

UNHRC session pushes for implementation of US-backed human rights resolution on Sri Lanka

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During the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) sessions this month, High Commissioner Michelle Bachelet, UK envoy to the UN Simon Manley and the EU delegation insisted on the implementation of a human rights resolution on Sri Lanka previously adopted at its meeting in March.

Backed by the US, the resolution was presented by the Core Group on Sri Lanka, which includes the UK, Canada, Germany, North Macedonia, Malawi and Montenegro. It called for the devolution of power to the Tamil elite, protection of human rights, a “review” of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), accountability, respect of religious freedoms and protection of human rights defenders.

Sri Lankan governments have a grave record of human rights violations and attacks on democratic rights, which has intensified under President Gotabhaya Rajapakse. The real purpose of the resolution, however, is to pressure Sri Lanka to break from Beijing and fully align itself with Washington’s military-strategic build up in the Indo-Pacific against China.

In a speech on September 13, Bachelet said that “militarisation and the lack of accountability” in Sri Lanka continues to have a “corrosive effect on fundamental rights.” She referred to the recent declaration of a state of emergency in Sri Lanka, draft regulations on civil society groups, numerous examples of arbitrary arrests and detention, and ongoing government interference in judicial processes.

Her office, Bachelet continued, had developed an information and evidence repository with nearly 120,000 individual items on Sri Lanka and urged UNHRC member states to provide the necessary funds to fully implement the March resolution. It would “collect, consolidate, analyse and preserve information and evidence” for future accountability processes in Sri Lanka, to help victims and survivors and investigations by UNHRC judicial proceedings, she said.

It was the first time a UN body outlined specific measures for an international intervention into Sri Lanka. Manley and

the EU delegation called on Sri Lanka to “cooperate fully with the High Commissioner.”

The UNHRC previously focused on crimes committed by Sri Lankan armed forces during the final months of Sri Lanka’s communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). This has now been expanded to include the anti-democratic measures implemented by the current Rajapakse government.

Since coming to power in November 2019, President Gotabhaya Rajapakse has militarised key parts of his administration by plugging in-service and retired senior military officers into key state posts. Repressive legislation, such as the PTA has been invoked to arbitrarily arrest and detain Muslim political leaders, activists, artists and writers.

So-called “de-radicalisation regulations” were also added to the PTA in March. The laws proscribe 300 Tamil and Muslim groups and individuals allegedly “linked to terrorism.” On August 30, Rajapakse declared a wartime-style state of emergency, under the guise of ensuring food security.

Government intrusions into the judicial process have become rampant, with legal proceeding against war crime perpetrators called off. This includes the indictment of former navy commander Wasantha Karannagoda for the “disappearances” of 11 young men during 2008–2009.

Concerns about the unrelenting erosion of democracy and basic rights in Sri Lanka, however, is not the driving force behind the “human rights” campaigns of the US and other Western powers. These powers all backed the bloody communal war which ended in May 2009 with the military defeat of the LTTE. The UN has estimated that over 40,000 civilians were killed during the final months of the conflict. Hundreds of young persons who surrendered to the army simply disappeared and several LTTE leaders were killed.

The human rights posturing of the US, UK and other imperialist powers, given their horrific war crimes record in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other places over the last three

decades alone, is completely bogus. Great power pressure on Sri Lanka is aimed at forcing Colombo to break with Beijing and for the Rajapakse regime to fully commit to Washington's escalating war preparations against China.

In the last years of the war, President Mahinda Rajapakse, the current president's brother, developed close economic ties with China in order to obtain financial assistance and military hardware. Washington, which at that time was developing its "pivot to Asia" to diplomatically isolate Beijing and encircle it militarily, was thoroughly hostile to Colombo's relations with China. It sponsored several UNHRC war crimes resolutions to pressure Colombo to fully endorse the US geo-strategic agenda.

Finally, in 2015, Washington orchestrated a regime-change operation to oust President Mahinda Rajapakse and replace him with the pro-US Maithripala Sirisena. Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe shifted the country's foreign policy in favour of Washington and closely integrated the military with the US Indo-Pacific Command.

Since coming to power in November 2019, however, current President Rajapakse and his cash-strapped government has increasingly turned to Beijing for financial assistance. Battered by the global COVID-19 pandemic, the Sri Lankan economy confronts an unprecedented crisis.

Colombo's inauguration of the Beijing-funded Colombo Port City (CPC), built on reclaimed seafront land, has particularly angered the US, and its strategic ally India. China regards the CPC as a important component in its strategic Belt and Road Initiative to counter US threats, defend its investments and protect its vital trade routes through the Indian Ocean.

Deep trepidation now grips Sri Lankan ruling circles over the UNHRC human rights resolution.

Addressing the current UNHRC session on September 14, Sri Lanka's foreign minister G. L. Peiris desperately tried to convince attendees that Sri Lanka was well on the way to meet its human rights commitments. He claimed that the Office of Missing Persons (OMP) was smoothly functioning and the reconciliation process proceeding.

The OMP, a toothless body established by the previous government in 2018, is supposed to be collecting information about persons who went missing during the war. Nothing has come out of its so-called investigations. The reconciliation process is code for power-sharing arrangements with Tamil elite. The Sri Lankan ruling elite and its Sinhala-Buddhist constituency are averse to any such devolution of powers.

During his speech, Peiris also questioned the need for "external initiatives" on human rights investigations. The Rajapakse government, which depends on military support, opposes war crime investigations. Any such probe would

rapidly implicate the president, who was defence secretary during the final stages of the war. In fact, every faction of the Sri Lankan ruling elite depends on the military's support.

Sri Lankan ruling class concerns are also reflected in media coverage of the UNHRC session. An editorial in the *Sunday Times* entitled "Paying a heavy price in Geneva," for example, slammed the government for "abysmally failing in Preventive Diplomacy." Translated into plain English, the newspaper's main concern is the Rajapakse government is not doing enough to appease Washington.

Prior to the UNHRC session, US diplomats in Colombo sought the support of the bourgeois Tamil parties, and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) in particular. Its leaders held several talks with the US ambassador in July and August. The Tamil elites back the US geopolitical moves against China in the hope that Washington will force Colombo to grant them some increased power and privileges.

Notwithstanding his rabidly nationalist rhetoric, Rajapakse has been desperately scrambling to accommodate Washington's pressure while maintaining his balancing act with Beijing. He has not ended Sri Lankan military ties with the Indo-Pacific Command and this week signed an agreement to sell 40 percent of the state-owned Kerawalapitiya West Coast Power Plant to the US-owned New Fortress Energy Company. The company has also obtained rights to develop a new offshore liquefied natural gas terminal that will supply Sri Lanka. Land has also reportedly been provided for US investments.

Rajapakse's attempts to balance between Beijing and Washington will be shattered as US imperialism steps up war plans against China. The room for manoeuvre was further undermined last week with the AUKUS military agreement between the US, UK and Australia and directed against China. The deal includes the provision of nuclear submarines to Australia "to more efficiently patrol off the coast of China."



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