

# Sri Lankan prime minister opposes international inquiry into war crimes

Wasantha Rupasinghe  
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Sri Lankan Prime Minister Dr. Harini Amarasuriya told parliament on October 24 that her government has formally informed the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) that it “does not agree with the conclusions and recommendations... concerning international intervention” on human rights abuses in Sri Lanka.

“We believe external actions will only exacerbate divisions and jeopardise ongoing national processes [on human rights violations],” she declared.

Amarasuriya was referring to a report compiled by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk, following his visit to Sri Lanka from July 23 to 26. His report, first published in August and presented to the 60th session of the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) on September 7, detailed human rights abuses under the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People’s Power (JVP/NPP) government, including the continued use of the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), custodial deaths and targeted arrests.

The report mainly focused on “accountability-related work” under previous UNHRC resolutions, both in Sri Lanka and internationally. Accountability-related work refers to the need for an international investigation into war crimes and other human rights abuses committed during the 26-year anti-Tamil communal war waged by successive Colombo governments against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The UN has estimated that more than 40,000 Tamil civilians were killed in the final months of the war that ended in May 2009. Thousands of Tamil youth who surrendered to the military simply “disappeared.” A number of unarmed LTTE leaders were murdered as they surrendered.

Amarasuriya’s claim about “ongoing national processes” is false. Sixteen years after the LTTE’s defeat, such processes are very limited and only a handful of soldiers have been charged let alone convicted. Any genuine investigation, which would lead inevitably to criminal

responsibility of top political and military leaders, is bitterly opposed by the entire Colombo political establishment, including the JVP/NPP.

Amarasuriya’s comments were aimed at deflecting criticism from opposition parties and the media over the government’s decision not to call for a vote on the latest UNHRC resolution.

When the resolution was presented at the UNHRC session on October 6, neither Sri Lanka nor any other country called for a vote. Forty-one member states were present but because no vote was called, the UNHRC declared the resolution “adopted.”

Opposition Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) MP Namal Rajapakse, criticized government, suggesting that resolution was “going to please the Tamil Diaspora.” MPs from the United National Party and Samagi Jana Balawegaya also questioned why the government did not call for a vote.

In fact, Amarasuriya was simply informing the government’s critics that the JVP/NPP agreed with the lie that no war crimes took place during the communal conflict. And, if any abuses had occurred, Sri Lanka would address them through a “domestic process,” which has been the means used to avoid any international or independent investigations.

Amarasuriya’s comments once again expose the Dissanayake government’s claims to oppose communal politics, want “reconciliation” with minorities, including Tamils, and to “heal the wounds” of war.

The US backed Colombo’s war but began criticising the war crimes and other abuses carried out in the final months of the war under the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse. Washington had no concern for the democratic rights of the Tamil people but was deeply hostile to Rajapakse’s close relations with China.

On September 10, the “Sri Lanka Core Group”—the UK, Canada, Malawi, Montenegro, and North Macedonia—presented its latest resolution on the country’s human rights violations to the UNHRC’s 60th session.

In 2021, the UNHRC called for “an evidence-gathering mechanism for future accountability processes for gross violations of human rights or serious violations of international humanitarian law in Sri Lanka” and established a UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Sri Lanka Accountability Project.

Former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse was in power at the time. He had been defence secretary under his brother President Mahinda Rajapakse, and had been directly responsible for the war crimes in the final months of the war. The resolution was a sharp warning of the consequences he might face if he developed close political relations with Beijing.

The final version of this year’s resolution, presented to the UNHRC session on October 6, did not call for an immediate international investigation into abuses in Sri Lanka, but it extended the OSLAP mandate for two more years.

At the same time, it welcomed the JVP/NPP government’s supposed commitment to reconciliation, devolution of power and anti-corruption reforms, as well as its efforts to address the effects of the country’s severe economic crisis.

The last point was an appreciation by the major powers of the Dissanayake government’s implementation of the International Monetary Fund’s harsh austerity measures. No doubt jubilant over the wording in the resolution, Colombo did not call for a vote in the UNHRC and oppose the resolution.

Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath told parliament on October 8 that previous Colombo governments had failed to comply with UNHRC resolutions. “By adopting a confrontational stance at the UNHRC through demanding a vote, we are further narrowing the space to solve our issues through domestic mechanisms,” he said.

The JVP, which is mired in Sinhala chauvinism and anti-Tamil racism, supported Sri Lanka’s nearly three-decade communal war to the hilt, condemning successive governments for not pursuing the military offensive vigorously enough.

Following the defeat of the LTTE in 2009, the JVP staunchly opposed war crimes charges and joined in the adulation of the military as “war heroes.” It has consistently rejected any investigation into human rights abuses, dismissing former President Mahinda Rajapakse’s 2011 Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission as a “waste of time and money.”

Ahead of the 2024 presidential election, Dissanayake told the Associated Press on August 27 that he “will not seek to punish anyone accused of rights violations and war crimes.” The JVP has never changed this position.

The government claims to be expediting the Office on Missing Persons (OMP), citing 21,000 cases and allocating

375 million rupees. However, the process simply compensates victims’ families while protecting the perpetrators. Numerous reports indicate that OMP has not been able to trace a single disappeared person in any meaningful way for their families.

The government’s proposed Truth and Reconciliation Commission similarly aims to bury the war crimes. Despite four Sri Lankan commanders being sanctioned by Britain, no senior official has been prosecuted. The only soldier who had been convicted—for murdering eight Tamils in 2000—was later pardoned by Gotabhaya Rajapakse.

Military occupation continues in the North and East, keeping residents under surveillance.

During last year’s presidential and parliamentary election campaigns, Dissanayake and other JVP/NPP leaders, in desperate attempt to conceal their anti-Tamil, Sinhala chauvinist policies, blamed the traditional political parties for their communal politics to divide the masses.

All opposition parties in Colombo are seeking to whip up communal divisions sentiments with bogus criticisms of the government, accusing it of serving the Tamil diaspora and betraying the military.

The Tamil capitalist parties, including the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi, are closely collaborating with the government’s IMF austerity program. They are calling for early provincial council elections in the hope of using the limited powers of these bodies to attract new investments and advance their profit interests.

Anti-Tamil discrimination has been institutionalised since 1948 to divide the working class and preserve capitalist rule. Defending democratic rights, ending discrimination, investigating war crimes, and ending military occupation of the North and East, requires the unity of Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim workers across ethnic lines in the fight against the capitalist system.

That fight must be based on the program of a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a Federation of Socialist Republics of South Asia and internationally. The Socialist Equality Party is the only organisation that advances this program.



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