

UN appoints panel for inquiry into Sri Lankan human rights violations

By W. A. Sunil
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UN Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) head Navanethem Pillay last week announced the panel for an international inquiry into alleged war crimes and human rights violations by the Sri Lankan government and its security forces during the final months of the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009.

During the more than a quarter century of civil war, nearly 200,000 people perished, mainly Tamils killed by the Sri Lankan military and pro-government death squads. A UN expert panel estimated that 40,000 civilians were killed during the last months of the military onslaught under President Mahinda Rajapakse's government, which was also responsible for numerous other war crimes.

The appointment of the UNHRC's panel followed a US-backed resolution, which was pushed through a UN Human Rights Council meeting in March requesting an international inquiry. This resolution marked a further sharp shift of US policy toward Sri Lanka.

The US and its allies all backed the communal war against the LTTE by successive Colombo governments. They only began criticising the military's human rights violations during the final stages of the war when it became clear that China would have a significant presence in post-war Sri Lanka, after providing the Rajapakse government with weapons and funds to win the war.

Until this year, the US pressure on Rajapakse to distance himself from China stopped short of calling for an international investigation, which could raise the prospect of war crimes charges.

The Obama administration is aggressively pursuing its "pivot to Asia" policy to diplomatically isolate and militarily encircle China. Washington is provocatively encouraging Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam to escalate actions against China over disputed maritime claims, risking military conflicts that could trigger a

wider war. The US wants the Rajapakse government to end its close ties with Beijing and line up behind this American offensive.

The three-member UN panel on Sri Lanka consists of Martti Ahtisaari, former president of Finland and UN special envoy for Kosovo, who was involved in the process that led to the creation of a US-backed state in Kosovo; Silvia Cartwright, former New Zealand governor-general and high court judge, who was a member of the Cambodia Tribunal on Khmer Rouge war crimes; and Asma Jahangir, a former president of Pakistan's Human Rights Commission, who has also been a UN Special Rapporteur.

Pillay's office said the panel would play a "supportive role, providing advice and guidance as well as independent verification during the investigation." The investigation team of 12 will be coordinated by a UN senior official, Sandra Beidas, who played prominent roles in previous UN interventions in Nepal, Haiti, Sudan and Somalia. The investigation will be conducted for ten months, until mid-April 2015.

The US and the UK, which jointly sponsored the March UN Human Rights Council resolution, expressed support for the panel. US State Department spokesperson Marie Harf said Washington "strongly urged" the Sri Lankan government to cooperate fully with the UNHRC and its investigation, and "take meaningful, concrete steps to address outstanding concerns related to democratic governance, human rights, reconciliation, justice, and accountability."

These statements are doubly hypocritical. Both countries fully backed the Sri Lankan war and share responsibility for all the abuses and war crimes. Washington and London both have war crimes records spanning decades. To cite a few, in Iraq and Afghanistan, US-led invasions resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. In Libya and Syria, the

regime-change operations backed by the Obama administration and the arming of Islamic fundamentalist groups have led to further atrocities.

Rajapakse's government rejected the UN resolution and refused to issue visas for members of the probe team to visit Sri Lanka. The government still flatly denies any responsibility for war crimes despite evidence implicating not only the military hierarchy but also Rajapakse and his brother, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse.

However, the panel is proceeding with the inquiry. Jahangir told the BBC: "A government's non-cooperation doesn't stop international investigations." She warned that Sri Lankan government "attempts to prevent people from testifying before the investigating team will only make its own situation worse."

In March, Nisha Biswal, the US assistant secretary of state for South Asia, said the Obama administration had not decided whether to impose economic sanctions on Sri Lanka. If Rajapakse falls into line, Washington will rapidly drop its "human rights" demands. If not, however, other options could include a regime-change operation.

Rajapakse is using the UN investigation to issue anti-Western rhetoric and whip up nationalist sentiments to divert attention both from the war crimes and the government's attacks on working class living conditions. Rajapakse declared that his government was being penalised by the "international community," without naming any specific countries.

At the same time, Rajapakse is nervous about the US push and is seeking better relations with Washington, keenly aware of Sri Lanka's key strategic location in the Indian Ocean, through which much of China's trade passes. The *Colombotelegraph* reported this week that the External Affairs Ministry had hired two more US lobbying firms, Madison Group and Beltway Government Strategies to promote Sri Lankan interests. Another two firms are already working in the US capital.

In January, one firm, the Thomas Advisory Group, issued an invitation to a meeting on Sri Lanka, pointing out that the country was "astride the main maritime trade routes of the Indian Ocean" and that China was already "making major inroads in Sri Lanka." The Thomas Advisory Group made clear that the Sri Lankan government wanted to ensure "that relations with the United States are improved even more strongly."

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the party of the Tamil elite, voted against the government's motion in parliament to reject the inquiry, while the United National

Party (UNP), the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), an ally of the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party, abstained.

The TNA is seeking US support for a "power sharing" deal with the Rajapakse government. It has no concern for the basic democratic rights of Tamil people, only for its own capitalist interests. The same goes for the SLMC. The recent violent attacks on Muslims by pro-government Buddhist extremist forces provoked tensions between Rajapakse and the SLMC, prompting it to abstain.

As for the UNP and JVP, the UNP began the anti-Tamil war and both parties backed the military offensives for nearly three decades from 1983. The UNP, the traditional party of big business, said it would permit an international inquiry, signalling its backing for US moves, while urging the government to "restore the systems and institutions of democratic governance."

The JVP submitted parliamentary amendments requesting an impartial investigation into human rights violations, which the ruling coalition rejected. The JVP's posture as defender of democratic rights is a manoeuvre to exploit growing popular opposition to the government.

Working people—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike—must take their own independent class stand against the war criminals in Washington and Colombo. They should give no support to the manipulation of human rights issues by Washington and other imperialist powers, while rejecting any support for the Rajapakse government or any faction of the bourgeoisie.

Those responsible for war crimes can only be held accountable, and democratic rights defended, in the struggle against the capitalist class and imperialism. This means fighting for a workers' and peasants' government—a socialist republic of Sri Lanka-Eelam—as part of the struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally.

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