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Recent UN interventions

The recent history of UN interventions informs us that the UN will only intervene when the various ruling blocks within the body consider it in their interests to do so. Many past UN interventions were not as a response to popular pressure in any real respect.

() However, in many cases timely UN intervention has saved major human catastrophes and reluctance to intervene in other cases has resulted in human tragedy, whatever the motives behind the decision. UN interventions using military might to subdue authoritarian regimes always had vested interests behind the intervention and resulted in, most cases, more human tragedy. On the other hand, genuine UN military interventions for the purpose of separating forces in conflict in a country while a peaceful settlement is being worked out has generally benefited all sides.

() Is UN intervention a possibility in Sri Lanka?

During the 25 year long conflict in Sri Lanka more than 80,000 lives have been lost, most of them Tamils, one million Tamils have been internally displaced and another one million Tamils have left the country to settle down in India and many Western nations. Until 2000, when the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) declared a unilateral cease-fire and called for internationally mediated peace negotiations, the UN and its powerful member nations like the US, UK, France, Germany, etc. turned a blind eye to the human tragedy that was developing in Sri Lanka. Although there was enough evidence that genocide against Tamils has been carried out in Sri Lanka during the period 1982-2000 and, therefore, UN intervention was merited, no one talked about human rights violations at that time.

() Mahinda Rajapaksa regimes disregard for the US-backed ceasefire agreement and the Scandinavian Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) that comes under this agreement, its military approach to the conflict and the gross human rights violations carried out by the Sri Lankan security forces in complicity with Tamil paramilitaries under the direction of Presidents brother and Defence Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa, have created an ideal situation for a UN-led intervention in Sri Lanka.

As a prelude to intervention, the UN human rights monitoring machinery, other human rights monitoring organisations and conflict resolution think-tanks have been activated to do the ground-work against the Rajapaksa Governments approach and its human rights violations, as they have done before in US-initiated UN interventions in Kosova, Darfur, etc.

New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW), an independent human rights monitoring group that has hitherto written reports on LTTE fund-raising and recruitment of child soldiers suddenly started releasing detailed reports, one after the other, on the human rights violations committed by the Sri Lankan security forces and the paramilitaries operating side-by-side with the security

forces. HRW started recommending that the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) take up this issue in its sessions. UNHRC also took up this matter in its sessions in Geneva and at its last (6th) session the European Union was prepared to propose a resolution condemning the Sri Lankan government.

() The UN has also sent special envoys working in the field of human rights to Sri Lanka, to give the message that serious Human Rights violations were being committed in Sri Lanka. Allen Rock, Special Advisor to the UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, was the first one to visit and expressed his concern about the kidnapping of children from refugee camps by the paramilitaries while the security forces turn a blind eye to this. But the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Kehelika Rambukwella ridiculed him and questioned his integrity.

John Holmes, the U.N. Undersecretary-general for Humanitarian Affairs, was the next one to visit. When John Holmes gave a harsh report on the treatment of the war displaced Tamils in the East, Jeyaraj Fernandopulle, the government's chief whip in Parliament and a Cabinet minister, branded Holmes a "terrorist" and said that, if not for the bribe John Holmes had accepted from the LTTE, he would not have done such a wrong thing.

() In his 28th October 2007 report to the Security Council on the protection of civilians in armed conflict, the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon stated that despite the serious nature of these crimes and their repercussions, insufficient attempts have been made to hold perpetrators accountable. In Sri Lanka, there is still little progress in the work of the Government-established commission investigating human rights abuses, including the murders of 17 staff of Action Contre la Faim who were killed in a single, abhorrent act in August 2006. Only the terms genocide and crimes Against Humanity have to be used by the UN to justify an intervention in Sri Lanka, if they want to, the same way they have done elsewhere.

Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG), a think tank on conflict resolution headed by the former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, has also taken an active role recently in the Sri Lankan conflict. In the Kathirgamar memorial lecture that Gareth Evans delivered in Colombo, he talked about the **Responsibility to Protect (R-2-P)** policy and emphasised that the Sri Lankan government has a **responsibility to protect**

all its citizens. He also reiterated that, although the Sri Lankan situation has not yet reached that of Darfur, it will get there if the Sri Lankan government fails to look after its responsibility to prevent such an eventuality. He also hinted that if Sri Lankan government fails in its responsibility to prevent abuses, intervention by the international community is inevitable.

() Some may argue that a US-designed UN intervention is impossible in Sri Lanka because of India. But, the US would not even attempt a UN intervention mission in Sri Lanka without embracing India in the whole process. Although the US wanted a NATO-led UN intervention in Darfur, later it compromised on an African Union-dominated UN peace-keeping force there. Similarly, the US may try to work alongside India in making compromises to use an Indian-dominated UN peace-keeping force in Sri Lanka.

() Perhaps this is the reason the Co-chairs have now decided to shelve the UN intervention

approach and take a fresh approach to the peace process and are trying to put more pressure for the first time on the Sri Lankan government side, announcing that their development aid in the new year will not be given directly to the Sri Lankan government but only through non governmental organisations operating in the field. As the co-chairs have exhausted all the pressure points to exert pressure on the LTTE, the US has now designated the Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO) under its Department of Treasury Executive Order 13224 which is aimed at financially isolating terrorist groups and their support networks. E.O. 13224 freezes any assets held by designees under US jurisdiction and prohibits US persons from transacting with designees. By this action the US is attempting to freeze the US-held assets of the TRO, a charitable organization, which in the opinion of the US, acts as a front to facilitate fundraising and procurement for the LTTE.

As President Rajapaksa is immersed at the moment in maintaining a parliamentary majority of his government in parliament, he has not reacted to the Co-chairs latest actions. Therefore, whether Sri Lanka can avoid a UN intervention depends on how the Rajapaksa regime is going to handle the new approach to the peace process the Co-chairs are trying to introduce.

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