

DSP reiterates support for the right of self-determination for the Tamil people

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Democratic Socialist Perspective (Australia) statement in response to the United Nations Human Rights Council resolution on Sri Lanka.

June 12, 2009 — The Democratic Socialist Perspective (DSP) — a Marxist organisation affiliated to the Socialist Alliance of Australia — supports the right of Tamils to self-determination. We have campaigned in solidarity with the Tamil people for several decades. For example, at the time of the 1983 massacre the DSP worked with the Tamil community in Australia to organise protests. This year too, the DSP, Socialist Alliance and Resistance worked closely with Tamil communities, including helping organise rallies, to highlight the calls for a ceasefire and for self-determination.

We support the right of Tamils to form a separate state or pursue other solutions, as they so choose, that guarantee complete and genuine equality. The Tamil people must freely decide which path to follow.

We condemn the racist and repressive policies of successive Sri Lankan governments as the main source of ethnic conflict. State terrorism is the main source of violence in Sri Lanka. We support the Tamils' right to take up arms in self-defence. However, the over-reliance by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on a militaristic strategy, which has included violence and repression against non-Tamil civilians and other Tamil groups, has alienated potential allies among Sinhalese workers and peasants, and among the Muslim population. It has also contributed to the international isolation of the LTTE and the Tamil struggle.

Following the LTTE's military defeat, an interesting discussion around tactics and strategy is opening up, which includes looking at successful national liberation struggles that have used a range of non-military tactics to build broad alliances against national oppression.

The ongoing solidarity campaign with the Tamil people is now focusing on immediate demands, such as freeing the displaced people from imprisonment in the government-camps. They must be allowed to leave the camps if they wish and return to their homes. Access to adequate food, medical care and housing must be guaranteed.

UN Human Rights Council resolution on "Assistance to Sri Lanka in the promotion and protection of human rights"

On May 26, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution on "Assistance to Sri Lanka in the promotion and protection of human rights". This resolution condemned the LTTE for "attacks ... on the civilian population", while making no mention of the tens of thousands of Tamil civilians killed by the Sri Lankan government forces this year alone.

The resolution welcomed the "liberation by the government of Sri Lanka of tens of thousands of its citizens that were kept by the LTTE against their will as hostages", an unproven claim when in fact

the Sri Lankan government has trapped the surviving Tamils in concentration camps surrounded by barbed wire.

The resolution was passed by the HRC with a margin of 29 votes to 12, with six abstentions. Most of the Third World countries that are members of the HRC voted in favour. Most of the imperialist countries voted against, supporting instead a resolution moved by Switzerland. The latter condemned the LTTE, but it also called on the Sri Lankan government to allow freedom of movement for the internally displaced people and to cooperate fully with humanitarian organisations.

The Swiss resolution also called on the Sri Lankan government to “investigate” allegations of human rights abuses and to prosecute those responsible. Given that the government is the main abuser of human rights in Sri Lanka, this amounted to a call for the government to investigate and prosecute itself.

The imperialist powers’ supposed concern for human rights is hypocritical, given that they have for many years been supporting the Sri Lankan government in its war on the Tamils.

The Sri Lankan government portrayed itself as a victim of Western governments and the “Western dominated world media”. This was ridiculous given the aid that Sri Lanka receives from the West, and the hostility of the Western media to the “terrorist” LTTE.

Nevertheless, most Third World governments supported Sri Lanka in the HRC. This included right-wing governments such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, but also left-wing governments such as Cuba and Bolivia.

Why did Cuba and its allies take the position they did?

There are several reasons:

1. They distrust the human rights rhetoric of the imperialist powers, which often use concern over human rights as a pretext for condemning, pressuring and even attempting to overthrow Third World governments.
2. They at times oppose movements such as the LTTE that attempt to break up existing Third World states. They tend to suspect that such movements are encouraged by the imperialists in order to weaken Third World countries.

In some cases this is true. For example, the CIA-backed Katanga secessionist movement was aimed at weakening and overthrowing the progressive government of Patrice Lumumba in the Congo in the early 1960s. This experience, which occurred shortly after the Castro government came to power, probably had a lasting impact on Cuban attitudes towards secessionist movements in general.

Similarly the US-backed secessionist movement in eastern Bolivia is aimed at weakening and eventually overthrowing the Evo Morales government. But it is a mistake to over-generalise from these examples. Many movements that aim to break up an existing state are a response to real national oppression. This is certainly the case with the Tamils.

3. Cuba’s diplomacy aims to build friendly relations with as many governments as possible and especially Third World nations regardless of the nature of these governments. This is both a survival strategy for Cuba in the face of the US blockade, and a way of winning support for some progressive ideas in the United Nations and other international forums. It is also a way to seek to build a bloc among Third World nations to strengthen the position of oppressed nations in relation to the imperialist countries.

The success of Cuban diplomacy is reflected in the nearly unanimous votes at the United Nations condemning the United States' blockade of Cuba. But the down side is that Cuba often refrains from criticising Third World governments for their repression of their own people.

International solidarity from ordinary people for Cuba's revolution is partly inspired by Cuba's generally principled internationalist position that seeks to aid the oppressed around the world: from Cuba's armed assistance in Angola that paved the way for the defeat of the South African apartheid regime, to its current practice of sending volunteer doctors to treat the poor in dozens of countries. Positions such as the one it has taken on Sri Lanka risks undermining such support.

The DSP does not agree with or support the UN HRC resolution on "Assistance to Sri Lanka in the promotion and protection of human rights". The DSP will continue to campaign for the goal of self-determination for the Tamil people and encourages the broader Australian community and other groups to show their solidarity with the oppressed Tamil people of Sri Lanka.

P.S.

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