Move at U.N. on Carnage in Sri Lanka Sets Off Fury

By NICK CUMMING-BRUCÉ


GENEVA — An American-led initiative calling on Sri Lanka to account for the carnage that ended its civil war three years ago has become the focus of a diplomatic dispute in Geneva and anger in Sri Lanka.

The arena for the dispute is a session here of the United Nations Human Rights Council, where the United States has put forward a resolution calling on the Sri Lankan government “to address serious allegations of violations of international law by initiating credible and independent investigations and prosecutions of those responsible for such violations.” Debate on the resolution is set to begin on Thursday.

A United Nations panel said last year that the Sri Lankan Army, in the course of what the government called a “humanitarian rescue operation,” caused the deaths of as many as 40,000 civilians in the final stages of the war against the Tamil Tigers insurgency. The panel’s report found credible evidence that both sides in the conflict had committed war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Eileen Donahoe, the American ambassador to the rights council, said the proposed resolution was “exceedingly cooperative and collaborative in spirit” and avoided specific reference to those charges. It calls on Sri Lanka to put in place “constructive recommendations” made by a commission that the country set up in 2010 to examine the civil war, and on the United Nations human rights commissioner to report back in a year on progress.

Ms. Donahoe said in an interview that the resolution was part of a “very genuine attempt to encourage the Sri Lankan government in the right direction,” and that it followed months of bilateral contacts.

Yet Sri Lanka is mobilizing to fight it off. President Mahinda Rajapaksa has contacted leaders of governments in Asia, Africa and Latin America to rally opposition to the resolution, diplomats say. The foreign minister, Gamini Peiris, condemned it as “strikingly divisive and polarizing” and “an initiative against Sri Lanka.” And the country sent a delegation of more than 70 people to Geneva to mount a vigorous lobbying campaign at the council session.

Sri Lanka already has an action plan for promoting human rights, Mahinda Samarasinghe, a government minister and special envoy on human rights, told the council at the end of February. What the
country needs, Mr. Samarasinghe said, is time to make progress in rehabilitating the war zone, not pressure from abroad or a “redundant resolution” at the council.

Human rights groups said that protests had been staged in Sri Lanka attacking the resolution as Western meddling, and the pro-government news media have denounced activists who favor the resolution as supporters of the defeated rebels.

Sri Lankan nongovernmental organizations represented in Geneva have complained of intimidation by government delegates, saying they have repeatedly photographed the groups’ members, even inside the chambers of the rights council. The complaints prompted an extraordinary rebuke by the council’s president, Laura Dupuy Lasserre of Uruguay.

The outcome of the debate is being seen as a test of the council as well as of Sri Lanka. In 2009, soon after the civil war ended, the Sri Lankan government surprised its critics by persuading the council to pass a resolution largely commending its approach to reconciliation, with backing from Sri Lanka’s Asian neighbors and other developing countries. Diplomats and council observers say it would be harder to do the same now.

Human rights groups have seized the opportunity to air allegations of continuing human rights abuses in Sri Lanka, affecting not only the Tamil minority but also any government critics. Amnesty International released a report last week listing 32 abductions or disappearances in the country since October, and criticized what it called a sense of impunity for security forces.

And diplomats say Sri Lanka cannot count on regional solidarity as much as before. Pakistan and Thailand have voiced their opposition to the resolution, but domestic political pressures appear to have pushed India, Sri Lanka’s neighbor and ally, the other way. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh told Parliament on Monday that India was inclined to support the resolution.