

US Increases Pressure on Sri Lankan Government Over War Crimes

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Global Research, February 05, 2014
[World Socialist Web Site](#)

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [United Nations](#)

US Assistant Secretary of State for Central and South Asia Nisha Desai Biswal announced in Colombo on Saturday that Washington will move another resolution—the third in three years—on Sri Lankan war crimes next month in the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC).

Biswal claimed that the decision was taken in response to Colombo's "lack of progress on accountability and the deteriorating human rights situation in the country." A UN probe estimated that at least 40,000 people died during the final months of the war that ended in May 2009.

The US official arrived in Sri Lanka for a three-day visit last Friday, two weeks after US Ambassador on Global War Crimes Stephen Rapp toured to gather information for the US resolution.

Biswal told a Colombo press conference on Saturday that the "lack of progress" on a war crimes investigation by Sri Lanka, had "led to frustration and a great deal of scepticism in my government and in the international community." Patience was "wearing thin" among the major powers, she said.

Biswal evaded a question on whether the resolution would call for an international probe, claiming it was "too early to determine the text of the resolution." The US diplomat referred to recent attacks on Muslim and Christian places of worship by right-wing mobs led by Buddhist monks. The violent assaults were unopposed by the government and the police.

President Mahinda Rajapakse effectively snubbed Biswal, citing a "tight schedule" as the reason for not meeting her. The Sri Lankan president is nervous about any war crimes probe. An international investigation could not only implicate the top military generals responsible for the slaughter of civilians but the president and his brother, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse.

The US is not interested in a thoroughgoing investigation into the Sri Lankan military's war crimes as it would also expose its own support for Colombo's protracted civil war. Rather, Washington is seeking to exploit the issue to advance its own strategic interests in the region. In particular, the Obama administration is demanding the full backing of Colombo for its "pivot to Asia" policy, which is aimed at militarily encircling China.

Washington wants the Rajapakse government to wind back its economic, political and military relations with Beijing. The crisis-ridden Sri Lankan government, however, depends on China for finance and military hardware, and for international political support to evade any war crimes probe.

US moves to intensify pressure on Colombo were underlined by a *New York Times* editorial on February 3 calling on the Obama administration to toughen its stance against Sri Lanka. The newspaper, which is an unwavering apologist for all of Washington's war crimes, hypocritically declared that any easing up of demands on Sri Lanka for accountability "would be tragic and would signal to public officials that they might never have to answer for mass murder."

Relations between Washington and Colombo were further strained on Monday after the Sri Lankan government refused a visa for Catherine Russell, the US Ambassador at Large for Women's Issues. Russell was forced to cancel a high-level visit scheduled for February 10 and 11.

External Affairs Minister Peiris rejected Biswal's criticisms, declaring that the US was attempting to show Sri Lanka in the worst possible light. Peiris claimed that the recent attacks on Christian and Muslim places of worship were "isolated incidents." They were "community reactions," he stated, giving legitimacy to the Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinist groups that carried out the attacks.

Notwithstanding the comments of Peiris, the Rajapakse government is desperate to appease the US. Rajapakse recently sent his secretary, Lalith Weeratunga, to Washington to plead with Biswal and other US officials not to pursue a new UNHRC resolution. Weeratunga lobbied officials, circulating a report claiming "progress" in addressing the plight of the war-devastated Tamil masses. Thousands of Tamils, however, are still living without houses, sanitary facilities, water or electricity. Weeratunga told Reuters that any war crimes investigation would create "huge chaos in the country" and "reduce the morale of the army."

The Sri Lankan government has hired two US lobbying companies—Thompson Advisory Group for \$US66,600 a month and Majority Group for \$50,000 a month. An invitation to meet Weeratunga and Sri Lanka Central Bank chief Ajith Nivard Cabrral at a Washington event stated: "China is making major inroads already in Sri Lanka, but our distinguished visitors wish to make sure that relations with the United States are improved even more strongly."

Rajapakse has also sent cabinet ministers to lobby for support in Vietnam, Brazil, Pakistan, the Philippines and Kuwait. Last Wednesday, Peiris met with Indian External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid, appealing for New Delhi's help to counter a US resolution. An Indian official told the *Economic Times*: "We heard them out, but gave no assurance about what we will do in Geneva."

China said it would back the Sri Lankan government against the US resolution. In an email to the *Daily Mirror*, the Chinese ambassador to Colombo, Wu Jianghao, declared that Beijing would "continue to unswervingly speak for Sri Lanka in the UNHRC" and recognised "the progress achieved by Sri Lanka."

During her visit, Biswal met opposition United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe and held discussions with Tamil National Alliance (TNA) leader R. Sambandan and another TNA leader, Northern Provincial Council Chief Minister C. V. Wigneswaran. The TNA leaders repeated their calls for an international war crimes investigation. The TNA, which represents the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie, views an inquiry as a means for extracting concessions from the Rajapakse government in the form of

a power-sharing arrangement.

After meeting with Biswal, UNP leader Wickremesinghe told the Sri Lankan media that his party was ready to help the government implement the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC)—a call previously made by the US. The LLRC was established by Rajapakse's government in 2010 to whitewash its war crimes. Wickremesinghe's statement is a clear signal to the US that the UNP supports Washington's geo-strategic demands.

Like the Rajapakse government, the UNP is mired in Sinhala chauvinism. This right-wing, pro-US party started the island's communal war in 1983, prosecuted it for over a decade and backed it at every stage. If the UNP came to power it would be just as ruthless as the Rajapakse government in trampling on the democratic rights of working people.

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