

**American Embassy Colombo  
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**For Immediate Release**

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**PRESS CONFERENCE**

**Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs  
Richard A. Boucher**

**May 10, 2007  
Cinnamon Grand Hotel  
Colombo, Sri Lanka**

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:**

I want first of all to say thank you to the government and the people of Sri Lanka for hosting me and for showing their great hospitality, and also helping me understand what's going on. I've talked with a lot of people from government, from the media, from civil society, from all walks of life, and I really appreciated the opportunity and the openness that people have shown in talking to me and discussing various aspects of the issues.

I must say I am concerned about the way things have been heading. We have been following this very closely from Washington. Secretary Rice, Under Secretary Burns and I have talked about Sri Lanka very frequently and there is a lot of concern. There is concern on several fronts that I will outline for you.

The first of these is what the situation is doing to the people of Sri Lanka. The economic situation: growth is still steady, but if you look at it you have more problems, problems with canceled tourists, canceled flights, and suspended aid programs. This is not good for the future. I think that is a consequence of people making these difficult decisions because of the security situation, the breakdown of the ceasefire, and the human rights situation on the island, which has developed a lot of concern among people.

We recognize that the people of Sri Lanka continue to face the threat of terrorism. They face the threat from the Tamil Tigers, an organization that continues to be a terrorist group, continues to be a group that recruits child soldiers, extorts money, kills people, blows up buses, and attacks government facilities. We also know the international community can help in this regard. We are helping, and we will help. We do have defense cooperation with the Sri Lankan military. The international community has been taking action to try to slow the ability of the Tamil Tigers to get supplies, to get money, and to get weapons. You have seen a couple of big cases in the United States, you have seen cases in Canada, cases in Australia, cases in France, and cases in Tamil Nadu in India. There has been a lot of action by the international community to try to constrict the flow of money and arms to the Tamil Tigers because we are opposed to terrorism and stand with the people of Sri Lanka against terrorism.

But we also believe that we need action to try to move the situation forward -- forward toward peace, forward toward respect for justice for all the people of Sri Lanka. In that regard, I spent a lot of time during my visit talking about the devolution discussion: the prospects of having a set of proposals from this side of the island that can give a perspective to the Tamil community to show them that they have a place of respect, that they have a place on the island, that they have a role in society where they can control much of their own affairs.

I told the government – I told the Sri Lankan Freedom Party, put it that way – that I welcome the fact that they had put forward a proposal. There are a variety of proposals and ideas out there. None of these proposals has achieved a consensus yet, but that remains a very, very important cause, that remains an important endeavor that all the parties need to cooperate in.

Whatever proposals one party might put forward, whatever they might think of somebody else's proposals, whatever they may think of the ideas that the Chairman has brought together, it's important that people put all the parties to work toward a consensus through the All Parties Representative Committee. Because only when we have that kind of consensus – that kind of consensus that gives the Tamil community as a whole a sense of how they can work and how they can live on this island – only when we have that consensus can we have a basis for peace talks. So that's what we are looking for, and that's what we have asked all the parties to pledge themselves to and to work toward through the All Party Representatives Committee.

The other thing that we have talked about quite a bit has been the human rights situation. And there are two aspects that concern us most. One is abductions and killings, and the second is freedom of the press.

I think that it is important that the government has reiterated the guidelines for arrest and transparency of arrest by the police or the military. It is important that they have asked all people in government employment to respect those guidelines. It is important to implement them thoroughly, and that is a welcome step.

But I think that it is also important as one straightens out, you might say, the way the government handles arrests, it is also important that the government ensures security for everybody. And in the current circumstance that means stopping and controlling the paramilitary groups that have operated in various parts of the island and who are suspected, believed, known to be involved in many of the abductions and killings that have occurred in recent months. So we discussed the need to do that, we discussed how to do that, and I hope that we will see progress on that front. But for people from all communities on this island to be able to live safely and without fear, these groups need to be stopped.

There are a number of committees and proposals operating now, inquiries to try to ensure accountability for things that have occurred in the past. We remain very concerned about some of the killings, the killings of aid workers, killings of people at various places on the island that have occurred in the last year or so. These committees and groups have an important role to play, and now that they are formed, now that they are working, they need to come up with answers. They need to satisfy a hunger for the truth. They need to be able to hold accountable people who might have been involved in these things. I think everybody recognizes that anyone who did these things has committed criminal acts. These are aberrations; these are things that need to be stopped. People need to be held accountable for the ones that occurred in the past. In that regard, I note the International Independent Group of Eminent Persons, both the senior level members, who are back on the island, and the experts – they have an important role to play by looking at these things in more detail and making suggestions and observations about how it could be moved forward more concretely and more quickly. So there are many things to do.

The other area of human rights that I raised is press freedom. We've seen a lot of different reports. We've seen reports of intimidation, reports of government power being used on newspapers and journalists; and then, of course, we've seen killings and violent acts committed against newspapers and journalists. Those are of great concern to us, because press freedom is one of the fundamentals to exposing bad practices, to holding people accountable and letting people on the island make their decisions through the democratic process about how they want to move forward and how they want to be governed. So we will always speak up in defense of the press. We will always point to the abuses that might be occurring.

In all this we continue to view the situation with hope. We continue to believe that there are solutions to these problems, that these difficult tasks can be achieved, because the people of this island certainly

deserve solutions. They deserve peace and they deserve opportunity. And we will continue to work very hard for that. We will continue to press forward toward that goal. We will work with other members of the international community. We will work with the government and we will work with people throughout this society.

I'll be glad to take your questions.

**Question:** (Shamila Wanigasekera – YATV)

Mr. Ambassador, have there been any reassurances by the government on upholding the human rights situation in Sri Lanka?

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:**

I think I did hear a commitment from the government to uphold human rights. I heard a commitment by the government to hold people accountable for crimes and infractions that have occurred in the past. I heard a commitment by the government to take steps to try to ensure that human rights violations do not occur in the future. And indeed, I cited one area -- the re-issuance of transparent guidelines on arrests -- that I think is a step forward. But, as I said, there is a lot more that needs to be done. And there is a responsibility not just to deal with the behavior of people in government employment in the security forces, but also to have government get control over the situation of the paramilitaries so that people can live more safely. We did talk about that, about how all those things can be done, and I think there is a basic commitment there. The question is how well it is being carried out.

**Question:** Muralidhar Reddy [The Hindu]

It's a two-part question. Yesterday there was announcement from the White House that your mission to Colombo is meant to explore new initiatives for peace. You haven't said anything about that. The second part of my question is this: The Foreign Secretary of Sri Lanka has gone on record that air power of Tigers is a threat to nuclear assets in South Asia. Has this assessment been shared with Washington? If so, do you agree with it?

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:**

You are ahead of me on the White House briefing. I didn't see exactly what they said or how it is worded. But I think we are always looking for the way forward. As I said, we come here with a positive attitude. We come here knowing that people here are basically committed to the same goals and the same values as we have, and our goal is to work with them to find a way forward, to find the avenues for peace and the basis for negotiations and peace. And so that is what I am doing: coming here, working with people to find a way forward. I think if we are able to move forward with devolution proposals that could be a basis for acceptance of the Tamil community within this society, acceptance of the basic idea that devolution gives people control over their own lives, then we probably also have a basis for renewed peace talks. So we are looking at how that can be done.

As far as the assessment on air power and nuclear assets, I haven't seen anything on that, so I would not have any comment at this point.

**Question:** Muralidhar Reddy [The Hindu]

Getting back into the human rights question. The British government has frozen its aid to Sri Lanka to try to improve human rights here. Has your government given any such demand to our government?

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:**

We always look carefully at our aid programs from two aspects: one is what can we do effectively? And two: what's the effect of what we are doing? And I think we are comfortable that we have a great many programs here that support the people of Sri Lanka, that help displaced people, that help build the education system, and other things like that. There is one program in the planning stages from the Millennium Challenge Corporation, and that is sort of more of a corporate-type activity. And that has not been proceeding forward because there are concerns in that area about the ability to carry out the project given the security situation and the human rights situation. So I think different governments have reacted differently to these things, but we are very careful about what we can do to make sure it contributes to the situation, and it contributes to the lives of people here.

**Question:** (Thinakkural)

Talking about the recent British government debate, what is your U.S. Government's concern or stand on that issue?

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:**

I think I'll leave it to the British government to explain British policies. Sorry, I'm not going to go there.

**Question:** (Follow up from Thinakkural)

OK, then about human rights issues. Rather than issuing statements, are there any active measures to prevent these abuses, especially abductions, extra judicial killings, and threats to media personalities?

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:**

I'm not quite sure what you are asking for. The United States, I think, has been active. We have been active in looking at these things, looking for solutions. We have appointed and sent experts and representatives for the International Independent Group of Eminent Persons. We have raised these issues in very precise and specific terms with a variety of people on this island who can do something about them. And that is where things have to be done.

**Question:** (Follow up from Thinakkural)

And what is your ...

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:**

Okay, That's enough. Three apiece or two apiece. Okay, why don't we go down here?

**Question:** (The Hindustan Times)

Would you enlighten us on the corporate projects which have not been implemented because of the security situation? You mentioned that there are projects which have not been implemented.

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:**

The Millennium Challenge Corporation has been working on some projects for a number of years that they were looking at. They were looking at some road building, and they still have said that Sri Lanka is eligible, Sri Lanka meets the basic criteria, but given the current circumstances, they have not been able to proceed with the project. If circumstances would change we would hope to go forward.

**Question:** (Neth FM radio)

Ambassador, how do you assess the commitment of the government to a peaceful solution, and on the other hand, the commitment of the main opposition party to the same?

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:**

I think all the political leaders and people in the government I talked to were committed. They just have different ideas about how to go about it. What I tried to emphasize to them is that the consensus on this side, the consensus through the All Parties Committee, is the best basis that we can have for going forward – a consensus that identifies for the Tamil community their role in the island, their place, their control over various levels of government and their own lives. That is the best basis for the country to go forward, and also for the peace talks to go forward. So I think there is an understanding of that fact, but there are obviously differences of approach. And what I have tried to emphasize is this is not an issue where politics should really enter into the picture. There is always plenty of stuff for political parties to debate and discuss and argue about, but I don't think this is one of them. This is where there needs to be an effort to reach a national consensus by all the parties. And that is what I have tried to encourage.

**Question:**

You said that U.S. Government has a variety of cooperative measures and assistance programs with the government of Sri Lanka, and it's important that we defend our country and its people. And you all had deferred, I mean, there were plans regarding this and they were deferred to the future. Now, with the recent LTTE air attacks, don't you think that it's time that you implemented some of these deferred plans?

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:**

I don't think they were deferred. I think I said they are ongoing. And will be accomplished in the future. We have concentrated mostly on working with the government, helping the government interdict supplies that the LTTE might be receiving. We have done some training. We have done long-term training for officers, both skills training and professional training, so that Sri Lanka can have a military that is responsive to civilian authority and responsive to the needs of the people of Sri Lanka. And we will look at other ways that we can help defend the people of Sri Lanka and help the government defend the people of Sri Lanka from the activities of terrorist groups.

**Question:** Simon Gardner from Reuters.

What is your central message to the government regarding human rights abuses that are blamed on the elements of security forces, both by truce monitors and the UN envoy? And the second part is, human rights groups are calling for an international rights monitoring mission here, perhaps even UN-backed. How vital do you think that is?

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:**

I think on the first issue the message is the one I gave before, which basically boils down to saying: as a democratic government you are held to a high standard of human rights. As a democratic government, you have an obligation to protect human rights, and I think everybody in the government understands that very, very clearly. And in order to do that effectively, you have to hold people accountable for past abuses, and you have to protect the population from any further abuses.

As far as calls for international human rights monitoring, we will see where that goes and how the discussion develops. I think the first responsibility for human rights monitoring falls with the government, falls with the country, falls with the people. Free press is a vital part of that, but also organizations like the Human Rights Commission and other organizations on the island need to be active in monitoring the human rights situation. The police and the other groups need to actively investigate, and it should be the government that takes responsibility for monitoring and improving the human rights

situation. And then to the extent the international community can help with that, either through training or monitoring or other ways, I'm sure the international community will be happy to do that.

**Question:** Easwaran Rutnam from the Daily Mirror.

You were talking about paramilitaries. Do you foresee the United States possibly in the future listing the Karuna faction as a terrorist organization if they continue to do basically what the LTTE is doing as well? And you were scheduled to meet the Co-Chairs today. What's the feeling among the Co-Chairs about the situation in the country?

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:**

I did meet with the ambassadors from Co-Chair countries today to compare notes on the situation, to talk about what we have been seeing. I have been in touch with my counterparts in the Co-Chairs – the Norwegians, the Japanese, the Europeans. So we do keep in constant touch with the Co-Chairs and share analysis and points of emphasis. We are not issuing statements right now, so I'm not going to try to issue a statement on their behalf. But I think everybody is watching the situation very closely.

As far as whether Karuna could get itself listed for engaging in terrorism, at this point I don't know what to predict. Certainly we will look at any group that consistently engages in terrorist activities and we will develop information and determine whether or not they meet our specific legal standards. But I would not be able to say if that criteria would be met or at what point it would be met without further study.

**Question:** (Derana TV)

Ambassador, you were talking about concerns regarding the security situation and the human rights situation in the country, and especially you were talking about the devolution proposals. But over the years, we have seen the international community talking about everything. But we have seen that the LTTE haven't stopped their terrorist acts, and rather, they have increased their terrorism activities. Now they have even gone to air power. The international community was always pressurizing, but it has not materialized. And now the LTTE has shown their supreme power, even gone up to air power. Now, what has the United States as a country, now, we have been asking, what can you do rather than talking, but at the end of the day the terrorism doesn't end. Now, this is a very serious...

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:**

Okay, I got the gist of it. What we can do is what I told you we were doing. I don't think there is any question that the international community stands against terrorism. You have seen action in country after country after country, including action in the United States, to prevent the Tamil Tigers from being able to raise money and buy arms. That kind of action is continuing and will continue in countries throughout the world. I think that is the first thing. The second thing, as I just noted a couple of seconds ago, is that we have been working with the government to try to help them defend the population against attacks by the Tamil Tigers. So I think we are standing with both the government and the people of Sri Lanka against terrorism and also pursuing ways forward to peace. That is what we are doing and that is what we'll need to do.

**Question:** (The Hindu)

Why didn't the United States take note of the air raids by the LTTE? What is the rationale behind it?

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:**

I don't understand the question.

**Question:**

Why has the United States not taken any stand on the air raids by LTTE?

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:**

Oh, I think we have. We are against them.

**Question:**

You haven't said that. I've not seen any such statements.

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:**

Well, I just told you that. We think they are very bad. They should not happen. They ought to stop. And the government has every right to stop those airplanes from hurting people and killing people and damaging the interests of the island.

**Question:** (Daily News)

What will be your assessment on Sri Lanka to Washington? And based on this assessment, will there be a change of U.S. policy toward Sri Lanka?

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:**

I think the basic assessment is the one that I gave you: that the people of Sri Lanka are facing difficult times, that we need to work with them and help them in defending themselves against terrorism and also in living safer and better lives without some of those threats that exist here, including the threat of paramilitaries. But also that there are ways forward, and that we need to push on those ways forward, need to try to work with everybody here to move forward, so that we can find a path toward more stability, and so we can find a path toward peace.

Was there a second part? Are we are going to change policy because of it? I don't see any immediate changes. I suppose we are always looking for more that we can do, different things we can do that might give us better prospects. But, fundamentally, looking for safety, justice, and peace for Sri Lanka – that doesn't change.

**Question:** (AFP)

Mr. Boucher, you were in Jaffna yesterday. What is your assessment of the situation? And the next thing is, since your last visit last year, do you think the human rights situation has improved, or deteriorated further?

**Assistant Secretary Boucher:**

I think on the overall human rights situation, as you have seen from our observations and the Human Rights Report, but also more generally commentary in Sri Lanka and elsewhere, there has been a deterioration of human rights on the island. People have more fears. They have faced more difficulties. And some issues, like questions of freedom of the press, have risen much higher on the level of concern.

As far as Jaffna, I would say Jaffna has all these things I talked about, but even greater. There have been some improvements there, there have been more regular and better supplies of food, there have been a few more job opportunities, more fishing – things like that that give the people a bit more livelihood.

And I think those things will continue, because the government people who are up there understand that the population there needs to be able to live and needs to support itself.

As far as the overall climate, though, I found a lot of people who are very afraid, a lot of people who are afraid because of the killings and abductions that have taken place in Jaffna. I think you have reported that we have seen some reduction of abductions in the Colombo area in the past, although I note there were two people abducted last night. But I don't think that is true at all in Jaffna. We saw three students abducted not long ago. You have seen journalists killed, we have seen people killed up there, and these are really serious threats to the people in that area, and they feel them very deeply. So whether I talked to people in the government or people in civil society or students, I found a lot of people very worried about their security, worried about their lives, and about how they were going to go forward. And recognizing the steps the government authorities have been taking up there, there is more that needs to be done to create a climate where people feel like they are safe. And that is one of the most important functions of government. So I hope they can achieve that and I hope they will achieve that.

Thank you very much. It was good to see you all.

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