Sri Lanka bristles over UN war crimes report
By James Lamont in Delhi, 26 April 2011

The Sri Lankan government has warned of sweeping protests against the UN after it criticised the military campaign that ended a long-running civil war against the Tamil Tigers rebel group.

Mahinda Rajapaksa, Sri Lanka’s president, has called for May day protests to condemn the UN’s findings, published on Monday. Its report outlines suspected war crimes against civilians in the fight against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, including the shelling of safe zones, bombing of hospitals and summary executions.

The report is the biggest pressure on the government since the end of the war in May 2009, when western governments pushed in vain for a ceasefire to protect civilians.

Protests are expected to be held across northern and eastern parts of the Indian Ocean island in the coming days, raising fears of a return to ethnic strife after two years of peace. A protest in support of the national army took place in the central city of Kandy on Monday.

Fears of an outbreak of hostility towards Sri Lanka’s Tamil population may deter the UN from seeking to launch a full investigation and pursue prosecution of war crimes suspects.

Colombo had earlier warned that the UN’s decision to publish the report by an expert panel would “damage” postwar reconciliation between the island’s Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority. It has strongly denied the suspected abuses, which have been alleged by human rights groups, including the International Crisis Group.

Mr Rajapaksa’s allies have called the UN report, which claims that crimes were committed by both sides in the conflict, “entirely flawed”.

A senior minister said on Monday that the panel was “one-sided” in favour of the Tamil Tigers and its findings were “baseless”.

The panel had concluded that “Sri Lanka’s efforts, nearly two years after the end of the war, fall dramatically short of international standards on accountability”.

Ban Ki-moon, UN secretary-general, has appeared hesitant to act on the panel’s findings and recommendations. On Monday he said he lacked the authority to order a full investigation into the suspected killings of as many as 40,000 civilians in the final phase of the war.

A full investigation would require Colombo’s consent or agreement among UN member nations. Russia and China, which both have veto power on the council, and India are opposed to formal Security Council involvement in Sri Lanka, diplomats told Reuters news agency. Practically, this means there is little chance of an international investigation.

China, a UN Security Council member which has previously protected Sri Lanka from international pressure, would likely be reluctant to support action to bring the island’s military to account. “The Sri Lankan government’s immediate dismissal of the report as biased demonstrates that there is no chance of a serious domestic justice process,” Brad Adams, Asia director of New York-based Human Rights Watch.

“The only hope for victims of the conflict is an international investigation leading to prosecutions.”

Since the end of a 26-year long civil war, Sri Lanka has enjoyed a period of strong economic recovery. The economy expanded 8 per cent last year compared with 3.5 per cent in 2009. The island’s stock market was one of the world’s best performers last year, and has continued to rise this year.