

## NEWS

# UN rights chief calls for probe, slams Sri Lanka

PRESENTING her report to the annual session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, UN High Commissioner for human rights, Navi Pillay criticised Sri Lanka for failing to examine abuses committed during the civil war last year between the government forces and Tamil Tigers.

Human rights abuses in Sri Lanka are damaging prospects for reconciliation after 25 years of civil war, Pillay, a former UN war crimes judge, told the council.

"In Sri Lanka, the opportunity for peace and reconciliation continues to be marred by the treatment of journalists, human rights defenders and other critics of government"

Repeating her call for an independent investigation into war crimes allegations in Sri Lanka, U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay told the U.N.'s Human Rights Council she was singling out outstanding cases in different countries.

"I am convinced that Sri Lanka should undertake a full reckoning of the grave violations

committed by all sides during the war, and that the international community can be helpful in this regard," she said in a speech presenting her annual report.

Her comments on Sri Lanka and other states will reassure critics of the council who argue that the 47-member body often fails to deal with human rights violations as countries unite in regional alliances to shield each other from scrutiny.

Last May, the council held a special session on Sri Lanka just after the end of the war against the Tamil Tigers, but the government deflected criticism by introducing its own resolution praising its defeat of the separatist group, which was then passed.

Sri Lanka government maintains that there were no war crimes committed and says it will not allow any international investigations.

In an earlier interview with the BBC, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa said he would not allow any such investigation as "there is no reason."



Sri Lanka is displeased by the decision of UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon to call for advise from a panel of experts, with Mahinda Rajapaksa accusing him of interfering in internal affairs

## UN rights panel labelled 'unprecedented and unwarranted' by Sri Lanka

SRI LANKA'S president has rejected the decision by the UN Secretary General to constitute a

experts panel to look into human rights abuses in the country's civil war calling it unprecedented and unwarranted and accused the world body of interfering with the internal affairs of the country, according to the president's office.

During a telephone conversation, on Thursday March 4, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon informed Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa of his plans to ask a panel of experts to advise the world body on accountability in context of allegations of human rights violations and war crimes in Sri Lanka.

"President Mahinda Rajapaksa has pointed out that the intention of the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon to appoint a panel of experts to advise him on Sri Lanka is totally uncalled for and unwarranted," Rajapaksa's office said in a statement.

Interestingly, instead of denying any wrong doing, the statement by the president's office chose to cite no such action being taken by the world body about other states where military action has led to massive civilian death tolls.

"No such action had been taken about other states with continuing armed conflicts on a large scale, involving major humanitarian catastrophes and causing the deaths of large numbers of civilians due to military action," the statement read.

The statement from the president's office implicitly acknowl-

edges large number of civilian deaths in its war against the Tamil Tigers. Previously the Sri Lankan government has maintained that civilian casualty due to its military action in the Northeast of the island was minimal.

Last month, a former United Nations official with detailed knowledge of events that unfolded in Sri Lanka in the final months of the war said Sri Lanka's military massacred as many as 40,000 Tamil civilians in the final onslaught against the Liberation Tigers in 2009.

"About 300,000 civilians, plus the Tamil Tiger forces, were trapped in an area of territory about the size of Central Park in New York," said the former United Nations' spokesperson in Sri Lanka, Gordon Weiss.

"They were within range of all the armaments that were being used, small and large, being used to smash the Tamil Tiger lines ... the end result was that many thousands lost their lives."

The statement from president's office further said: "the implementation of such an intention would certainly be perceived as an interference with the current general election campaign being held island wide."

"President Rajapaksa reiterated that any appointment of such a panel as intended would compel Sri Lanka to take necessary and appropriate action in that regard.", the statement further said. It was not clear what these 'appropriate actions' would be.

## Sri Lanka tells US to 'not dictate' solutions

SRI LANKA has angrily rebuffed a call by a US official for the island's government to focus on reconciliation and a permanent solution in regards to power sharing with the Tamils.

US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, Robert Blake called on the Sri Lankan government to "begin a process of accountability for many of the human rights abuses that may have occurred during that war," in an interview with the BBC World Service.

The US official advised the Sri Lankan government to resettle the remaining refugees from the camps as a matter of priority.

"In our view I think one of the highest priorities now is first, to complete the resettlement of the internally displaced people," Blake said.

Acknowledging that 180,000 IDP's have been resettled, he expressed concern about the lack of action taken by the government about the remaining 100,000 civilians still in the camps.

"I think it's important for them to be allowed to return to their homes and villages in the north as quickly as possible.

Secondly, I think it's important for the government to pursue as quickly as possible this process of national reconciliation and power sharing, particularly with the north," Blake added.

"And third, to again talk about the larger issue of possible war crimes that may have occurred. Again, that will be an important part of the larger reconciliation piece," Blake noted.

On the issues of human rights abuses, Blake also expressed his comments on the arrest of opposition presidential candidate Sarath Fonseka.

"So far I think it has been less than we might have hoped for, but we've certainly encouraged the government of Sri Lanka to ensure that he is charged promptly... and that everything is handled in accordance with Sri Lankan law as they move forward."

Blake said he could not comment on the charges against Fonseka as "we haven't yet seen what the charges are".

But "we've encouraged the government to make public as quickly as possible what those charges are," he said.

In Sri Lanka, there was outrage at the comments of the US South Asian official.

Media Minister Lakshman Yapa Abeywardana said these were Sri Lankan matters and that Blake had no right to dictate terms to the Sri Lankan Government on how to run its affairs.

On the issue of Fonseka, Abeywardana said that it is up to the Sri Lanka authorities to decide whether the retired general should be tried in a civil court or in a Military Court.

It followed an accusation made earlier by defence secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa in a Singaporean newspaper that the US and Norway had backed Fonseka's presidential campaign, a charge both countries denied.