

Sri Lanka: Jaffna University Student Union's silence on Gaza war

Naveen Dewage
20 February 2024

Millions of workers and youth around the world, horrified at Israel's genocidal war in Gaza have protested week after week since October 7 demanding an end to the conflict. More than 29,000 people, including many women and children, have been massacred. Hospitals, schools and other infrastructure facilities have been destroyed.

The Israeli military has blocked essential supplies of food, water, fuel, medical care and electricity resulting in widespread starvation, disease and further deaths. Now it is preparing a murderous land offensive into Rafah where 1.5 million Palestinians have been driven, living in atrocious conditions.

The US, along with all the imperialist powers, has backed the Israeli regime's barbaric war to the hilt, politically and materially, with large supplies of arms.

Unsurprisingly the Sri Lankan government of President Ranil Wickremesinghe, along with the opposition Samagi Jana Balawegay, has lined up with Israel parroting the US denunciations of Hamas. The opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna has declared that it does not "take sides" in the conflict, effectively lining up with the oppressor, Israel, against the oppressed Palestinians.

What is the attitude of the Jaffna University Student Union (JUSU) to one of the greatest crimes in history: silence!

Asked by the *World Socialist Web Site*, JUSU leader K. Thavarakan did not mince words. "We do not care about international developments. We do care only about our problems, Tamil people's problems," he said. In other words, "We don't care what is happening in Gaza."

During a campaign by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at Jaffna University, a JUSU council member bluntly declared: "There is a wide global protest movement supporting Palestinians now, but when the Sri Lankan government was massacring Tamils during the war there was no such a global movement to support us?"

The cynicism involved in these remarks is staggering.

There are clear parallels between Israel's genocide of Palestinians and the slaughter carried out by the Sri Lankan military against Tamils in the final months of its bloody war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in 2009.

After the fall of LTTE-controlled Kilinochchi, Elephant Pass

and Mullaitivu by January 2009, the Sri Lankan army drove the remaining LTTE forces and nearly half a million Tamil civilians into an ever-shrinking pocket of land on the northeastern coastline.

Civilians were subject to relentless artillery and aerial bombardment. The Defence Ministry announced "no fire zones" where people would be safe but then bombed these areas. On February 1, the army shelled the Puthukkudiyiruppu hospital within a so-called "no fire zone," killing nine people and injuring another 20.

On February 6, the Ponnambalam Memorial Hospital in the same town was also hit, killing around 75 people. The following day, the Air Force, in a manner similar to the Israelis, justified this war crime by falsely claiming that the hospital was the hideout of an LTTE leader, Soosai.

Human Rights Watch documented 30 attacks on health facilities in the war zone from December 2008 on. Just as the Israeli military is seeking to starve the Palestinian population, Sri Lankan forces severely restricted supplies to Tamil civilians trapped in the war zone.

The war ended on May 18, 2009 after the final collapse of LTTE military forces. Surrendering LTTE leaders were murdered by Sri Lankan troops. Some 300,000 Tamil civilians were sent into military-controlled concentration detention camps set up in Vavuniya. Around 11,000 people, mainly youth, were taken to secret "rehabilitation centers." Many simply "disappeared."

The Colombo government dishonestly denied any atrocities, flatly declaring that no civilians had been killed. The UN, however, estimated that 40,000 Tamil civilians had been massacred in the final weeks of the war alone.

Undoubtedly among Tamil youth and workers today there is considerable sympathy for the plight of the oppressed Palestinians. Among student leaders at Jaffna University there is none.

Moreover, it is simply false that there were no global protests in 2009 against the brutal onslaught against Tamils in Sri Lanka. Demonstrations erupted in Toronto, Paris, London and Berlin against the humanitarian disaster in Sri Lanka.

However, while the protests expressed widespread anger against Colombo's racist war, the Tamil parties and

organisations that dominated the demonstrations limited the demands to calling for the Western powers and India to intervene and to stop it. Appealing to the very powers that were backing Colombo's brutal military offensive was completely futile.

The JUSU's silence on the Palestinian genocide is a product of the pro-imperialist politics of the Tamil parties with which it has close ties. All of them plead with the "international community"—above all the United States—to pressure the Colombo government for a power-sharing deal to enhance the power and privileges of the Tamil elites in the North and East of the island.

All of these Tamil parties have taken a similar stance to the JUSU on Gaza, not wanting to offend Washington and New Delhi.

Illankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK) spokesman M.A. Sumanthiran issued a token protest note via Twitter when the Israeli military attacked the Al-Ahli Arab hospital in Gaza on October 18. Two days later, he issued an empty appeal in parliament to "let peace prevail in the region."

Tamil National People's Front (TNPFF) leader Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam, speaking in the parliament on October 20, declared that Israel was carrying out "genocide" and vaguely referred to the situation facing Tamils in 2009, but he did not call for an end to the war.

All Tamil parties defend the Zionist state of Israel arbitrarily formed by the imperialist powers following World War II at the expense of the Palestinian people. Most significantly, they have nothing to say about the support of the US and European powers for Israel and its slaughter in Gaza.

After the end of the war, the US began to raise concerns about "human rights" in Sri Lanka, not out of any concern for the democratic rights of workers and youth—Tamil, Sinhala or Muslim—but to pressure the Colombo government to sever its ties with China. The Tamil parties followed suit, lining up with the US-led preparations for war with China.

The JUSU also fell into line. In a report in September 2022, it promoted the fraud that the "UK, India, America and Germany are working together to support Tamil people." At the same time, it lambasted China for supporting Colombo in undermining Tamils' rights, claiming that Beijing was trying to dominate Sri Lanka.

The JUSU's silence on the massacres taking place in Gaza is an indictment of Tamil nationalist politics. Those who do not defend the rights of workers and youth in every country do not defend the rights of those who they call "our people." The JUSU and the Tamil parties that prostrate themselves before imperialism only care about the wealth and privileges of the Tamil bourgeoisie.

A WSWs International Editorial Board statement written in February 2009 as the Sri Lankan army intensified its brutal offensives highlighted the bankrupt nationalist perspective of the Tamil elites, stating:

The pro-Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam web site *Puthinam* published an article on February 1 titled, "India, India and everything is India." It argued pathetically, "Our demonstrations in front of the White House, Downing Street, streets of Ottawa and the streets of other Western capitals would only create inconvenience to the respective governments," and urged: "Though they couldn't do anything now, we need the support of the Western states later so we should not trouble them..."

The *Puthinam* article speaks volumes about Tamil nationalist politics which is always oriented to the imperialist powers and India as their saviours. It called on the Tamil diaspora not to "embarrass" their imperialist masters but to serve them and seek their support. That is exactly what they are doing today: not embarrassing US imperialism over its support for Israeli genocide in the futile hope that a few crumbs will pass their way.

The IEB statement explained, "the allies of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka and in the diaspora in the imperialist countries are the working class. It is the only social force with the power and whose class interests lie in ending the war, overthrowing the Sri Lankan bourgeois state, and ensuring the democratic rights of the Tamil population, as part of the struggle against the imperialist world order."

Workers and young people today in Sri Lanka, the Middle East and around the world need to draw the necessary political lessons from the bloody conclusion to the protracted communal war in Sri Lanka. Basic democratic and social rights cannot be defended in Gaza, Sri Lanka or anywhere else by pleading with imperialism. Rather the orientation must be to building a unified movement of the international working class against imperialism on the basis of a socialist perspective to put an end to capitalism.

Above all, this means a rejection of all forms of nationalism and communalism, which serve to divide workers on the basis of race, religion or ethnicity. The Tamil nationalism espoused by the JUSU and Tamil bourgeois parties, like the Sinhala chauvinism of the Colombo political establishment, has proven to be a disaster for the working class.

We urge Tamil, Muslim and Sinhala workers and youth to join us in opposing the US-backed genocide by the Zionist regime against Palestinians and help build an international movement of the working class to end imperialist oppression and the drive toward world war.



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