

Sri Lanka becomes a diplomatic battleground

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25 May 2009

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's visit to Sri Lanka last weekend has brought into sharp relief the intense international rivalry following the end of the island's protracted civil war.

Reflecting the stance of the US and European powers, Ban called for greater access to detention centres into which the Sri Lankan army has herded 265,000 Tamil refugees. He also appealed for the Colombo government to "heal the wounds" of the 26-year conflict by addressing the grievances of the Tamil minority.

The European Union (EU) ratcheted up the pressure on Colombo last week by calling for a war crimes investigation into the killing of Tamil civilians. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton rang Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse last Thursday to demand access for UN agencies to the internment camps and to call for reconciliation with the Tamil minority.

Rajapakse and his government are certainly guilty of war crimes. The UN estimates that at least 7,000 civilians died in the war zone from January as the Sri Lanka army closed in on the final pocket of land held by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Footage shot by journalists accompanying Ban as he flew over the area showed scenes of devastation—demolished buildings, burnt-out vehicles and bomb craters.

However, the expressions of concern from the US and Europe have nothing to do with any genuine sympathy for the victims of the war. For the past three years these same powers have backed Rajapakse's renewed war and maintained a studied silence over the army's blatant breaches of the 2002 ceasefire, its

bombardments of civilian targets and the abuses of democratic rights, including the operation of pro-government death squads.

Headed by Britain and France, 17 members of the UN Human Rights Council have pushed for a special session this week to consider Sri Lanka. These same members will not, of course, call for a special session to discuss the war crimes carried out by the US in Iraq, or in Afghanistan, where the European powers are also either directly responsible for, or complicit in, the slaughter of civilians and gross democratic rights violations.

The US and European powers are simply exploiting threats of a war crimes investigation, as well as to block a much-needed IMF loan, as levers to bolster their political influence over the Rajapakse regime. The prime concern is that rival powers—above all, China—have used the war to increase their standing in Colombo. Western commentators have rather bitterly noted that Rajapakse was able to thumb his nose at US and British calls for a ceasefire, confident he had Chinese support.

For instance, a comment entitled "Sri Lanka takes a step to the East" in last weekend's *Sydney Morning Herald* asked how Rajapakse was able to ignore Western pressure. "Enter the dragon and a host of other new friends," it explained. "Chinese aid last year amounted to nearly \$1 billion, mostly on big visible projects like a highway, two power stations and a new international shipping port at Hambantota in the island's south, which happens to be Rajapakse's home town."

China has been a major arms supplier to the Sri Lankan army, even reportedly providing six fighter-

bombers free of charge. In return, Beijing will get access to the Hambantota port—part of its strategy to secure crucial trade routes to the Middle East and Africa—as well as oil exploration rights to the seabed off the island’s northwest coast. A Chinese delegation of industrialists arrived in Sri Lanka last week for discussions over a “dedicated zone” on the island for its investors.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* noted that “Sri Lanka is being welcomed into the club of Eurasian landmass tyrannies, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation [SCO], which so far comprises Russia, China and the Central Asian ‘stans’.” According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, this year Sri Lanka and Belarus will become the SCO’s first dialogue partners.

In the political sphere, China’s support has been particularly helpful. Beijing and Moscow repeatedly blocked discussion or any binding motion in the UN Security Council over Sri Lanka. In response to the convening of a special session of the UN Human Rights Council, 12 countries headed by China and Russia have tabled a counter-resolution praising Colombo for winning a war against a “terrorist group” and calling for international funding for Sri Lanka.

Significantly, India, which had been backing a ceasefire to placate anger among Tamils in southern India, also put its name to the counter-resolution. Obviously concerned at the growing influence of rival China in Colombo, New Delhi is trying to claw back its standing in a country that it has long regarded as part of its sphere of influence.

In Colombo, the Rajapakse regime is acutely aware that China’s backing has been critical. Earlier this month, the defence ministry, headed by Rajapakse’s brother Gotabhaya, issued a statement denouncing “the hypocrisy and sanctimony of the Western Powers” toward Sri Lanka. While not naming the targets of its criticisms, the statement declared that Colombo was “grateful for the whole-hearted support” of other countries, including China and Russia.

Last week President Rajapakse, his brother Gotabhaya and the Sri Lankan army commander

heaped praise on China in their victory speeches and statements. Government ally, Athuraliye Rathana, a Buddhist monk and head of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), openly lashed out at the US and Britain for trying to “rescue the terrorists,” adding that “our real friends are China and Russia”.

In an editorial last week, the right-wing *Island* triumphantly declared that “little Lanka’s victory is not second to the near impossible rare feats of humankind like man’s landing on the moon. Her war had the trappings of a David-Goliath contest with the Western powers... Even the UN handled Sri Lanka’s war as if the LTTE were a member state! It is a miracle that Sri Lanka managed to crush terrorism.”

The war in Sri Lanka was not a “war on terrorism” but a bloody communal conflict produced by decades of official anti-Tamil discrimination. Nor was the victory a miracle. The Sri Lankan military, backed by all the powers, major and minor, outnumbered and outgunned the LTTE and pursued its war of attrition with wanton disregard for civilian life.

Following the slaughter of the remaining LTTE fighters last week, Sri Lanka has become the centre of a different type of battle. The open schism in the UN Human Rights Council is a measure of the deepening divisions between the major powers, raising the danger of broader international conflicts as each vies for economic and strategic advantage over its rivals in every corner of the globe.

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