRC resolutions were first moved against the country.

Washington backed a 2009 resolution a month after Colombo's ended its bloody war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and sponsored all UNHRC resolutions on Sri Lanka between 2012 and 2017.

This week's 16-point resolution called for the devolution of power, protection of human rights, and a "review" of the prevention of terrorism act, accountability, respect of religious freedoms and protection human rights defenders. It also expressed concerns about militarisation of the civilian

government.

In formulating the resolution, its sponsors have cynically exploited the anti-democratic measures of the Colombo government. Accountability is a reference to the crimes committed during the final months of the war against the LTTE when at least 40,000 civilians were killed, including surrendering LTTE leaders. The Tamil population has continuously demanded Colombo provide information about the hundreds of young men disappeared after surrendering to the army.

In recent months, the Rajapakse regime has inflamed anti-Islamic sentiment and alienated the community with the forcible cremation of Muslims killed by COVID-19. It has also stepped up the militarisation of his administration with the elevation of retired generals into key government positions.

Significantly, the resolution calls on the OHCHR "to collect, consolidate, analyse and preserve information and evidence and to develop possible strategies for future accountability processes for gross violations of human rights or serious violations of international humanitarian law in Sri Lanka to advocate for victims and survivors, and to support relevant judicial and other proceedings including in Member States with competent jurisdiction."

According to media reports, establishment of a relevant database for "future accountability processes" would cost \$US2.8 million over an 18-month period. The body would be staffed by 12 personnel, including three legal advisors, two analysts, two investigators and human rights officers. It is the first time a UNHRC resolution has outlined specific measures for an international intervention in Sri Lanka.

Concerns about war crimes, suppression of democratic rights and militarisation of the government by sponsors of the UNHCR resolution are utterly

hypocritical.

In the last three decades alone, the US, UK, Canada and Germany have unleashed neo-colonial military interventions killing hundreds of thousands of people and committing countless war crimes.

The ruling elites in these imperialist countries have responded to the economic and social crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic by promoting extreme right-wing and fascist forces. A sharp expression of this extreme-rightward turn was the Trump-led fascist coup attempt in Washington on January 6.

The UNHCR resolution has nothing to do with exposing war crimes or defending human rights but is another expression of intense US efforts to undercut Beijing's influence in the region by putting Colombo on notice over its relations with Beijing.

The US and its strategic ally India are concerned about the Rajapakse government's increasing financial dependence on Beijing. Teetering on the brink of default, the cash-strapped government last week obtained a \$1.5 billion swap loan from People's Bank of China to boost its falling foreign reserves.

In 2015, Washington orchestrated a regime-change operation against former President Mahinda Rajapakse, the brother of the current president, after "human rights" resolutions at the UNHCR failed to persuade Colombo to distance itself from Beijing.

Last week, Beijing, well aware of Washington's political manoeuvres, campaigned against the UNHCR resolution on Sri Lanka. China's envoy in Geneva urged UNHCR members to oppose the resolution and condemned the "double standards and politicisation of human rights." He called on the UN body to "promote and protect human rights through genuine dialogue and cooperation" and "respect the sovereignty and independence" of other countries.

President Rajapakse spoke to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, appealing to him to oppose the resolution. India, however, abstained on the UNHCR vote. New Delhi maintains close contact with the Tamil nationalist parties in Sri Lanka who are pressuring Colombo for a power-sharing arrangement.

Pawankumar Badhe, India's envoy in Geneva, called on Colombo "to address the aspiration of Tamil community... [and] engage constructively with the international community to ensure that the fundamental freedoms and human rights of all its citizens."

Addressing parliament on Thursday, Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Dinesh Gunawardena ludicrously declared that the resolution "will have an adverse effect on the ongoing efforts to maintain peace, reconciliation and economic development in the country."

Conscious that Colombo is under immense pressure from Washington, he insisted, however, that "Sri Lanka will continue to engage constructively with the UN and its agencies in the same spirit of cooperation..."

Sajith Premadasa, leader of Samagi Jana Balavegaya, the main opposition party, told parliament that the reason the UNHCR resolution had been passed was "because the government has adopted policies that have led to disunity and mistrust among different communities in the country." In the same breath, Premadasa declared that his party "is willing to support the government to take forward a domestic mechanism."

Leading Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) member Bimal Ratnayake said that the government "has betrayed the country for its vicious and dictatorial power. Even now we should admit our mistakes without being conceited. We urge the government to respect human rights, abolish the 20th amendment to the Constitution, stop militarisation and we will win at the UNHCR next time."

These organisations have consistently downplayed the geo-strategic issues underpinning the UNHCR resolution. The SJB leadership, previously in the United National Party, and the JVP fully backed the war and deny that the military committed any war crimes. Like Rajapakse's ruling party, they depend on the military and know that it will be needed to defend the ruling elite against the mass eruption of social tensions.

The UNHCR resolution is not just about Sri Lanka but is another indication of the intense pressure being exerted by Washington on its allies in preparation for US-led military operations against China. A war between these nuclear-armed nations would rapidly escalate into a catastrophic global conflagration.



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