

NEWS

UN envoys fail: Sri Lanka rejects probe, camps closure

TWO top UN officials who visited Sri Lanka in the space of one week aiming to press for a probe into rights abuses during the final stages of the military's victory over Tamil Tigers and to urge the government to resettle 300,000 Tamils forcibly held in concentration camps in the Northeast, returned without securing any commitment from the Sri Lankan government on either issue.

UN under secretary general for political affairs Lynn Pascoe visited Sri Lanka on Wednesday September 16, to discuss resettlement, political reconciliation and ways to probe human rights violations during the conflict.

On arriving in Sri Lanka Pascoe said the Sri Lankan government was not making sufficient progress in implementing a deal between Colombo and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon in May to resettle the refugees within six months.

During his visit to Sri Lanka, Pascoe visited a camp complex where more than 300,000 displaced people are held in state-run facilities, most of which are overcrowded and risk flooding during the forthcoming monsoon season.

"I have travelled to many displaced camps throughout the world. And the situation is always the same. People don't like to live in camps, in cramped conditions," Pascoe told reporters after touring camps where Tamil civilians are held in what rights groups say are prison-like conditions.

On Friday September 18, Pascoe met the Sri Lanka President Mahinda Rajapakse and handed a letter from UN secretary general Ban Ki Moon outlining the concerns of the international community on the situation of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and other related matters.

Speaking to reporters after the meeting Pascoe said that he had raised the issue of the early release of the IDPs and their freedom of movement with the President, sources in Colombo said.

"Clearly, the government is making a lot of effort, but we have some strong concerns. The UN is concerned over the lack of free movement of IDPs, particularly the 'closed' nature of the camps," Pascoe told reporters at the end of his three day long visit.

"We picked up great frustrations. I was told by many that they just wanted to go home," Pascoe said. "I urged the government to allow people who were screened, to be allowed to leave."

"For others, to leave the camps in the daytime to find work, to meet with family, to visit families in other camps," he said.

Pascoe also called for "truth-seeking" into alleged excesses by security forces during the crushing of Tamil Tigers.

"We feel that ideally the Sri Lankans should carry out a national process of truth-seeking and accountability," Pascoe said in a statement issued in Colombo after his departure late on Friday.

Pascoe, undersecretary general for political affairs, asked Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse to set up a process to ensure accountability for alleged war crimes, said the statement.

"The (truth-seeking) process has to be serious, independent and impartial," said Pascoe, a deputy to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.

"Coming to grips with the past is difficult," the UN statement said. "Sweeping it under the rug could be a tempting shortcut, but it can have a high price at a later time," the statement added.

However, the Sri Lanka rejected Pascoe's call for freedom of movement and war crimes probe. In a statement released on Friday, September 18 instead of agreeing to speed up the resettlement process, Sri Lanka revised its timeline for releasing Tamils from internment camps, extending it by two months.

The statement from the Presidential Secretariat said the villages in the former battle zone would soon be cleared of mines and all displaced people would be returned home by the end of January 2010.

When UN secretary general Ban Ki Moon visited Sri Lanka in May this year Sri Lanka promised him that the Tamils will be freed within 180 days, by the end of November 2009.

"With the new (mine-clearing) equipment in use, and hopefully more to come, we expected the entire resettlement to be completed by the end of next January," Rajapakse told Pascoe, according to the statement.

Sri Lanka also dismissed Pascoe's call for freedom of movement saying the civilians cannot be allowed freedom of movement until the authorities screen them for remaining Tamil Tigers.

"I understand the pressure and constraints on the Secretary General. However, you must also understand the problems we face," Rajapakse said in the state-



UN envoy Lynn Pascoe failed to get agreement from Sri Lanka on any of the issues his organisation raised concerns about

ment, referring to the need to screen the camps for Tamil Tigers.

The statement also brushed aside Western demands for a probe into war crimes in the final stages of the decades-old conflict, saying the global body should not "pacify" Western countries which have been seeking a UN investigation.

"Considering the understanding that existed between the UN and Sri Lanka, President Rajapakse said he did not expect the UN to pacify any members, big or small, about the situation in Sri Lanka," the statement added.

Sri Lanka has resisted calls for war crimes investigations into its crushing of the long-running Tamil separatist insurgency and managed to stave off a UN Security Council debate on the issue thanks to support from China, India and Russia.

Before leaving Sri Lanka, Pascoe warned of the possibility of renewed violence due to resentment from prolonged detention.

"As the situation currently stands in the camps, there is a real risk of breeding resentment that will undermine the prospects for a political reconciliation in the future," he said.

On Wednesday September 23, Walter Kalin, the United Nations' top envoy for refugee rights arrived in Sri Lanka. Kalin would press for improved conditions for the Tamil civilians held in tightly guarded camps which the government insists are "welfare villages", according to UN sources.

"Mr. Kalin will be in Colombo today for talks with various government officials to appraise himself with the developments on the IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons)," a spokesman for Sri Lanka's human rights ministry said.

The UN helps fund and manage the camps, but the organization has become increasingly concerned that the screening process is taking too long and that conditions in the camp, particularly sanitation, are worsening.

UN told not to interfere

Hindustan Times

SRI LANKA has made it clear that it would not allow the United Nations to meddle in its post-conflict affairs.

Speaking at the UN General Assembly, Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayaka said that the international organisation should not interfere in the internal affairs of a state.

He said multilateralism was not about the UN agenda responding only to the demands of a minority of powerful States, but also defending the interest of the powerless majority.

"It is also imperative that the prohibition reflected in the Article

2 (7) of the Charter that the UN should not interfere in the internal affairs of States be respected," Wickramanayaka said. "The Charter must be our guiding norm since it is the Charter that keeps us together. Non interference in the internal affairs of states must be respected at all times."

The relation between the Mahinda Rajapaksa regime and the UN has been strained since the war with LTTE ended in May.

The government recently expelled an official of UNESCO, stating that he had been making statements biased towards the LTTE. Lanka had also objected to the use of the phrase "bloodbath" by an UN spokesperson while describing civilian casualties during the last phase of the war.

Victory speech to near empty UN hall

SRI LANKAN Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayaka gave a long triumphant speech at the 64th UN General Assembly in New York, to a hall that was more than half empty, reported Inner City Press. According to the non-profit public interest organisation, the Prime Minister "droned on" as the Sri Lankan Foreign Affairs and Defense Ministers "sat with their head in their hands".

In his speech, Wickramanayaka repeated promises that the government were doing all they could to help resettle the civilians in camps. He however warned that "the stability and security that we have restored at great human cost cannot and must not be compromised, particularly when a large number of self-confessed ex-LTTE cadres continue to mix with the IDPs (internally displaced persons)," hinting that the resettlement may be delayed even longer.

The Prime minister also made it clear that Colombo would not allow the UN to "interfere in internal affairs". Relations between the UN and the Sri Lankan government have been strained, since the climax of the war in May, amid allegations of human rights abuses.

As the Prime Minister spoke, Tamil Americans rallied in front of the UN to protest over the organisation's inaction.

Before the Prime Minister addressed the UN General Assembly, he spoke at the Asia Society at Park Avenue, Manhattan, where he started his speech by saying "our country is nourished by Buddhism".

The only questions Wickramanayaka answered were "pre screened softball questions", according to Inner City Press. The organisation also claimed that "several facts were plainly misrepresented."

"The Asia Society's questioner - who multiple times and accurately said, 'I am by no means an expert on Sri Lanka' - asked if the International Committee of the Red Cross has access to all the IDPs. Yes, Wickramanayake replied. But the ICRC has complained of no access to at least 10,000 people."

"Then Wickramanayake said that two ICRC staffers were found to have "direct" ties to the LTTE and were arrested. Presumably he was referring to the two UN system staff, a question that Inner City Press wrote on a note card that was never read out by the moderator.