

# Tamil rights: Surprise but uneven changes in voting at the UN Human Rights Council

Sunday 25 March 2012, by [RIDENOUR Ron](#) (Date first published: 22 March 2012).

March 22, 2012 – *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* — The UN Human Rights Council voted today to criticise the Sri Lankan government for “not adequately address[ing] serious allegations of violations of international law” when conducting its final phases of war against the guerrilla army Liberation Tigers for Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which ended, May 18, 2009, with massive government-caused bloodbaths.

The resolution called upon Sri Lanka to implement its own findings and recommendations made in the report of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC), but extended that call to “initiate credible and independent actions to ensure justice, equity, accountability and reconciliation for all Sri Lankans” (“independent action” is not defined).

Furthermore, with 24 countries in favour, 15 against and eight abstentions, the resolution “encourages” the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to offer the Sri Lanka government “advice and technical assistance” in implementing the LLRC recommendations, and to make a report on the provision at the 22<sup>nd</sup> HRC session, a year from now.

In an earlier draft, Sri Lanka would have had to provide a timetable to show implementation was underway. To acquire India’s vote, perhaps, the final resolution was watered down. No mention of war crimes or crimes against humanity is included; instead, Sri Lanka is asked to investigate “allegations of extra-judicial killings and enforced disappearances”. [\[1\]](#)

The resolution implies a lack of confidence in the Sri Lanka government to enact even its own mild investigation, while preventing any discussion of a more solid investigation into allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity that the “Report of the Secretary-General’s Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka” called for last year when it recommended an independent international investigation.

## Comparison with May 2009 resolution

The resolution that US allies backed in May 2009 (the US was not on the HRC then) also called upon Sri Lanka to investigate itself for possible human rights abuses, while condemning only the LTTE for terrorism, war crimes and other human rights abuses. Even though this resolution only asked the police to investigate themselves, many governments took this as an affront to sovereignty. 29 countries voted to applaud Sri Lanka and condemn only the LTTE. Nothing was stated about the suffering of hundreds of thousands of Tamil civilians. This resolution was opposed by 12 votes and there were six abstentions. The pattern was clear then: nearly all the Non-Aligned Movement governments voted for Sri Lanka, and the West voted for a possible critique.

This time the geopolitical voting pattern was broken, and, coincidentally, disproved my prediction that Sri Lanka would come through without a slap on the face. [\[2\]](#)

The changes in voting are interesting:

*Latin American and Africa changed votes significantly.*

In 2009, all of the African governments on the HRC voted in favour of Sri Lanka, with one abstention. This time the vote was split with five in favour of the possible criticism, three opposed and five abstentions.

In 2009, five of Latin American governments voted to support Sri Lanka, two voted for some critique (Chile and Mexico) and Argentina abstained. Today, six governments voted for the critique with only the two Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our America (ALBA) governments voting against any critique (Cuba and Ecuador).

*The Middle Eastern governments did not change their votes.* They all voted not to criticise, with one abstention, the same pattern as in 2009.

Europe, west and east, voted the same way: for a slight critique.

*Russia and China backed Sri Lanka fully.*

The countries still on the HRC since 2009 that changed their votes from support of Sri Lanka to critique were *Cameroon and Nigeria, India and Uruguay.*

The most significant reversal was *India*, given its several decades-long relationship supporting the island nation. Although India changed its vote, it balanced the change with sovereign state solidarity with Sri Lanka. "While we subscribe to the broader message of this resolution and the objectives it promotes, we also underline that any assistance from the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights or visits of UN Special Procedures should be in consultation with and with the concurrence of the Sri Lankan Government", read the Indian statement, as reported by Tamilnet.com.

*"Observers in Tamil Nadu said that the Indian statement contradicted the demands put forward by Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Ms. J. Jayalithaa, who had demanded India to declare SL President Mahinda Rajapaksa complicit in genocide and war-crimes and to call for economic sanctions against Sri Lanka till the country ensured equal status to Tamils",* the website reported.

*Uruguay's* change is also important. Its new president, José Mujica, was a left-wing guerrilla who spent 15 years in prison, two at the bottom of a well. He has placed reducing poverty as the first order of business.

*Peru* was not on the HRC in 2009 but its new government headed by President Ollanta Humala to criticise Sri Lanka. He has also vowed to tackle poverty as his first priority.

The fact that two African governments have reversed their vote may indicate that international agitation has had an effect. More NAM governments abstained this time as well.

### **Why the difference?**

Although the greatest terrorist state in the world introduced the resolution critical of Sri Lanka, the United States is a partner in the war crimes and in genocide against Tamils. It always backed Sinhalese chauvinism and discrimination against Tamils, and offered no aid to Tamil civilians. But Washington sees an opportunity here to polish its image as a "human rights supporter" while maintaining systematic human rights abuses in its many invasions and military interventions in the world.

The current US president is at war in seven countries, all circumscribing United Nations laws

against invading countries: Afghanistan, Iraq (tens of thousands of US mercenaries still occupy Iraq), Pakistan, Somalia, Uganda, Sudan and Libya. Furthermore, without US backing the Palestinian people would have been liberated from Zionist Israel ages ago.

These are some factors in the change in the HRC vote:

1. Tamils in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka Tamils living in the diaspora in many countries have, since the end of the war, conducted many protests and lobbied governments for justice. A few Tamils have even committed suicide in despair and in protest.
2. British TV station Channel 4's Killing Field series was shown during these sessions and clearly pointed an accusing finger at the Rajapaksa family regime for standing behind horrendous murders, mutilations, rape; in short, war crimes and crimes against humanity.
3. Mainstream Tamil parties in parliament in Tamil Nadu were a major influence in convincing the Indian government to change its vote.
4. The US is making it clear to Sri Lanka's government that it is dissatisfied with it, even while approving a World Bank loan of US\$213 million for development in the capital city, Colombo, just a week ago. The US keeps its fingers in the economy while it shows its unhappiness because Rajapaksa is offering more economic concessions to China and Russia. The US has lost its long-hoped for port in Trincomalee harbour, which China will probably acquire.

It was China, as well as Russia, Israel and Iran and Pakistan (not exactly blood brothers), that gave and sold more military hardware to Sri Lanka in the last two to three years of war to annihilate the LTTE. The US-UK and NATO offered far less in the latter period given that they were bogged down in the Middle East.

## **Conclusion**

Perhaps nothing substantial for Tamils in Sri Lanka will come out of this human rights geo-political game, not in and of itself. But the game's rules are changing, at least in this area of the world, when so many NAM members have not sided with a fellow member. This in large part because the evidence of gross atrocities has come to the surface.

No doubt, US machinations have had some effect. But we should not be fooled that these governments are interested in the human rights of any people. The current US president sees an opportunity to score points by pointing a finger at a real culprit, just as he sought to do in Libya under false pretences and as he is trying in Syria. He, like all capitalist presidents, seeks oil, profits and domination. He can afford to point a finger at Sri Lanka's government today, because he has lost influence there and because he wants re-election votes from human rights-concerned citizens, albeit beguiled ones.

Cuba, which started the ALBA coalition with Venezuela in 2004, needs to reflect upon its foreign policy stance, especially in regards to Sri Lanka. It has politically backed Sri Lanka, in part, because they are both members of NAM, and Cuba often acts in a knee-jerk manner when the US points its finger at other governments, especially of Third World countries—understandably.

Yet Cuba goes overboard in backing this most ruthless Sri Lankan regime responsible for scores of thousands of civilian deaths, incarcerating hundreds of thousands without due process, that continues to militarise the traditional Tamil homeland in the north and east of the island, taking over homes, businesses, places of worship and building hotels upon Tamil graveyards.

Cuba has acted immorally, in contrast to its long-time solidarity with the oppressed and exploited peoples of the world.

The evidence of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and even genocide, is much too vivid due to testimonies of victims, satellite photos and the excellent Channel 4 documentaries with photos and videos taken by UN aid workers, some by victims or by Sri Lankan murdering soldiers and then sold or otherwise released to the public.

If Tamils in India and in the diaspora keep up the pressure, if left organisations, grassroots groups, representatives of other oppressed peoples seeking liberation (such as Palestinians, Kurds, Basques, Irish ...) join in united fronts for liberation for one and all, then we might be able to bring some real hope for Tamils in Sri Lanka.

Don't be fooled: the US does not want true accountability, or a Tamil Eelam homeland for the oppressed minority, but the spotlight has been turned on and peoples' power could stoke the light, bringing, at least, relief to the down-trodden Tamil people.

**Ron Ridenour**

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**P.S.**

\* <http://links.org.au/node/2788>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] See Tamilnet's story with draft changes:  
<http://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=35027>.

[2] <http://links.org.au/node/2755>