
That letter by US House members to Hillary Clinton: Open response

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by Neville Ladduwahetty The 38 House Members of the US who sent a joint letter dated March 9, 2009, have urged the Secretary of State to call the President of Sri Lanka "and press for the full protection of civilians, authorization for active involvement by United Nations agencies in humanitarian relief, and progress towards political settlement that grants ethnic Tamils meaningful participation in national governance". Referring to the IDP camps, the letter quotes from a Human Rights Watch report that describes them as "internment centres masquerading as welfare villages".

This open letter is based on a source that has accepted credibility and legitimacy- Mr. John Holmes, Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, who presented a report on Sri Lanka to the Security Council on February 27, 2009. Issue One: Protection of civilians It is an acknowledged fact that the LTTE has forcibly trapped civilians and are using them as a human shield. This human shield is the only protection the LTTE has against the military offensive of the Sri Lankan Security Forces. The LTTE would therefore do everything in their power to prevent the civilians from leaving, to the extent of even shooting those who try to escape. No pause in the fighting or appeals to the LTTE would make the LTTE release them. This fundamental reality must be accepted. It is only by weakening the LTTE that the civilians could take the initiative to either save themselves or be saved by the security forces. Regarding this issue, Mr. Holmes stated: "I called in particular on the LTTE to let the civilian population leave freely, amid credible reports of shootings of some trying to flee, and to stop forced recruitment, especially of children. I also urged the Government to do all they could to make it possible for the civilian population to get out safely, including by means of agreement to a temporary halt to hostilities or a human corridor to allow people to leave". Before the arrival of Mr. Holmes, all of these same suggestions had been attempted by the security forces despite the non-cooperation of the LTTE. It is these measures that have permitted nearly 40,000 civilians to escape and seek the protection of the Sri Lankan Government. The security forces have in fact gone beyond and adopted strategies specifically to ensure the safety of the civilians but at great cost to the safety of its own troops. Mr. Holmes further states: "The Government assured me at every level that they have virtually stopped heavy weapons because of their recognition of the need to spare the civilian population". With regard to delivery of humanitarian relief, Mr. Holmes' brief states: "Latest efforts by the Government in cooperation with the ICRC and WFP to ship food and medical supplies via the sea route are welcome". Every effort to bring relief to these civilians have been stymied by the LTTE; the latest being to fire at these food ships. Issue Two: IDP camps As for the characterization of IDP camps as "internment centers", it must be recognized that the civilian exodus started only a few months ago. Mr. Holmes's observation in regard to the facilities provided by the Government in this short span was: "In both transit camps and Manik farm, basic needs such as food, shelter, clean water, sanitation and health care appeared to be met, despite serious overcrowding in some of the transit sites"; UN agencies and NGOs now have more or less free access to these sites which is very important". In fact it must be appreciated that since it would be risky to allow the IDPs to return to their original homes until the demining activities have been completed, the facilities provided need to cater to their needs for some time. It is in recognizing this fact that the Government has allocated nearly 1000 acres of land for this purpose. Issue Three: Political participation With regard to political representation, there is in fact an over-representation of Tamils in Parliament. The percentage of the Sri Lankan Tamil population in the Northern and Eastern Provinces is not more than 6%. However, there are 22 members representing the Sri Lankan Tamils from the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) alone in a Parliament of 225 members. There are additional members from other Tamil parties. Therefore, the representation of TNA members alone is well over 10%. The issue therefore is not a matter of numbers but an issue of non-cooperation. For instance, the 22 members of the TNA have not participated with the All Party Representative Committee (APRC) in its attempts to forge a political solution. The response to an invitation by the President to these TNA members to meet with him to discuss political issues has also been lukewarm. The general attitude is one of non-participation. The reason for the lack of meaningful participation by Tamils in national governance is because they have consistently sought exclusionary political arrangements rather than arrangements that fostered national governance; a separate state being the arrangement sought by the Tamil leadership and the LTTE for the last two and a half decades. Participation in national governance first requires commitment to the concept of national governance. This requires an attitudinal change in the Tamil mindset. Comment While 38 House members are urging the Secretary of State to take action, it is appropriate to note the views of the US Ambassador in Sri Lanka, Robert Blake, who during the course of a recent interview stated: "We call on the LTTE to allow civilians to leave the conflict zone and to negotiate the terms of surrender with the Government of Sri Lanka to include the laying down of arms, renunciation of violence and acceptance of the Government of Sri Lanka offer of amnesty" (Daily Mirror, March 6, 2009). Whether the letter to the Secretary of State was initiated due to pressures from the Tamil constituents in their respective states, or through a genuine humanitarian concern for the trapped civilians, the Congressmen must understand that the only way to save the civilians is by exerting pressure through the Tamil diaspora on the LTTE, to release them as called for by Ambassador Blake. By not releasing the civilians, the LTTE has demonstrated its cowardliness as well as its inhumanity in subjecting these unfortunate civilians to a senseless and cruel fate. Courtesy: Island.lk