

NEWS

America responds to protests over Clinton rape remark

THE United States has responded after Sri Lanka protested over the US Secretary of State including Sri Lanka in a list of countries where rape is used as a weapon of war.

"Now, reading the headlines, one might think that the use of rape as a tactic of war only happens occasionally, or in a few places, like the Democratic Republic of the Congo or Sudan," Hillary Clinton said, addressing a session of the U.N. Security Council that was looking at rape in war.

"That would be bad enough, but the reality is much worse. We've seen rape used as a tactic of war before in Bosnia, Burma, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere," Clinton said.

"In too many countries and in too many cases, the perpetrators of this violence are not punished, and so this impunity encourages further attacks," the US Secretary of State added.

Sri Lanka responded when its prime minister went on live radio to say that Clinton has apparently forgotten the Monica Lewinsky affair and should tend to her own backyard before alleging that women are being maltreated in other countries.

Premier Ratnasiri Wickrematunge fielded a number of questions on a SLBC program, including one to which he responded that Ms. Clinton should put "her house in order without trying to live in a glass house and pelt stones at others," reported the Sunday Times.

The Prime Minister's office later issued a statement based on Mr. Wickrematunge's comments to SLBC. However, the references about Monica Lewinsky were left out. It only said that Ms. Clinton should put her house in order.

Sri Lanka also lodged a 'note of protest' with the U.S. Embassy in Colombo, complaining about Clinton's suggestion that Sri Lankan security forces used rape as a weapon of war.

"We vehemently reject and condemn the irresponsible statement made by US State Secretary Hillary Clinton," the country's defense spokesman was quoted as saying in the state run Daily News.

The United States responded by lodging a "strong protest" to Sri Lanka over the remarks by the Prime Minister on state radio.

Sri Lanka's Ambassador Jaliya Wickremasuriya, was summoned to the Department of State to be told of the US Government's displeasure.

Robert Blake, Assistant Secre-



We've seen rape used as a tactic of war in Bosnia, Burma, Sri Lanka and elsewhere Hillary Clinton told the UN Security Council

tary, South and Central Asian Affairs, had expressed "great concern" over the remarks and wanted to know whether this was the official position of the Government of Sri Lanka.

The United States also responded to the protests from Sri Lanka in a letter addressed to Sri Lanka's Minister of Foreign Affairs Rohitha Bogollagama from the State Department.

It clarified that "numerous cases of rape and sexual violence in Sri Lanka, particularly acts committed against women held in detention by the government" had been detailed over the years by the US government and international human rights groups.

However, the letter signed by Melanne Verbeke, ambassador at large for global women's issues at the State Department said that "in the most recent phase of the conflict, from 2006 to 2009 ... we have not received reports that rape and sexual abuse were used as tools of war, as they clearly have in other conflict areas around the world."

"We hope that this clarification puts the issue in its proper context," the letter said, adding

that Washington remains concerned about extrajudicial killings, disappearances and detainee abuse in Sri Lanka.

"Secretary Clinton believes that Sri Lanka must focus to the future and move forward on the promotion of peace and the protection of human rights," the letter said.

Clinton had been speaking during a UN resolution calling for an end to sexual violence in armed conflict. She was also speaking on the last day of the US's turn at the rotating presidency of the 15-member body.

"The physical and emotional damage to individual women and their families from these attacks cannot be quantified nor can the toll on their societies," she said.

"The dehumanizing nature of sexual violence doesn't just harm a single individual or a single family or even a single village or a single group. It shreds the fabric that weaves us together as human beings. It endangers families and communities, erodes social and political stability, and undermines economic progress. We need to understand that it holds all of us back."



The question is whether the SLFP can get a two thirds majority

Polls before April

SRI LANKA will hold both presidential and parliamentary elections before April 2010, state radio has announced.

The presidential poll, which was due by November 2011, will now be held before April 2010, the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation said. It did not give an exact date.

The holding of the presidential poll nearly two years ahead of schedule reflects the government's popularity, reported the BBC.

A government minister was also quoted as saying that parliamentary elections, which were due shortly after the legislature ends its term on April 2, would also be brought forward and held with the presidential poll.

The dates will be announced during a meeting of the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party on November 15, reported the state-run Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, citing Media Minister Lakshman Yapa Abeywardena.

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa will seek a second term, having declared victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in May.

Earlier, government sources had told Reuters the president could call early polls by January, hoping to lock in a second six-year term with his popularity peaking after his government defeated the Tamil Tigers in May.

Those sources had said a parliamentary election would follow in March. The reports were then unclear whether Rajapaksa would call both elections together, a possibility that has also been raised.

Rajapaksa, who is hugely popular among the Sinhalese majority, is likely to score a clear victory, reported the BBC.

The opposition is weak and the president is hoping for a two-thirds majority which would enable him to change the constitution, possibly making provision for more than two successive presidential terms, the BBC report said.

Rajapaksa has already said that he will wait until after the vote to introduce political reforms aimed, for instance, at addressing Tamil grievances.

But critics said that while

ministers and the President regularly speak of the need for reconciliation, they are vague about concrete plans for reconciliation and about the nuts and bolts of reforms - for instance, the powers that might be held by Tamil-majority areas.

Officials from the president's United People's Freedom Alliance said they were keen to call an election to take advantage of support from the majority Sinhalese after victory against the Tamil Tigers. Rajapaksa has resisted calls for war-crimes investigations into his military policy and, with support from China and Russia, managed to stave off a United Nations Security Council debate on the issue.

The UN has said that up to 7,000 civilians may have perished in the first few months of this year when security forces escalated their offensive against the remnants of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Other reports placed the number killed at 20,000.

The move comes three days after the coalition of Rajapaksa scored its eighth clear victory in provincial polls.

The president's party secured 68 percent of the vote at the recent Southern provincial council elections, slightly lower than expected.

"The party is quite comfortable with the 68 percent support, but it is better to have an early election to renew our mandate," a senior ruling party official said, declining to be named.

He said the president has been meeting with local party workers this week to map out electoral strategy.

Dayan Jayatilleka, recently sacked as Sri Lanka's ambassador to the UN in Geneva, writes in a new article that "there is no informed discussion about the nature of the post-war order".

Analysts have said Rajapaksa's popularity could fade if anticipated economic benefits from peace fail to materialise. There is already public grumbling over the high cost of living, reports say.

According to the constitution, the earliest Rajapaksa can call a presidential poll is when he completes his fourth year at the helm in November.