

OPINION

US Senate report slammed by rights organisations, welcomed by Sri Lanka

DESPITE the mass human rights violations and war crimes the Sri Lankan government has committed and continues to commit, a new report published by a US senate committee suggests that the US should seek 'warmer ties' with Sri Lanka due to the geopolitical significance of the island. Whilst rights organisations criticised the proposals, Sri Lanka welcomed it, declaring it as an indication of the US bowing to Sri Lanka.

The Committee on Foreign Relations of the United States Senate, chaired by Sen. John Kerry published an 18 page report titled "Sri Lanka: Recharting US Strategy after the War", on Monday December 7, for consideration of the US Administration.

According to the report the U.S.'s reluctance to invest in the economy or the security sector in Sri Lanka has pushed Sri Lanka towards other powers more willing to invest and assist. The report further warns this strategic drift will have consequences for U.S. interests in the region.

"The challenge for the United States will be to encourage Sri Lanka to embrace political reform without pushing the country toward Burma-like isolation," the report says.

The report further claims that the U.S. policymakers have underestimated Sri Lanka's geostrategic importance for American interests, and adds the United States cannot afford to "lose" Sri Lanka. Further, it encourages the Obama administration to recalibrate its approach to post-war Sri Lanka to include more economic, political and security aid to protect U.S. interests.

"While humanitarian concerns remain important, U.S. policy cannot be dominated by a single agenda. It is not effective at delivering real reform, and it short-changes U.S. geostrategic interests in the region," according to the report.

The report comes amid growing concern among many activists that President Barack Obama's policy of diplomatic engagement with abusive or authoritarian governments, such as China, Burma, Iran, Sudan, and Syria, is being pursued at the expense of human rights.

Rights organizations slammed the report labelling it as "incredibly shoddy" and produced by people who "don't know anything about Sri Lanka."

"This report is an incredibly shoddy, ill-informed piece of work that grossly overstates the strategic importance of Sri Lanka to the United States and woefully understates the degree of abuses carried out by the government there," said Robert Templer, director of the Asia programme at the Brussels-based International

Crisis Group (ICG), according a report on IPS.

"Maybe the people who wrote the report don't know anything about Sri Lanka or maybe they're of the school that says that everything on the planet is strategic," said Brad Adams, Asia director for Human Rights Watch.

"The huge human-rights and humanitarian problems that continue there are not small; they're central to any principled diplomatic engagement with Sri Lanka at this point. So [the notion] that we are in a competition with China, which I think is driving this, is misplaced," he told IPS news agency.

Professor Francis Boyle of University of Illinois College of Law, commenting on the statement "[f]or their part, Tamil leaders have not yet made anticipated conciliatory gestures that might ease government concerns and foster a genuine dialogue," appearing in page 1 of the report said, "[t]his is a sick joke and a demented fraud."

Sri Lanka's state run English language newspaper, Daily News, interpreted the proposed shift in U.S. approach as U.S. bowing to Sri Lankan President Rajapakse's determination.

"The new approach to Sri Lanka also shows acceptance of the correct position that Sri Lanka took in not giving into the pressures of the West, as President Mahinda Rajapakse firmly rejected and resisted the joint moves by Western powers and associated organizations of the "international community" to force a ceasefire and a truce with the LTTE. It also recognized the value of the friendship that Sri Lanka maintained particularly with China, the good relations with Russia and also the important role that strong bonds forged with India played in bringing the protracted war against terror to an end," said the Daily News.

The newspaper also took the opportunity to have a dig at the European Union stating: "The U.S. Senate Report also gives a shove to those in the European Union that seem determined to punish Sri Lanka for defending its sovereignty and territorial integrity from the menace of terrorism, and has indirectly endorsed the position of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, when it defeated the EU led move to bludgeon Sri Lanka over its success against the LTTE."

Sri Lanka's minister for disaster management and human rights, Mahinda Samarasinghe described the report as "quite positive" as U.S. sees Sri Lanka as strategically important.

"It looks for more constructive engagement with Sri Lanka, which is exactly what we would like to have with the U.S.," he



The US Senate report, produced by two staffers, a Sinhalese and a Muslim, recommends the American administration form 'warmer ties' with Sri Lanka, despite the latter committing crimes against humanity in its war against the Tamil Tigers and continuing failures to look for a political solution

said.

"It shows that the 'naming and shaming game' should not be the policy with Sri Lanka."

The report states, thirty years of violence have taken a toll on the majority Sinhalese population, giving rise to a siege mentality toward the ethnic Tamil minority and laments Tamil leaders have not yet made any conciliatory gestures that might ease government concerns and foster a genuine dialogue.

Commenting on the report, Tamil political observers questioned the logic of trying to provide an excuse for the Sinhala peoples' animosity towards the Tamils, when it is the Sinhala government that has oppressed the Tamils and unleashed a genocidal war resulting in tens of thousands of Tamil deaths in first few months of this year alone.

The political observers further questioned the judgement of report's authors on expecting the Tamils, who have been subjugated as a population and incarcerated in concentration camps en masse, to make conciliatory gestures when the Sri Lankan government, which claimed to represent Tamils and claims to have liberated the Tamils from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, have made not efforts in reconciliation.

Whilst the report, states that the 'final stages of the war captured the attention of governments around the world, particularly the United States,' it does not

make any detailed reference to the horrendous war crimes the Rajapakse government presided over.

Instead the report details the significance of geopolitical position of Sri Lanka and recommends that the U.S. policy on Sri Lanka should not be focusing on the human rights violations but be broader and more robust approach that appreciates new political and economic realities in Sri Lanka and U.S. geostrategic interests.

"Sri Lanka is located at the nexus of crucial maritime trading routes in the Indian Ocean connecting Europe and the Middle East to China and the rest of Asia," reports states.

"Take a broader and more robust approach to Sri Lanka that appreciates new political and economic realities in Sri Lanka and U.S. geostrategic interests. Such an approach should be multidimensional so that U.S. policy is not driven solely by short-term humanitarian concerns but rather an integrated strategy that leverages political, economic, and security tools for more effective long-term reforms."

The report goes onto recommend the U.S. government to expand its assistance to include all areas of Sri Lanka, particularly in the south and central areas so that Sinhalese and other groups also benefit from U.S. assistance programs and reap some "peace dividend and urges the Congress to authorize the U.S. military to

resume training of Sri Lankan military officials to help ensure that human rights concerns are integrated into future operations and to help build critical relationships.

The report also made recommendations to the Sri Lankan Government including the commencement of a program of reconciliation between the diverse communities in Sri Lanka and engaging in a dialogue on land tenure issues, since they affect resettlement in the North and East.

Tamil political observers, commenting on the recommendations, questioned the rational behind peace dividend for the Sinhala populace in southern Sri Lanka, who are unaffected by the war, whilst hundreds of thousands of Tamils are internally displaced and forcibly held in concentration camps after losing all they owned due to the war.

They further noted that the report acknowledged the underlying root causes of the conflict persists even after the end of the war but did not make any recommendation to the Sri Lankan government to put forward a political solution or introducing any form of power sharing with the Tamils to address the root causes.

In addition to rights organisations and Tamil political analysts, the report also came under fire from Tamil groups.

Commenting on the report a

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