

Sri Lankan foreign minister opposes United Nations HRC investigation into human rights abuses

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Addressing the 60th regular session of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) on September 8, Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath declared that Colombo was “opposed to any external mechanism imposed on the country, such as the Sri Lanka Accountability Project.”

Herath was responding to a key recommendation in the Council’s recent 16-page report on Sri Lanka. Issued on August 12, the report, titled *Situation of Human Rights in Sri Lanka*, calls for the establishment of an “international mechanism” to investigate war crimes and human rights violations in Sri Lanka.

Herath dismissed this demand, claiming that the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People’s Power (JVP/NPP) government, led by President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, had made “progress” on human rights and national reconciliation within its first year in office. In reality, the so-called reforms are nothing more than window dressing.

On September 10, the Sri Lanka Core Group—comprising Canada, Malawi, Montenegro, North Macedonia and the United Kingdom—formally tabled a resolution titled *Promoting Reconciliation, Accountability and Human Rights in Sri Lanka* at the UNHRC.

It seeks to extend the mandate of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to continue monitoring and reporting on Sri Lanka’s human rights situation. It also calls for oral and written updates at future UNHRC sessions, culminating in a comprehensive report at the Council’s 66th session.

The August 12 report reviews the human rights situation in Sri Lanka up to July 2025. It covers nearly the entire first year of the JVP/NPP government since the previous resolution was passed.

The report follows UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk’s trip to Sri Lanka from June 23 to 26. During his visit, Türk met President Dissanayake and other political leaders, and travelled to war-torn Jaffna, where he spoke with Tamil party leaders and relatives of war-affected individuals.

Contrary to Herath’s claims of progress, the UNHRC report documents widespread human rights violations under the Dissanayake administration, including:

- Routine use of torture and ill-treatment, particularly in detention facilities.

- Multiple custodial deaths, allegedly due to torture or ill-treatment. According to government figures, 13 custodial deaths occurred since 2024.

- Lack of effective investigations into custodial deaths, prison deaths, and arbitrary arrests during drug raids.

- Ongoing use of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), leading to arbitrary arrests and prolonged detention without charge or trial. As of May 23, 2025, 49 people had been arrested under the PTA. (During the 2024 presidential and national elections the JVP/NPP falsely claimed it would abolish the PTA.)

- Restrictive legal framework created by the combined effect of the PTA and the Online Safety Act, limiting freedom of opinion and expression.

- Targeted arrests of individuals, mainly from Tamil and Muslim communities, for participating in memorialisation events or protests.

The report also highlights surveillance, intimidation, and harassment, especially in the North and East, and the targeting of families of the disappeared, community leaders and human rights activists. Longstanding land disputes with the military and state agencies also remain unresolved.

The UN high commissioner called for broad-ranging reforms by the Sri Lankan government and the “international community”—i.e., the imperialist powers—including accession to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court to enable so-called transitional justice.

Other measures include a moratorium on the PTA and the repeal of other repressive laws, such as the Online Safety Act; reduced military involvement in civilian affairs, and fair resolution of land disputes. The high commissioner also urged continued OHCHR monitoring, legal reforms, targeted sanctions and prosecutions under universal jurisdiction.

US-sponsored UNHRC resolutions on war crimes and human rights violations in Sri Lanka since 2011 have not been driven by genuine concern for the rights of oppressed Tamils, Muslims or the working class. For nearly three decades, the US and its allies supported successive Sri Lankan governments in their war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

In the final months of the war, which ended in May 2009, the US and its allies began raising concerns about war crimes—mainly as a geopolitical manoeuvre to pressure then-President Mahinda

Rajapakse to distance himself from China.

When that failed, the US backed a regime-change operation—with Indian support—to replace Rajapakse with Maithripala Sirisena in the 2015 presidential election. Sirisena’s government, alongside Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, realigned Sri Lanka’s foreign policy toward Washington. The current JVP/NPP government continues this pro-US orientation, deepening Sri Lanka’s integration into the US-India war drive against China.

Although the US, under President Donald Trump, has withdrawn from the UNHRC, pressure on Sri Lanka continues via other major powers. This posturing has nothing to do with exposing war crimes or defending human rights.

The JVP/NPP government’s opposition to international accountability, however, is not based on opposition to imperialist interference.

President Dissanayake has welcomed senior US and Indian officials to Colombo, including Admiral Steve Koehler, commander of the US Pacific Fleet, and Donald Lu, US assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asia. In April, during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Colombo, the JVP/NPP government signed the first-ever formal defense agreement with India.

The real reason behind its rejection of an international mechanism lies in the JVP’s Sinhala chauvinist politics.

A ruthless proponent of Sinhala supremacism, the JVP from the outset supported Colombo’s communal war against the LTTE, becoming political cheerleaders for the military during the almost 30-year war.

The JVP participated in governments that prosecuted the war and was notorious for its extrajudicial violence against opponents of its militarism and anti-Tamil chauvinism, including the use of political assassination.

Like previous regimes, the JVP relies heavily on the military to maintain power and continues to deny the war crimes. During last year’s elections it formed a so-called Three Armed Forces Collective whose members include majors and other senior officers who led the communal war.

A previous UN investigation estimated that about 40,000 Tamil civilians were killed in the final weeks of the war, many by indiscriminate military fire. Some who surrendered were disappeared while others, including LTTE leaders waving white flags, were executed.

Attempting to save face, Foreign Minister Herath cited a series of cosmetic measures by the Dissanayake administration as proof of “progress.” They include the formation of a committee to propose the repeal or replacement of the PTA; proposals to amend the Online Safety Act; recognition of Tamil plantation workers as a distinct community, and the “strengthening” of domestic reconciliation mechanisms, including the Office on Missing Persons (OMP).

These are recycled promises from previous regimes. For example, the OMP was established in 2018 to investigate disappearances. It collected some data, but no meaningful action was taken. Past governments proposed paying compensation to families of the disappeared, a move rejected by Tamil

communities seeking justice—not handouts.

The Tamil bourgeois parties have seized on the UNHRC report to further their pro-imperialist agenda, calling on the US and India to pressure Colombo for justice.

On August 4, four days before the report’s release, a coalition of Tamil political parties and over 100 civil society groups urged the UNHRC to refer Sri Lanka to the International Criminal Court. Signatories included the Tamil National People’s Front (TNPF), Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO), Democratic Tamil National Alliance (DTNA), Tamil National Green Organisation, and others.

On September 9, the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Katchchi (ITAK) condemned the continued use of the PTA. Colombo’s *Daily Mirror* reported ITAK leaders stating that victims “were left with no choice but to seek international assistance.” In the same breath, ITAK welcomed India’s support for devolution, equality, and early provincial council elections.

These parties are not fighting for genuine democratic rights but rather external support from imperialist powers in exchange for limited power devolution. They are fully aligned with the government’s IMF-backed austerity agenda, which has devastated working people.

Tamil workers and oppressed people can secure their rights neither through the Tamil bourgeois parties, nor by appealing to the Sri Lankan government or imperialist powers, all of whom are violators of human rights. The Modi regime in India is itself trampling on the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, as part of a broader offensive on civil liberties.

That is why the Socialist Equality Party is fighting to build an independent political movement of the working class, uniting Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers across communal lines.

This movement must be based on the fight to overthrow capitalist rule and establishment of a United Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Tamil Eelam, as part of the broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally. Only through this path can democratic rights be secured for the Tamil people, other oppressed communities and for the entire working class.



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