

---

# SRI LANKAN FOREIGN SECRETARY DISCUSSES END OF LTTE CONFLICT WITH U.S. STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIALS

Sunday, 12 April 2009

Last Updated Sunday, 12 April 2009

Dr. Palitha Kohona, Sri Lanka's Foreign Secretary, met with top U.S. State Department officials on Friday 10 April 2009. The end of the 25-year-long conflict with the terrorist LTTE was at the core of the discussions. With about 500 LTTE combatants cornered by government security forces in northeastern Sri Lanka, the Foreign Secretary told the Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, Richard Boucher, that Sri Lankan forces are, consistent with government policy, exercising extreme caution to safeguard civilians held hostage in the no-fire zone by the LTTE. The government believes that 30,000 to 60,000 civilians are held forcibly by the LTTE as a human shield in a small area north of Mullaitivu. During the cordial meeting, Assistant Secretary of State, Boucher reiterated the call by the Tokyo Co-Chairs -- which comprises the U.S., Japan, the European Union and Norway - for the LTTE to "allow civilians to move freely out of harm's way." The U.S. Assistant Secretary of state also raised the possibility of having an individual meet with LTTE leaders to discuss a surrender under which the LTTE would lay down their weapons. In talks with the Assistant Secretary of state, the Sri Lankan Foreign Secretary vehemently denounced allegations that the Sri Lankan security forces are shelling civilians within the government-declared no-fire zone. He said there is no substantiated evidence to support this claim. Furthermore, there is no advantage at all to the security forces in shelling civilians. On the subject of an IMF loan facility sought by Sri Lanka, the Foreign Secretary noted that Sri Lanka is asking for a standby facility against the backdrop of the global financial crisis. The Foreign Secretary also noted that it was the government -- not the LTTE -- that had declared the no-fire zone to protect the civilians the LTTE had "herded" into this small area. The Foreign Secretary, accompanied to the State Department meeting by Sri Lanka's ambassador to the U.S. Jaliya Wickramasuriya, pointed out that the government has continued to deliver food and medicine to the no-fire zone, and to aid the evacuation of civilians. These supplies, he said, are also being used by the LTTE. So far, about 65,000 civilians have fled the LTTE areas. More than 3,200 sick or injured civilians and another 4,000 healthy bystanders have been evacuated by ship by the ICRC. Those civilians were moved through government transit centers to welfare villages. The Foreign Secretary told the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State that there is no need for more personnel from the International Committee of the Red Cross in Sri Lanka. There are currently 646 ICRC staff members in Sri Lanka, according to the ICRC itself. The Foreign Secretary said the ICRC is no longer required in areas once held by the LTTE, but now under government control. He also suggested that the ICRC redeploy staff recently employed in this area and hire more Sri Lankans, especially medical personnel. The U.S. Assistant Secretary of State raised the possibility of using representatives from the United Nations and the ICRC to process the internally displaced persons now residing in 13 government IDP centers. The Foreign Secretary said the centers, while temporary, offer residents meals, healthcare and safe shelter. The centers now include vocational training, telephone facilities and a program to re-unite family members who have been separated while fleeing from LTTE-controlled areas. He noted that the positive assessment of the centers by Walter Kaelin, UN Secretary General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons. He said that the government's goal is to return the displaced to their homes quickly. "Our objective is to get the people back to their homes as soon as possible," the Foreign Secretary said during the State Department meeting, following the experience in the Eastern Province. A political process is currently underway. For instance, post-conflict development, including democratic elections that were held in the Eastern Province recently, could be considered as part of this process for addressing minority concerns. Embassy of Sri Lanka Washington DC 10 April 2009