

UN Sri Lanka vote threatens India's government
By AFP
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NEW DELHI: A dispute over a United Nations resolution on the bloody end to Sri Lanka's civil war with ethnic Tamil rebels is threatening the stability of India's already shaky coalition government.

A key ethnic Tamil party withdrew from the coalition Tuesday, accusing the government of watering down a UN resolution criticising Sri Lanka's war-time conduct against its minority Tamil population.

The party, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, has demanded the UN Human Rights Council resolution accuse Sri Lanka of genocide and that it lead to the formation of an international inquiry into possible war crimes.

The party also demanded a similar resolution be passed by India's Parliament.

The DMK party, from the southern state of Tamil Nadu, has 18 members in Parliament, five of them government ministers.

The issue of Sri Lanka's actions in the final five months of its quarter-century civil war in 2009 poses a conundrum for the Indian government. It is concerned that too strong a resolution will anger its Indian Ocean island neighbor and push it deeper into China's sphere of influence.

However, the anger of ethnic Tamil parties in India, and the precarious nature of the coalition, puts it under pressure to take a hard line toward Sri Lanka.

A UN investigation into the final months of the war indicated the ethnic Sinhalese-dominated government might have killed as many as 40,000 minority Tamil civilians. The Tamil Tigers had been fighting for a breakaway Tamil state in northern Sri Lanka.

Indian Finance Minister P Chidambaram said the government was still considering its position on the UN vote, adding that any resolution by Parliament would require a consultation with its other government allies, a process the Congress party had already begun.

He insisted the DMK's withdrawal would not topple the government, even though the coalition is already a minority government that leans heavily on small regional parties and is routinely held hostage to their pet interests.

National elections are not expected until next year.

The DMK accused the government of diluting a draft Sri Lanka resolution sponsored by the United States and ignoring the Tamil party's concerns.

"It will be a big harm to the Tamil race for the DMK to continue in government," said the party's leader, M. Karunanidhi.

Several Tamil legislators, from the DMK and an opposition party, disrupted Parliament, storming the well and chanting, "We want justice."

However, Karunanidhi left open the possibility of rejoining the government, saying, "We are ready to change our opinion" if the demands are met.

The UN draft resolution, posted on a UN website late Monday, calls on Sri Lanka to implement the recommendations of its own war commission and take action to ensure justice and reconciliation in the country.

It also calls for the implementation of recommendations issued last month by the UN's top human rights official, Navi Pillay, who accused the government of failing to investigate reports of widespread killings and other war-time atrocities.

Pillay's report said opposition leaders were being killed or abducted in Sri Lanka. It also questioned the government's commitment to postwar justice and urged Sri Lankan authorities to allow international experts to investigate allegations of human rights violations. Rights group Amnesty International also blamed India for pushing for a weak UN resolution.

"There is a lot of evidence in this draft resolution to clearly show the imprint of Indian influence. There is a significant downgrading of the international community's concerns regarding human rights violations in Sri Lanka," G Ananthapadmanabhan, the head of Amnesty International in India, said in a statement.

The rights council passed a similar resolution last year that human rights campaigners accuse Sri Lanka of largely ignoring.

Ananthapadmanabhan said the new resolution is especially weak given new information about possible war crimes that has come to light since last year.

Congress President Sonia Gandhi declined to comment on the DMK's withdrawal, but earlier Tuesday called for an "independent and credible" inquiry.

"We are anguished by reports of unspeakable atrocities on innocent civilians and children, especially during the last days of the conflict in 2009," she said, according to the Press Trust of India news agency.

A Sri Lanka spokesman denied that his government was involved in genocide.

"This is far from the truth," Keheliya Rambukwella said.

He also dismissed the events in neighbouring India.

"We don't get involved in provincial politics of another country," he said.

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