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## Visiting U.S. Assistant Secretary Eric Schwartz meets with FM Rohitha Bogollagama

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Welcoming President Mahinda Rajapaksa's unequivocal commitment to the resettlement process of the displaced persons in the north, Eric Schwartz, Assistant Secretary, Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration of the U.S. State Department pledged that the United States government wishes to be supportive of such efforts, when he met with Rohitha Bogollagama, Minister of Foreign Affairs today (27th July 2009). Schwartz, who is the first high level official from the Obama Administration to visit Sri Lanka, held discussions with President Rajapaksa yesterday.

The Assistant Secretary describing his visit to the welfare villages in Vavuniya observed that the government had taken significant and substantial steps to improve the conditions and acknowledged the dedication of the officials who are involved in improving the lives of the displaced civilians. Foreign Minister Bogollagama underscored the need for wider engagement with the United States on the resettlement and reconstruction efforts in the north and east and strengthening of economic ties that will benefit the people of Sri Lanka. Appreciating United States' assistance to Sri Lanka from the earliest days of the conflict including during the peace negotiations, the Foreign Minister described the government's efforts to address the challenges in the resettlement process. He added that the process will be assessed periodically to measure the progress and welcomed assistance from international partners to expedite the process. He referred to the need for establishing a partnership for this purpose with the international community. Foreign Minister Bogollagama pointed out that the thousands of displaced civilians currently is a legacy of the LTTE and that the government is determined to address this challenge within the framework of a home grown solution. He opined that during this process, the government has also to be sensitive to domestic pressures. The Foreign Minister observed that since there are many ways of dealing with the respective aspects of resettlement, he hoped that undue pressure by the international community would not be exerted, especially since the government has made resettlement a priority. The Foreign Minister also referred to the fact that the rehabilitation of ex-LTTE cadres had begun. This aspect he said is in line with the government being conscious of its responsibility to provide an opportunity for the former combatants to lead a normal life once again. Economic empowerment of the displaced civilians is another priority observed Minister Bogollagama explaining that it will have a beneficial effect on the success of the resettlement and reconciliation processes and the country's economy. The people of Sri Lanka were eager to benefit from the development opportunities that were denied to them during 30 years of conflict he said. The Foreign Minister observed that an increase in foreign investment would allow for establishment of industrial bases in the north and east, benefiting the people of the areas. In this context, the current situation also presents an opportunity for inclusive growth, the Assistant Secretary observed, adding that his government understands the challenges that Sri Lanka is facing in the post conflict phase. He remarked that the U.S. government believes that the next few months will be crucial to the success of the resettlement process, pointing out that American government would be interested in finding ways to assist. Schwartz, who during an earlier assignment served under former President Bill Clinton as the UN Secretary General's Deputy Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery, observed that President Clinton has now been appointed UN special envoy to Haiti and acknowledged that a contingent from Sri Lanka is contributing to the peacekeeping efforts in that country. Assistant Secretary Schwartz recalled that his tsunami experiences demonstrated that successful recovery efforts needed local support. Foreign Minister Bogollagama pointed out that local involvement in projects related to resettlement such as de-mining has made the process more efficient and cost effective. The United States has provided US\$ 6 million for de-mining purposes, and is also hoping to provide additional resources for the resettlement process. Foreign Minister Bogollagama and the Assistant Secretary agreed that both governments should work closely together in what is perceived as a crucial phase of Sri Lanka's contemporary history following the end of the conflict. Ministry of Foreign Affairs Colombo 127 July 2009