

Sri Lankan government condemns Channel 4 war crimes documentary

By K. Ratnayake
21 June 2011

The Sri Lankan government has responded to the screening of the documentary *Sri Lanka Killing Fields* by intensifying its jingoistic campaign to portray the country as the victim of an “international conspiracy” to tarnish its reputation and that of its “heroic” armed forces. This big lie has become the standard response of the Colombo establishment to all evidence of the war crimes carried out by the military in the final months of its onslaught on the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The one hour video, made by Channel 4 in Britain and screened on June 14 in Geneva, provides harrowing footage shot inside LTTE-territory from September 2008 to May 2009, when the LTTE was finally defeated. It shows civilians being shelled in the no-fire zones proclaimed by the Sri Lankan military, as well as the repeated targetting of hospitals. According to a recent UN panel report, which has also been vilified by the Colombo government, tens of thousands of Tamil civilians were killed in shelling and aerial attacks.

The documentary further provides evidence of the extra-judicial execution of surrendering LTTE soldiers and leaders, as well as the rape of Tamil women seeking the protection of the army. It also shows the appalling conditions facing civilians in the no-fire zone—lacking food, shelter and medical treatment. The footage was difficult to obtain because the government banned all media from the frontlines and prevented all but a handful of aid workers from delivering limited assistance to the no-fire zones.

As in the case of the UN report, the government has made no attempt to refute the damning evidence of the crimes for which it is responsible. Rather, knowing that it will not be contradicted by the opposition parties or the media, it has simply repeated its line that the army

killed no civilians, but was carrying out a “humanitarian operation”, and that the footage is purely “LTTE propaganda.”

The day after the documentary was screened, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse launched a broadside against it, claiming that LTTE elements had bribed Channel 4 to produce it. “Once again some pro-LTTE elements have used the Channel 4 news agency, after giving money to them, in order to tarnish the image of both the Sri Lankan government as well as the army,” he said. He provided no evidence for the allegation.

The defence secretary, like his brother President Mahinda Rajapakse, is directly implicated in the war crimes and human rights abuses carried out by the military.

Speaking on June 17, Gotabhaya Rajapakse declared that “the time has come for the patriotic people to rally for countering the international challenges posed against the motherland. Remnants of the LTTE in the international arena, with the pro-LTTE elements, are attempting to carry forward their separatist movement again.”

The posturing of the government as the champion of the small island against the predatory activities of the major powers is absurd. In waging his criminal war, President Rajapakse courted and had the backing of all the major and regional powers, including the US, China, the European Union and India. They ignored the government’s blatant flouting of the 2002 ceasefire and the military’s atrocities that began the renewed fighting in mid-2006. The US, China and India all provided assistance to the Sri Lankan military.

If the US and the EU began raising limited criticisms of the atrocities carried out in the final months of the war, it was not out of concern for the plight of Tamil

civilians. Rather Washington feared that Beijing had gained influence in Colombo at its expense. The US used the threat of war crimes proceedings as a means of pressuring the Rajapakse government. Rajapakse would not be the first American partner to be turned into a pariah and subjected to a campaign of regime change.

Seizing on the Channel 4 documentary, British Foreign Minister for South Asia Alistair Burt renewed the threat, warning: “If the Sri Lankan government does not respond [to the call for investigations into human right violations] we [the UK] would support the international community in revisiting all options available to press the Sri Lankan government to fulfil its obligations.”

The US and European pronouncements on war crimes in Sri Lanka are utterly hypocritical. Like the Sri Lankan military, the US-led occupying forces in Afghanistan and Iraq are responsible for arbitrary detentions, torture, extra-judicial killings and the killing of civilians in air strikes and special forces operations. It is this hypocrisy that the Sri Lankan government has latched onto to divert attention from its crimes.

Replying to Burt’s comments, the Sri Lankan external affairs ministry called on “friendly countries” not to issue “threats but the space and support for restoration of what was lost over three decades.” In other words, there should be no accounting for war crimes. The ministry denounced the video as “an exercise which is carried out by a small section of international media at the behest of certain parties with vested interests” with the objective of pushing the country back to war.

The Colombo media has been more overt in criticising Western hypocrisy. An editorial in *Divayina* on Sunday was headlined “Channel 4 Arsenic.” It declared: “No one is questioning how the Western countries killed Bin Laden. But the West is not satisfied how Sri Lanka defeated the terrorists. This arsenic poison is flowing from hypocrisy and imperialist superiority.”

A June 15 editorial in the *Island* declared that the video was an illusion created in the “digital age”—without providing any evidence that the footage had been digitally doctored. It noted, correctly, that US President George Bush and British Prime Minister

Tony Blair had used lies to justify their invasion of Iraq, and continued: “Its [Channel 4] propaganda blitzkrieg is aimed at not only having the political and military leaders who defeated [LTTE leader] Prabhakaran’s brutal terrorism hauled up before an international war crimes tribunal but also at ruining Sri Lanka’s booming tourism.”

The pious outrage that informs such editorials has nothing to do with opposing imperialism. The whole Colombo political and media establishment supports the neo-colonial enterprises in Iraq and Afghanistan. Rather, the response amounts to a crude appeal by one gang of war criminals to their bigger brothers in crime to live and let live, and to ignore all such atrocities.

This bogus campaign against the “international conspiracy”, which receives blanket media coverage in Colombo, stems not only from nervousness about a possible targeting of the Sri Lankan government for war crimes or regime change. The war itself was a product of decades of systematic anti-Tamil discrimination that was exploited by successive governments to whip up communal sentiments to divide the working class and prop up bourgeois rule.

Having militarily defeated the LTTE, the Rajapakse regime has concocted the “international conspiracy” for the same reactionary political purposes—to justify its continued abuse of democratic rights and stirring up of communal antagonisms. The ferocity of this propaganda campaign is an indication of the depth of the economic and political crisis that the government confronts. As he imposes austerity measures on working people, Rajapakse will not hesitate to use the police-state measures developed during a quarter century of civil war against the working class.

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