

US Steps Up the Drumbeat on Sri Lankan Human Rights

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The Obama administration is stepping up its pressure on Sri Lanka on “human rights,” with discussions taking place on another resolution critical of its record to be put to the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) meeting next March. The US and its allies are using the threat of a probe into Sri Lankan war crimes and human rights abuses to press the Colombo government to align more strongly with the West.

In previous years, the US has already pushed two resolutions through the UNHRC on Sri Lanka. The one passed last March called on Colombo to implement the recommendations of the government’s own Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) into the island’s protracted civil war, which ended in 2009 with the military defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The LLRC report was a sham that whitewashed the war crimes carried out by the Sri Lankan government and military, and made limited proposals that are yet to be carried out. A UN study estimated that at least 40,000 people were killed during the final weeks of the war, the majority innocent civilians.

In the past few days, US Assistant Secretary of State Nisha Biswal and State Department deputy spokeswoman Marie Harf have both issued statements calling on Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse’s government to take the necessary steps to investigate human rights abuses in the country.

On December 4, Biswal warned that the patience of the international community “will start to wear thin ... if there is no real progress in this regard.” Two days later, Harf said the US continued to be concerned over accountability issues for human rights abuses and also the erosion of the rule of law, violence against religious minorities and restrictions on press freedom.

US foreign relations committee staff member Damien Murphy visited Sri Lanka last week. According to the Colombo-based *Sunday Times*, he and American officials held a wide range of discussions with government officials and Tamil leaders in preparation for a new UNHRC resolution.

Britain’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office Minister Hugo Swire this week raised the possibility that the UK could also press for a new UNHRC resolution if the Sri Lankan government failed to carry out its own “independent and credible” investigation into human rights abuses. Last week, the European Parliament passed a motion threatening a full UN inquiry if Colombo failed to implement the LLRC recommendations in full.

Japan's special envoy to Sri Lanka Yasushi Akashi concluded a visit last Friday by telling the media there were international concerns over the government's delay in acting on the LLRC report. "There is a notion that the Sri Lankan Government has taken too much time appointing commissions and then shelving their reports without taking any action," he said. Akashi warned that listening to "the international community is a prerequisite" for closer collaboration.

This "human rights" campaign is completely hypocritical, not least because the US and its allies all backed Rajapakse's war against the LTTE and covered up its war crimes, right up to the final few weeks. Just as the US has exploited "human rights" to justify illegal and predatory wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria, so it is using the same phony banner to pursue its imperialist interests in Sri Lanka.

Washington is focussing on Sri Lanka as part of Obama's "pivot to Asia," aimed at undermining Chinese influence throughout the region and encircling China militarily. The US began to point to the Sri Lankan military's atrocities only as the war was drawing to a close. Its real concern was that China enhanced its position in Colombo during the conflict by providing military and financial aid to the Rajapakse government.

A bipartisan initiative, the US Congressional Caucus on Ethnic and Religious Freedom in Sri Lanka, last month held a panel discussion on the topic: "What is next for Sri Lanka—progress or back-pedaling—and the US-Sri Lanka relationship?" Panelists included Ashley Wills, the former US Ambassador to Sri Lanka and the Maldives, and Lisa Curtis from the right-wing think tank, the Heritage Foundation.

The invitation letter noted "continued concerns about the treatment of ethnic and religious minorities" but drew attention to "the broader context of worrisome political trends in Sri Lanka [that] threaten to undermine stability in Sri Lanka and the region, as well as prospects for a comprehensive, forward looking US-Sri Lanka partnership."

As reported by Reuters, Curtis declared that since 2009 US-Sri Lanka relations had been in a "downward spiral" and called for the US to reverse the trend through a combination of "carrots and sticks." She explained what she meant by "downward spiral" in a September Heritage Foundation article. "There are increasing geostrategic reasons to care about Sri Lanka, particularly because the island nation is strategically located in the Indian Ocean and is increasingly being wooed by China," she wrote.

The same message was spelled out in a document in December 2009, just months after the end of the Sri Lankan war. US Secretary of State John Kerry, then chairman of Senate Foreign Relations Committee, co-authored a review of US interests in the island. After outlining China's growing influence in Colombo, and the island's strategic location across important shipping lanes in the Indian Ocean, it concluded that the "US cannot lose Sri Lanka" and proposed a strategy to bring it firmly within the US orbit.

China has continued to side with Sri Lanka against the US-led "human rights" campaign. Its embassy in Colombo recently stated: "China supports the Sri Lankan government's efforts to safeguard independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity." It added that "the international community, instead of taking measures that may complicate the issue" should allow the Sri Lankan government to choose its own path in addressing human rights.

Rajapakse government has awarded \$US4 billion in projects to Chinese companies during

the past four years. Investment Promotion Minister Lakshman Yapa Abeywardhana last month told reporters that the government would sign \$2 billion worth of investments before the end of the year, of which \$1.3 billion was from China.

Speaking in parliament last week, External Affairs Minister G.L. Peiris insisted that the “direction the country needs to go can, and will, be decided by Sri Lanka and no other country. The government is not prepared to pass on that responsibility to another country at any cost, despite threats and intimidation.”

However, the Rajapakse government’s room for manoeuvring is narrowing as the Obama administration ratchets up the pressure on countries throughout Asia to fall into line with its aggressive “pivot.” The constant drumbeat on “human rights” abuses in Sri Lanka carries the menacing threat that Rajapakse and other political and military leaders could find themselves the target of war crimes proceedings—unless they fall into line with Washington’s strategic requirements.

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