

U.N. presses Sri Lanka to pursue wartime crimes Stephanie Nebehay Reuters 21 March 2013

The United Nations urged Sri Lanka in a resolution on Thursday to carry out credible investigations into killings and disappearances during its nearly 30-year civil war, especially in the brutal final stages in 2009.

It voiced concern at reports of continuing violations including killings, torture, curbs on the right to freedom of expression, and reprisals against activists and journalists.

Resolutions such as that brought by the United States are not binding, but the scrutiny by the U.N. Human Rights Council maintains pressure on the government to prosecute crimes committed in the conflict against Tamil Tiger rebels.

"This resolution, which builds on a similar 2012 resolution, re-affirmed that Sri Lanka must take meaningful action on reconciliation and accountability in order to move forward," U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said in a statement. (...)

Tens of thousands of civilians were killed in the final months of a war that began in 1983 as government troops advanced on the last stronghold of the Tamil Tiger rebels fighting for an independent homeland, a U.N. panel has said.

The panel said it had "credible allegations" that troops and the Tamil Tigers both carried out atrocities and war crimes, but singled out the government for most of the responsibility for the deaths. The government rejects the allegation.

U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay said in a report last month that Sri Lanka was failing to investigate alleged wartime atrocities committed by government forces and that activists and opposition politicians were still being killed or abducted.

The U.S. resolution "calls upon the government to conduct an independent and credible investigation into allegations of violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law".

The 47-member Geneva forum adopted the text with 25 countries in favor, including India; and 13 against, including Pakistan. Eight abstained and one delegation was absent.

"We note with concern the inadequate progress by Sri Lanka in fulfilling its commitment to this

council in 2009," India's ambassador Dilip Sinha told the talks.

Rights groups welcomed the continuing spotlight on Sri Lanka but regretted that the council failed to establish an international investigation into wartime crimes.

"It is clear that the Sri Lankan government is unwilling and unable to investigate these events itself, so an international probe is the only way to obtain the truth and justice necessary for genuine reconciliation," Yolanda Foster, Amnesty International's expert on Sri Lanka, said in a statement.

Alex Conte, of the International Commission of Jurists, said: "Sri Lanka has a long history of promising justice but delivering impunity ... With this resolution, the international community shows it wants to see concrete action."

Sri Lankan presidential envoy Mahinda Samarasinghe took the floor at the debate to reject the U.S. resolution as "highly intrusive" and called for states to vote against the text.

"Why this preoccupation with Sri Lanka, why this inordinate and disproportionate level of interest in a country that has successfully ended a 30-year conflict against terrorism and has demonstrated so much progress in a relatively short space of time?" Samarasinghe said.

Referring to Sri Lanka's Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission, he said: "We have every confidence in our domestic processes and mechanism."

Former army chief Sarath Fonseka, who led the military to victory in the conflict, said this week he was ready to face questions about allegations of war crimes.

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