

Sri Lankan government rejects UNHRC resolution for inquiry into war crimes

Wimal Perera
15 October 2024

The UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) adopted a resolution on Sri Lanka on October 9, extending the mandate of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) by one year to monitor international scrutiny on “human rights concerns” in Sri Lanka.

The resolution, first passed in October 2022, was supported by an extensive report titled “Situation of human rights in Sri Lanka.” Its rejection by the government of newly-elected President Anura Dissanayake signifies a continuation of the policy of successive Colombo regimes in denying the war crimes committed by the Sri Lankan military in the communal war against the separatist Liberation of Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

In the final months of the war which ended in May 2009, the UN estimates that at least 40,000 Tamil civilians were slaughtered by the military’s indiscriminate bombardment including of hospitals and so-called safe zones. Thousands more who surrendered to the military were simply “disappeared.” A number of LTTE leaders bearing white flags were murdered in cold blood.

Other human rights violations include arbitrary arrests and suppression of freedom of expression during the conflict and 15 years since the end of war by military and the police. The latest situation report prepared by the UN Human Rights High Commissioner includes instances of custodial deaths, impunity for the security forces and corruption.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) led by Dissanayake has opposed all UNHRC resolutions since 2011, based on the lie that the Sri Lankan military forces did not commit any war crimes or human rights violations and branding the LTTE as “terrorists” that wanted to divide the country. The JVP has criticised

past governments for appointing committees to “investigate” human rights violations.

The JVP’s opposition to any war crimes investigation flows from the Sinhala chauvinist politics on which it was founded. The party has been an ardent supporter of the anti-Tamil war since it erupted in 1983 and criticised governments for not being aggressive enough in defeating the LTTE.

Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath told the media that the three-person Cabinet had approved a proposal rejecting the resolution. “Our [presidential election] manifesto contains very progressive human rights protection mechanisms. However, we need more time to carry out that task,” he claimed.

Speaking at the UNHRC session, Sri Lanka’s permanent envoy to the UN in Geneva, Himali Arunatilaka, claimed that the proposal to set up an “external evidence gathering mechanism” was “an unprecedented and ad hoc expansion of the Council’s mandate” and contradicted its founding principles.

Arunatilaka falsely sought to portray the new government to be formed by the JVP and its electoral front, the National People Power (NPP), after the November 14 parliamentary elections as more democratic and humane. President Dissanayake, she said, had already directed the “redoubling of investigations into a number of clearly identified accountability cases.”

One such investigation ordered by Dissanayake is the fresh probe announced into the 2019 Easter Sunday terrorist attack carried out by Islamist extremists, which clearly has nothing to do with the war crimes carried out by the military during the 26-year war against the LTTE.

On the eve of the presidential election, Dissanayake ruled out any war crime investigation and holding those

responsible to account. Interviewed by Associated Press on August 27, the JVP leader said he “will not seek to punish anyone accused of rights violations and war crimes...”

“On the question of accountability, it should not be in a way to take revenge, not in a way to accuse someone, but only to find out the truth... Even the victims do not expect anyone to be punished. They only want to know what happened.”

In reality, for the past 15 years, relatives of the “disappeared” have demanded to know what happened to their loved ones and that those responsible be charged and tried.

The JVP/NPP, like the Colombo political establishment as a whole, has close ties to the security forces. As part of the NPP, it has established a group of retired military and police officers—the Retired Tri-forces Collective—that no doubt includes individuals associated with war crimes and other human rights abuses.

The US and its allies were among the countries backing the latest UNHRC resolution and has supported previous ones. Washington has cynically exploited the issue of human right violations in Sri Lanka to pressure successive Colombo regimes to line up behind its war preparations against China.

The US backed the reactionary anti-Tamil communal war and turned a blind eye to the atrocities being carried out by the Sri Lankan military. Only after the defeat of the LTTE did Washington start to raise questions about war crimes and support international investigations. It did so as a means to pressure governments to realign their foreign policy away from Beijing.

US posturing on defending “human rights” is sheer hypocrisy. Washington is the chief backer and funder of the Israel-led genocide in Gaza in which at least 40,000 Palestinians have been killed, and over 186,000 according to an estimate published in the *Lancet*.

To apply pressure on Colombo, the US government has imposed limited sanctions on the chief of army staff, Lieutenant General Shavendra Silva, in early 2020, and in 2022 on Prabath Bulathwatte, former head of the army’s clandestine “Tripoli Platoon,” notorious for torture. In 2021, the Washington listed naval officer Chandana Hettiarachchi and army staff sergeant Sunil Ratnayake for travel bans.

President Dissanayake has already signalled his willingness to line up with US imperialism against China. The JVP/NPP offered its assurances in a series of meetings over the past two years with the US ambassador to Colombo, Julie Chung.

Responding to US President Biden’s message of congratulations on his election win, Dissanayake declared his government’s readiness to “working closely with the US for strengthening our long-standing friendly relations.”

Washington clearly will be wanting not just words, but tangible actions from the JVP/NPP government and human rights abuses are one means of pressuring it into line if necessary. While the issue remains low-key at present, the US and its allies can quickly turn it into a full-throated denunciation and demands for an international investigation under the UNHRC resolution.

For the families of the countless victims of human rights abuses in Sri Lanka, neither US imperialism nor the UN will provide any justice. Nor indeed will the various Tamil bourgeois parties in Sri Lanka that appeal to the “international community”—that is, the imperialist powers—to pressure Colombo for greater powers and privileges for the Tamil elites.

The Socialist Equality Party, which is standing in the November 14 general election, insists that only an independent, unified movement of workers—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—fighting for a workers’ and peasants’ government and socialist policies can address the many outstanding issues of democratic rights and bring those responsible for war crimes to justice.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact