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Remarks to the Press in Sri Lanka

R. Nicholas Burns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs

Galle Face Hotel
Colombo, Sri Lanka
January 23, 2006

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. It's a great pleasure for me to be with you. I'm very happy to be here in Sri Lanka to visit this country for the first time.

I had excellent meetings today with the President and with the Foreign Minister. I was able to meet the Opposition Leader, to see a number of ministers and representatives of civil society, and, of course, fellow ambassadors from friendly countries to Sri Lanka. I had a wonderful lunch given by the Foreign Minister. I also was able to meet Minister Eric Solheim, and we compared notes on our mutual goal, and that is to work with the international community, and certainly work with the government, to try to restore peace and maintain the ceasefire here, and resume negotiations.

I want to say, first of all, we're very proud of the efforts of the American Embassy here, of Ambassador Lunstead, who has done such a wonderful job to represent the United States. We are a great friend to this country. We support its territorial integrity. We support the preservation of peace.

We work very closely with the government and we're proud of what the United States has been able to do as a friend to Sri Lanka. I think many of you saw that in the wake of the horrible tragedy of the tsunami. When our military came here, the U.S. Marines gave immediate help to the people who had been affected. We are also, in the longer term, very hopeful in 2006 we might reach an agreement with the Government of Sri Lanka to provide a considerable amount of economic assistance, so that reconstruction and rehabilitation of the country can continue, especially those areas that have been so badly affected by the tsunami.

In addition to that, I must say that the United States is dedicated to peace. We call upon the LTTE, especially, to cease and desist from the violence and terrorism that it has afflicted upon the people of this country. The bombing this morning, which cost two lives; the repeated attacks over the past several weeks; and of course the attacks over many, many years upon the political leadership and the average citizens of this country, are reprehensible and they are condemned by the international community.

And we hope that the LTTE will understand that it will have no relationship with my government and, indeed, no effective relationship with any country in this world as long as it seeks to redress its own grievances through the barrel of a gun. Now,



we understand the Tamil community here has legitimate grievances, and legitimate issues that ought to be addressed by the government. And there out to be a dialogue, a better dialogue, between the government and the Tamil community.

But the responsibility here lies with the LTTE, which has taken up terrorism and violence as its political weapon. So we hope very much that Minister Solheim's visit here will result in a resumption of negotiations on a date certain, and in a place certain. For those negotiations to take place, we hope the ceasefire can be restored and we hope a final peace can come to Sri Lanka. The United States wants that very much, and we'll support the government in its effort to protect this country, and its territorial integrity as these negotiations resume.

So I wanted to begin with that very brief statement. I'm happy to take any questions that you might have.

QUESTION: You talked about Tamil Tiger violence. In your meetings with the government, did you address the accusations leveled at the military about violence against Tamil civilians?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Yes, we did. In fact, we raised that with the President, and the Foreign Minister, and the other officials with whom we met. We said for sure that the activities of the paramilitary organizations also ought to be condemned and they ought to be stopped. And if there are allegations of military abuse of Tamil civilians, they ought to be investigated. If there are people found responsible, of course they ought to be dealt with in the justice system here. We raised those issues because they are important issues, and they are important to the Tamil community and we've heard from the Tamil community of how important they are. I must say that the response we received from the government is that the government leaders also believe that those attacks must stop, and they must not be carried out in the future.



QUESTION: If the U.S. will not negotiate with Al Qaeda in its war on terror, why does it support negotiation with the Tamil Tigers on behalf of the government?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Al Qaeda is a terrorist organization that has no grievances whatsoever to negotiate with the United States of America or the United Kingdom or any other country in the world. It's a nihilistic terrorist organization that uses terrorism for reprehensible aims. We also condemn the LTTE, and we brand it a terrorist organization. We sanction any individuals or groups of individuals who would seek to give financial support to that organization. But I must say that all of us who are friends with this country understand that this long conflict is only going to come to an end when the LTTE and the government sit down and find a way forward to end the violence and convince the LTTE to stop using violence as a political weapon. That has to happen.

I think any realistic observer of this country's long struggle would say, and agree, that that kind of dialogue has to take place. I'm not aware of any government in the world, or any significant NGO in the world, who believes we ought to be sitting down with Al Qaeda given its agenda.

QUESTION: Is there some kind of direct role the U.S. can play in bringing about a final solution to Sri Lanka?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: We are supporting the core role, the first and foremost role, played by Norway. I had a very good meeting with Minister Eric Solheim this afternoon. I told him that we support his efforts 100 percent and that he can rely on the United States to back him up. We're also part of the Co-chairs group which meets, as you know, regularly to try to provide diplomatic support to those who would want to end this conflict, including the government. I am the American representative to the Co-chairs, and I assume we will be meeting fairly soon to continue the Co-chairs' negotiations.

If there's any weight that America can bring [it is] to try to convince the LTTE to come in and negotiate, and to try to give advice to

our friends in the government that they ought to find a way not to respond to the obvious provocations of the last several weeks. I think that is really what America can do best here. We're a friend of this country. We respect its territorial integrity and want to see it preserved. And the people of this country ought not to have to live for another 15 or 20 years with this reprehensible terrorist group keeping this country verged on the edge of war. What is striking about the situation here, in Sri Lanka, is how so many people are concerned about the possible outbreak of conflict, of armed conflict, of a civil war.

It is incumbent upon all the friends of this country to band together, as we have in the Co-chairs group, to send a message that we support peace, and that we'll do whatever we can diplomatically to help prepare the road for peace. At the same time, we are trying to show our support for the government by providing military assistance and training for its officers, military exercises between our troops and the government's troops, so that the government can be strong and the government's forces can deter future attacks against the people of this country.

QUESTION: In light of the escalating violence, if conflict does break out, what moves will the U.S. take to assist Sri Lanka in the background of the U.S. Global War on Terrorism?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: We're focused not on hypothetical questions, but on the work at hand this week -- and that is to try to give stimulus to a diplomatic effort to do three things: To reinforce the ceasefire; to convince the parties to agree to resume negotiations; and to see those negotiations succeed so that peace can be restored. That's the immediate diplomatic agenda. And our weight is behind that agenda.

I want to say again: while we do believe that the Tamil population has legitimate grievances, and they must be respected by the majority population, and there has to be a way for the Tamils to be able to articulate those grievances, the full responsibility here really lies with the LTTE. That's the organization that has to choose peace, instead of the reprehensible policies of the past decade and more. And so we're working for peace, and we will remain, whatever happens here, a friend to this country, and obviously a friend to the government of this country.

QUESTION: Mr. Under Secretary, Human Rights [Watch] in its annual report a couple of weeks ago criticized your government for human rights violations in pursuing the War on Terror since 2001. If the Sri Lankan government was to pursue similar policies in prosecuting the terrorist organizations like the LTTE, would the U.S. Government endorse such activities or would you crack down or pressure Sri Lanka not to pursue the program that you've been pursuing in your War on Terror?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: You know we have a friendly relationship with the Sri Lankan government. It's a responsible government, and it's a government that's dealing with enormous challenges, from rebuilding after the tsunami to the effort to provide economic growth, but particularly the fight against [terror], to preserve peace here, and so we support that government. If, from time to time, there is evidence of human rights abuses, then the United States, of course, would be concerned and would talk as a friend to that country to try to see if that country could redress those human rights abuses. That is normal in international politics.

But for the most part, if I were focused on human rights in Sri Lanka, in addition to trying to give advice to friends -- and for instance, one of the issues that I did raise today in all of my meetings was the need for the government to make sure that there is no official support for the paramilitary groups, that there is no involvement by the military in attacks on Tamils. But the major part of our concern here is not with the government. The government is democratic, the government is composed of people who are responsible, who are good people who want to help this country.

Our major concern is with the LTTE. There is no moral comparison, no moral equivalency, that we see between the government and the LTTE, and we think the major part of the burden for peace rests on that organization.

QUESTION: Does the United States feel the LTTE is genuinely interested in peace?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: We don't have direct contact with the LTTE, so we have to judge them by their actions. The actions of the last several weeks would indicate that this is an organization bent on provoking violence, as it commits violence, as it kills innocent people. And so, if we see that kind of terrorism anywhere in the world I think all of us, as democratic citizens, need to reject it and need to call upon those who perpetrate it to stand down. So that's what the United States is saying today.

It's also the message of all the other friends of Sri Lanka, all the other governments that are here trying to support a process of peace in this country. We want to avoid a war, and that is the strong wish of the government, as we [heard when we] spoke to the President and others today. They wish to avoid war, and so all of us need to be here to help peace prevail.

Thank you very much.

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