

US threatens Sri Lankan government over war crimes

By Sampath Perera
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The US assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asian affairs, Robert Blake, has warned the Sri Lankan government that its leaders could face international war crimes charges arising from the final stage of the country's civil war, which ended in May 2009 in the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

In an interview with AFP in Colombo on February 28, Blake pointedly referred to Libya, noting that accusations against Muammar Gaddafi had been referred to the International Criminal Court.

Feigning US concern over human rights violations and the settlement of internally displaced persons during the civil war, Blake stated: “[I]f Sri Lanka is not willing to meet international standards regarding these matters there will be pressure to appoint some sort of international commission to look into these things.”

Blake's statements are entirely hypocritical. The Obama administration is not only responsible for its own civilian atrocities and the other war crimes it is continuing to perpetrate in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and elsewhere; it is also complicit in what has happened in Sri Lanka.

Washington fully backed President Mahinda Rajapakse government's war against the LTTE, providing military and intelligence support. The Sri Lankan military's savage bombardment of the area controlled by the LTTE in northern Sri Lanka killed 7,000 civilians between January and May 2009 according to UN estimates. The International Crisis Group put the death toll much higher, at 30,000 to 75,000 civilian deaths. At the end of the war, 280,000 displaced civilians were illegally detained in military-run camps. Thousands of Tamil youth were dragged into secret detention camps.

The US and European powers raised the human rights

issues only during the final stages of the war, not because of sympathy for Tamils but to undermine Beijing's influence in Colombo. China had emerged as a major supporter of the Rajapakse government's war, providing funds and weapons to strengthen its economic and political influence.

In his interview, Blake added: “The United Nations Security Council unanimously passed a resolution against Libya on Saturday night. One of the provisions of that resolution was to refer Muammar Gaddafi to the International Criminal Court so that they could investigate alleged war crimes and abuses against his people. So this is a common thing.”

A former US ambassador to Sri Lanka, Blake claimed he “didn't mean a direct comparison” with Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, he added “around the world there is an interest in assuring accountability for crimes that have been committed”.

Blake further insisted that “accountability” for war crimes could not be “swept under the carpet” and noted: “If you look at longstanding cases like what happened in Serbia and cases like that, eventually people were brought to justice for the crimes they committed.”

The White House official was referring to former Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, who was forcibly brought to trial. In reality, not only Milosevic but also the US and European powers and their client regimes in the former Yugoslavia were responsible for breaking up that country and the resulting communal violence.

It is true that Rajapakse and his ruling cabal and the military hierarchy have committed war crimes. The working class and the Tamil masses, however, cannot expect any justice from the Obama administration. Blake's statements are a thinly-veiled threat that

Rajapakse and his closest collaborators could be hauled before an international investigation unless they toe the line of the US.

In another sign of mounting US pressure on the Rajapakse government, on March 1, the US Senate unanimously adopted a non-binding resolution presented by Robert Casey, a senior Pennsylvania Democratic senator, calling for “an independent international accountability mechanism to look into reports of war crimes”.

Toward the end of 2009, a US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations report signalled a policy change toward Colombo, suggesting that the human rights issues be played down in order to combat China’s influence. Declaring that “the US cannot afford to lose Sri Lanka” and citing the island’s location in strategically important sea lanes, the committee proposed that the US should not have a single agenda of human rights. The report particularly mentioned China’s close relations with Sri Lanka.

Nonetheless, the Obama administration retained the human rights complaints as a card to play against the Colombo government, while endorsing Rajapakse’s own inquiry, a hand-picked Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC).

Blake’s intervention indicates US concern over the Rajapakse government’s continued leaning toward China. The London-based *Times* observed last November that “Chinese banks are enthusiastic buyers of Sri Lankan government bonds.”

By mid-2010, China’s overall “assistance” to Sri Lanka topped \$US3 billion. Chinese investment in the tourism industry hit \$1 billion early this year after Shangri La and the China Aero-Technology Import Export Corporation signed agreements to build luxury tourist hotels.

China has become a major trading partner. Sri Lankan exports to China rose from \$59 million in 2009 to \$80 million in 2010. During the same year, Chinese two-way trade with Sri Lanka rose to almost \$2 billion and Chinese exports to Sri Lanka nearly doubled.

Another serious concern for the US, and also India, is that China is completing the construction of a large harbour at Hambantota in southern Sri Lanka, as part of its plans to have port facilities across the Indian Ocean to protect Chinese shipping routes.

Also irking Washington is the fact that the Sri

Lankan government has close relations with Gaddafi’s regime in Libya. Rajapakse visited Libya twice during 2009, in April and September, obtaining a pledge of \$500 million in financial assistance toward development projects. In January this year, Rajapakse’s son Namal, who is a member of parliament, met Gaddafi in Tripoli and invited him to visit Sri Lanka.

On March 5, Rajapakse’s media director, Bandula Jayasekera, issued a press release stating that Gaddafi had phoned the president. According to the statement, Rajapakse advised the Libyan dictator to “establish peace in Libya as soon as possible and safeguard the lives of Libyan people”. It was an ostentatious declaration of support for Gaddafi’s efforts to crush the opposition to his regime.

The Rajapakse government is desperate to avert even the hint of a war crimes probe. On February 23, a Sri Lankan delegation led by Attorney General Mohan Peiris and External Affairs Secretary Romesh Jayasinghe secretly met UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and the UN panel advising him on war crime charges in Sri Lanka. The delegation urged the UN not to make an adverse report. Last year, the government declared the UN panel “unacceptable” and refused to cooperate with it.

The Colombo government has made no comment on Blake’s threat. It has expressed regret at, but not condemned, the US Senate resolution. In a further attempt to placate Washington, Rajapakse met with US ambassador Patricia Butenis on March 8. This is a signal that Rajapakse is seeking an accommodation with the Obama administration. He knows full well that the US government’s real concerns are not war crimes but its strategic and economic interests.

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