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The United States reiterated its willingness to support President Mahinda Rajapaksa to achieve the desired task of the Commission of Inquiry appointed by the President to probe into the killings of 17 aid workers and other human rights violations.

In an interview with the Sunday Observer US Ambassador Robert Blake said the US has no intention in interfering with the Commission and the US strongly believed in the independence of the Commission.

Blake along with another diplomat was accused of holding a meeting with the commissioners said that the agenda of the meeting was only to discuss the 'logistic matters'.

Excerpts:



Q: Are you satisfied with the support that the US had offered so far to Sri Lanka and what are the strategic areas where the US and Sri Lanka should work closely?

A: Yes. The US and Sri Lanka are close friends for more than 50 years now. The US is a strong supporter of Sri Lanka's fight against terrorism. We strongly believe that Sri Lanka like all other countries has an obligation to defend its people against LTTE terrorism.

The US has provided military, law enforcement and other kinds of support to help the government to defend itself while believing that a purely a military solution would not be the correct solution for this conflict.

The US believes that the answer to the conflict lies with a power sharing concept which can respond to the aspirations of Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims. We also believe that in this very important stage of the conflict, it is very important for the government to address the human rights issues as well.

The US also has concerns about Tamils who suffer disproportionately due to human rights violations. It is important to give them a sense of feeling that they could live with respect and dignity here. So improving the human rights performances is also an important aspect of our dialogue with the government.

Q: The US supports developing countries. Sri Lanka has been battered and bruised by LTTE terrorism and how best the US could support in curbing terrorism?

A: I think I have just answered that question. The US is one of the first countries to declare LTTE as a foreign terrorist organisation in 1997. We have also helped to investigate and prosecute people in the US, who were trying to provide arms to the LTTE.

So, the FBI, for an example, has conducted distinct operations that had resulted in the arrest of many people and those investigations are on-going. We also have a central bank, which improves financial investigations to track down the money flow into the LTTE and help to stop those money from flowing in.

Then the most importantly we work with our friends in the military to help them to stop import of arms into this country.

We gave them a maritime surveillance system last year - a radar system - that will give the Sri Lanka Navy a much better picture of LTTE naval activities in their waters and thereby give them the opportunity to detect LTTE shipments of arms. I must say they have enjoyed considerable success last year in sinking many of these ships.

The ban on LTTE is extremely effective in terms of implementing the American law. People understand that we are very strict about forcing our laws which will prosecute anyone who is believed to be illegally assisting the LTTE.

Q: Criticism had mounted when the East was about to be liberated. Now the Mahinda Rajapaksa government has created the right environment to give more power to the

people whereby they can look after their own affairs. What is your comment on restoring democracy in the East?

A: I think President Rajapaksa and the Sri Lankan Government made very important progress over the past year. First they have expelled the LTTE from the East. That is a positive development and secondly they have restored government services.

In the East they have reopened schools, hospitals and government institutions. Now there is a greater sense of normalcy in many towns in the East. People are out late at nights, going for movies and for shopping which is a big achievement after 20 years. There is stability now, in that part of the country.

With regard to the election we always support the principle of free elections. It is important to allow the local inhabitants to represent their views. There have been some controversies which were highlighted in the media.

The Opposition parties have alleged that there were many irregularities. The US is not in a position to judge since we did not have observers on the ground. But we think that it is important for the government and the new Provincial Council to look into those charges seriously and act on them.

In the long run it is really important to consider what the people of the East believe. If they believe that it was largely a free and fair election and they support the new council, then the international community should also be prepared to accept their decision in toto.

In terms of what happens after, I think that the new Chief Minister has an important challenge on his hand. First of all, he has to assure security, because on one hand he is the chosen Chief Minister of the Eastern Province and on the other hand he is the head of the TMVP which still has armed cadres.

So, he is in a difficult position where he has to enforce state law as the Chief Minister and on the other hand a fairly large number of armed cadres. I think something must be done and they can not continue to do illegal activities in the East.

Otherwise they would undermine the leadership of Pillaiyan and the transition that the TMVP is trying to make while being a para-military group and a political party. So, we support the idea of them of being a political party. But that transition must be completed and certainly they can not be in both.

Beyond the challenge of security, I think that the new Chief Minister in order to secure the support of the people of the East, it is very important to show that he has been given opportunities to serve all other communities in the East and pursuing development in a neutral way.

And I think that way he can ensure that there is harmony among these communities and also stability in the East, which will automatically reach to a greater development and priority for the people of the East.

Q: Will the US continue with its support to develop the East?

A: Yes, we have quite a number of projects with the assistance of the private sector, for example the vocational training. We have just announced a major project in Batticaloa to develop dairy industry and another to grow vegetables for exports.

We strongly believe that we need to help the people of the East and give them economic opportunities. We believe that there is a big role for the private sector to play. We have proposed to give more assistance for the East and the US government is considering it now.

Q: You have always advocated a credible political package to meet the aspirations of the Tamils. How do you see the APRC proposal to implement the 13th Amendment?

A: The East is a fine laboratory to show that powers within the 13th Amendment be devolved within the Eastern Provincial Council. But I think the government needs to go beyond the 13th Amendment. Implementing the 13th amendment is itself will satisfy the aspirations of the Tamils.

The way they develop must be a significant power sharing proposals through the APRC using some other mechanisms. But I do believe that the APRC has made lots of progress.

According to Prof. Vitharana over 90 percent of their work has been done and I think the APRC has been a useful mechanism to get the Southern consensus to move forward. The most important thing is to come up with an idea which is really welcomed by the Tamils.

I think that it is important for the government to consult a wide range of Tamils. We are not calling for negotiations with the LTTE. That is something that the government has to decide.

It is important to recognize more than half of the Tamils are living outside the Wann. I think their interests also should be respected as well. So, people like Anandasngaree and other elected representatives in the government controlled areas are needed to be brought into this process and consulted.

Q: You mentioned the solution should be something beyond the 13th Amendment. So what is your proposal to end the national issue?

A: I think we need to distinguish as these are two different things. The President Rajapaksa's proposal to implement the 13th Amendment is a good idea. But I don't really want to come up with a proposal because whenever I try to say something I am later

accused of trying to dictate to the Sri Lankan people. The US does not have any intention of doing that. It is up to the Sri Lankan people to decide what is best for them.

Q: What do you think that Sri Lanka is facing today - is it a war on terror or an ethnic problem? What sort of a solution do you suggest to end the conflict in the island?

A: I think all these are loaded terms. I am reluctant to say this is an ethnic conflict but it is a civil conflict. I always remind people who are visiting from USA that Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims lived together and continue to live peacefully together. Tamils are living in Colombo peacefully with their Sinhalese and Muslim friends. So there is no ethnic conflict here. And certainly the government is defending itself against terrorism.

Q: It is clearly proven that the LTTE is not the sole representative of the Tamils. And also it has been proved the LTTE's political agenda is different from the Tamils. What do you have to say?

A: I do actually see there are important differences here. From my discussions with Tamils I know that over 95 percent of them support a solution within a framework of a united Sri Lanka.

They are not seeking an independent Tamil Eelam which Prabhakaran is seeking. I think it would be very useful for Prabhakaran to give up this idea of seeking an independent Tamil State and agreeing to negotiate with a united Sri Lanka.

I think this would give him lots of credibility to respond to lots of scepticism here in the South that the LTTE would never negotiate with the government. The LTTE has a responsibility to show that they are prepared to negotiate in a genuine way.

Q: What is your view about the on-going military operations to liberate Wanni where people are living under severe hardship and the young and the old were being conscripted by the LTTE?

A: With respect to the on-going military campaign, as I said earlier, the US do not believe in purely a military solution is possible. The 25-years long experience of war here has shown that the LTTE is a rather formidable organisation and it is very difficult to defeat them militarily.

So the best way to reach a solution is through a political solution to address the aspirations of the Tamils and all the communities. And again the Tamils in Wanni and rest of the country need sense of dignity and conviction in future that they will be able to have an important say over matters that concern them especially the areas where they are predominant.

They should be able to have a high degree of self governance within a united Sri Lanka. I believe that is really a way forward to achieve a peaceful settlement to this conflict.

Q: You have just mentioned that the military can not defeat LTTE and this was the assumption before the East was liberated by the military. So how can you say that the military cannot defeat the LTTE in North?

A: The East was a different situation and the LTTE was spread out. But Wanni is more in the heartland of the LTTE. Here they have been prepared for many years to face any kind of an attack.

Q: Do you still believe that Sri Lankan Security Forces cannot capture Prabhakaran?

A: I think you have to ask this question from the Forces. What I can say is that the US does not have any love for Prabhakaran. But it is going to be difficult for the government to get him.

Q: He is the 'Most wanted man' by the Indian government for the killing of the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. In which way could the US help the government to bring him to book?

A: I can not really say how, as we are not involved in any military efforts to capture him. We believe that the best way would be, not with the gun but through peaceful means.

Q: Do you think that both Al-Qaeda and the LTTE, are ruthless terrorist organizations and how do you categorise the LTTE?

A: I would not say they are the same at all. I do not want to get into the business of comparing terrorist organisations because every terrorist organization is different. And it is also important to address the LTTE in the Sri Lankan context.

Q: But some countries call the LTTE as freedom fighters?

A: I do not respect the freedom fighter argument. Certainly any group which is working for freedom, they should do it in a peaceful manner. They can not use violence and terror. That is same with the LTTE and we have consistently said they must renounce terrorism and stop using violence.

Q: The US and Sri Lanka are engaged in a common fight - combatting terrorism. But some critics say that the US has double standards when combatting terrorism against the US and dealing with the terrorism in countries like Sri Lanka. What is your comment?

A: I really don't agree with that. I think we have a very consistent approach and even in places like Iraq where we are confronted with a very serious terrorist problem and we are in favour of a political solution there. The insurgency strategy of the US is based on using a wide range of tools to combat terrorism and it is just not the military strategy.

In Iraq we are engaged in with certain strategies to bring down the levels of killing and violence both against American forces and other coalition forces. The ordinary Iraqis

have come way down over the last years. Iraq is a major domestic issue an year ago in my country and now people have confidence that Iraqis are in a better track and hopeful about their future.

So the policies are the same that we are advocating here in Sri Lanka and so I can say there would not be any double standards.

Q: In this situation what are the priorities of a country - combatting terror to save lives or safeguarding human rights?

A: Well. I do not think there is contradiction between the two. I think one has to devote. Clearly one has to defend one's country against terrorism. That is extremely important. For any government the most important priority is to defend its citizens. It is true in the US and it is true in Sri Lanka and every other country in the world. But we also believe that it is possible to preserve human rights.

So, for example, one of the very difficult problems the government faces is to identify suicide bombers. How they find these people before they carry out their murderous acts. And I believe that the way to do that is still to arrest, question in a humane way and if they are suspected of the crime produce them in courts.

But do not use extra judicial killings and other kind of things. And those acts will undermine the long term solutions. So, it is much better to use rule of law to address terrorism. Accountability of rule of law is extremely important.

Q: Do you think that Sri Lanka has violated UN Conventions when strengthening bilateral relations with Iran?

A: I do not think so and not to my knowledge. But is up to the government to be aware of those resolutions.

Q: Iran is in rivalry with the US with regard to nuclear issues. Therefore how do you see the recent visit of the Iranian President to Sri Lanka?

A: Our concerns about Iran is well-known. President - Bush, Secretary of State - Rice and many our leaders are concerned about their nuclear capabilities. We acknowledge their right to develop civil nuclear energy for energy purposes. But the US opposes nuclear weapons. Similarly we have expressed our deep concern about the Iranian support for international terrorism particularly in the Middle East, especially the support for groups like Hisbulla.

We always want all our friends to make the same point for Iran. At the same time we understand that Sri Lanka has to develop relationships with Iran and we do not have objections if they donate funds education projects in the South.

Q: We were made to understand that you had met the members of the Commission of Inquiry which probes into 15 cases of killings of Aid workers and other alleged HR cases? What was your area of interest while meeting the commissioners?

A: Yes, we did have a short meeting with them, and the purpose of the meeting as Justice Udalgama has explained was purely a technical matter. The Commission did not get the support of the IIEGPS and the Commission has the problem of how to continue the video conferencing to record testimony of witnesses resident abroad. So the question arose as to whether the international community could continue to fund the video conferencing.

Since the US and the other partners in the IIEGP process happened to fund the process all along, we discussed the matter whether to fund the particular video conferencing. So that was real the purpose of the meeting.

The US do not have any intension of whatsoever in interfering anyway with the Commission of Inquiry. We strongly believe in independence. I really do not share the allegations that we are interfering with the Commission and we simply looked into logistic matters.

We support the Commission appointed by the President. And he has reiterated on many occasions that his commitment in seeing this commission achieve its desired task. So we totally support the President in this regard.