



Mahinda Rajapaksa has been irritated by David Cameron's criticism during his Sri Lanka trip

Sri Lanka plan to catch out Cameron

The island's rulers have devised a way to head off Britain's call for a war crimes investigation, writes Nicola Smith in Colombo

SRI LANKA is considering setting up a South African-style Truth and Reconciliation Commission after shrugging off David Cameron's demands for an independent inquiry into alleged atrocities at the end of its 25-year civil war. Cameron, speaking at the biennial summit of Commonwealth nations yesterday, repeated demands for an independent war crimes inquiry and set a deadline of March before pressing for an international investigation under United Nations auspices. But President Mahinda Rajapaksa refused and sources in his government suggested he would instead sidestep international investigators by favouring a less confrontational option based on the South African model, which

paved the way for democracy but led to blanket amnesties for past crimes on both sides. Cameron emerged as the most vocal critic of Colombo's human rights record during the summit that ends today. The decision to hold the meeting on the island has generated controversy for months amid mounting protests about continued human rights violations and alleged war crimes dating back to 2009, when, according to the UN, up to 40,000 civilians, many of them Tamil, may have been killed in the final months of conflict. "President Rajapaksa now has a real opportunity through magnanimity and reform to build a successful, inclusive and prosperous future for his country," Cameron said yesterday. "[This] means credible,

transparent and independent investigations into alleged war crimes," he said. The government immediately hit back. "We are not going to allow it; definitely we will object to it," said the president's brother Basil Rajapaksa, the economics minister. Responding to questions about Cameron's ultimatum, the president retorted that "they can say what they like... people in glass houses should not throw stones". His comments appeared to allude to the Northern Ireland peace process, which Cameron had mentioned several times as the basis for Sri Lanka's own post-war reconciliation. Rajapaksa insisted the country already had its own inquiries on reconciliation and missing persons under way, though these have been widely criticised for achieving little. Earlier in the day Rajapaksa had sought the advice of the South African president, Jacob Zuma, on his country's reconciliation commission, in which both the victims and perpetrators of apartheid testified. It was widely praised for

helping the country come to terms with its past, though some victims claimed the system allowed murderers to escape justice. "Our president said he would like to learn more about the process in South Africa," said a Rajapaksa aide. Critics of the government said the South African model would be unworkable. Suren Surendiran, a spokesman for the Global Tamil Forum, said Tamils would feel cheated by anything short of an international inquiry. "It is a delaying tactic by Mahinda Rajapaksa to avoid the noose falling on him by March 2014," he claimed. Cameron's hosts could barely conceal their fury last week that he had hijacked the pomp and ceremony they had laid on to impress their Commonwealth guests with his persistent and embarrassing allegations. As the first foreign leader to visit the north of the island since the country's independence in 1948, Cameron said he wanted to "shine a global spotlight" on an area where the

worst atrocities of the war were allegedly committed. On Friday he met refugees who lost their homes during the war and visited the Tamil Uthayan newspaper, where six journalists have been murdered since 2006. His convoy was mobbed by crowds, many of them tearful women, whose relatives had disappeared during and since the conflict ended in May 2009. However, Sri Lanka's most famous cricketer, Muttiah Muralitharan, who met Cameron yesterday, cautioned that he may have been "misled" about the island's appalling human rights record as he personally had seen a "1,000 improvement" in the north of the country. In a separate move, Cameron announced at the summit that Britain would extend its Victoria Cross commemoration programme to all Commonwealth "heroes" who fought for Britain in the First World War. That's the president of Sri Lanka, PM, not one of your fags, Rod Liddle, page 29



CHRIS JACKSON/EPA

Buying frenzy as shops ordered to cut prices

Miriam Wells and Girish Gupta Caracas

SHE may hate her government but Carmen Cecilia loves cheap shoes. The 35-year-old office worker was one of thousands of people queuing for bargains in Venezuela last week after President Nicolas Maduro ordered prices to be slashed. "I'm waiting because I want some high heels, it's definitely worth it. Of course I don't support the government but I've got to make the most of this," Cecilia said. The shopping frenzy began last weekend after the socialist government sent the army into a leading electronics chain, demanding that it sell its products at "fair prices" or face prosecution. Maduro, 50, was elected by a slim majority in April following the death of President Hugo Chavez. He claimed retailers were robbing his people by charging vastly inflated prices. Crowds rushed to stores to get their hands on goods marked down by up to 60%. Faced with the threat of government intervention, many retailers had cut their prices voluntarily. Looters broke into stores at dozens of shopping centres. Elsewhere, though, the mood was of happy camaraderie. "We want to buy! We want to buy!" chanted shoppers queuing outside one electrical store, cheering those who emerged with cut-price goods. More than 100 shop managers and businessmen were arrested, many accused of usury, a crime defined as a seller gaining a "notoriously disproportionate advantage" over their customer. "They are barbaric, these capitalist parasites!" said Maduro in one of his many lengthy daily speeches. He will be fighting municipal elections next month. "We have more than 100 of the bourgeoisie



MIGUEL GUTIERREZ

Venezuelans are flocking to buy goods at a big discount

behind bars at the moment." Earlier last week he had declared: "Let there be nothing left on the shelves." Strict currency controls have left the oil-rich country facing severe shortages of basic products and annual inflation of 54%, one of the world's highest rates. Everyday goods such as lavatory paper, milk, rice and cooking oil disappear at times from supermarket shelves. Demand for dollars is so high that on the black market, where many importers say they are forced to turn, the currency sells for nearly 10 times the official rate. "Every shop owner here is terrified," said Fatima, the manager of a clothing franchise in Sambil, Caracas, one of Latin America's largest shopping centres. "This country is getting worse and worse — the government just doesn't understand how an economy works." On Thursday the national assembly voted to grant Maduro, a former bus driver and union leader, decree powers that he said would be used immediately to impose limits on prices and profits "to protect our people from speculators, thieves and bourgeois parasites". The government also blocked access to at least 50 websites giving information on the black market dollar rate. Maduro's policy echoes that of President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe who in 2007 ordered all prices in shops to be cut in half — with predictably disastrous consequences. Henrique Capriles, Maduro's opponent in April's presidential election, said the price-slashing was a desperate attempt to avoid losing municipalities in next month's poll. "Every time Maduro opens his mouth, investments shift to other countries," he said. Maduro's economic policies are even more radical than Chavez's, according to Luis Vincent Leon, a political analyst, who expects more "crowd-pleasing" measures in the coming weeks. "Chavez had popularity and charisma that allowed him to control the situation," he said. "Maduro does not and is turning to radicalism instead."

China rules out baby boom as one-child policy is eased

Michael Sheridan Far East Correspondent

CHINESE officials have moved swiftly to play down expectations that changes to the country's "one child" policy will usher in a baby boom in the world's most populous country. A loosening of curbs on

family size was the most headline-grabbing change to emerge after a key closed-door conclave of the ruling Communist party last week, seen as setting a road map for the administration of President Xi Jinping. At present, most city-dwellers are forbidden to have more than one child, but there are exceptions for country-dwellers whose first child is a girl and for parents who are themselves only children. The latter exception will now be extended to couples of whom only one partner is a single child. Chinese health ministry officials said yesterday there was no fundamental change to the policy, noting that the new rules would initially apply only in some provinces. Experts say it is expected to affect 15m-20m parents. Wang Peian, deputy director of the health ministry, said the aim was "adjusting and perfecting" the policy. China, home to nearly 1.4bn people, could not afford the social and economic disruption of a baby boom, he said. Chinese media reports said 2020 was the earliest date that all couples might be allowed to have two children, but there has been no official endorsement of that.



The fertility rate is falling

Nor should it be assumed that all couples would necessarily want to have more than one child. Chinese couples are already opting for smaller families, driving the country's fertility rate down to 1.5-1.6 births per woman. "A baby boom can be safely ruled out," said Wang Feng, professor of sociology at the University of California Irvine. "Young people's reproductive desires have changed." Other changes agreed at the meeting included opening state-owned industries to more competition, intensifying anti-corruption efforts and ending the "re-education through labour programme" — under which dissidents can be detained without due process.

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