

NEWS

Political reconciliation, human rights should be priority - US

A TOP American envoy visiting Sri Lanka praised Sri Lanka for progress so far in its post war efforts but warned more needs to be done.

US Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs Robert Blake who was on a three-day visit between Monday December 7 and Wednesday December 9 to discuss political matters and reconciliation said the US was willing to extend more aid to Sri Lanka provided there was progress in political reconciliation and human rights.

"The United States welcomes the recent progress by the government of Sri Lanka," Blake said, referring to the return of hundreds of thousands of refugees from camps that drew international condemnation because people were not free to leave." Blake told reporters in Colombo after meetings with the president and senior government officials.

"Everyone agrees that there is still a tremendous amount of work to be done."

"Killings and abductions have come down. That is certainly welcome. We still need progress on press freedom and ... political reconciliation." Blake said.

Blake's visit came after the US Senate's Foreign Relations Committee urged President Barack Obama not to "lose" its relationship with the strategically located island nation as China and India have gained increasing sway.

The report urged the Obama administration to not to focus on the human rights violations alone but recalibrate its approach to post-war Sri Lanka to include more economic, political and security aid to protect U.S. interests and offer incentives for Sri Lanka to improve its rights record.

However, Blake, who was the ambassador in Colombo until May, said he was not aware of the report's recommendations and made it clear that accountability was a key priority for the Obama administration, at least for now.

"An important element of reconciliation is safeguarding and



The most senior US representative to visit Sri Lanka, Robert Blake, criticised Mahinda Rajapaksa's government for failing to respect human rights and for not putting forward a political proposal

protecting the rights of all Sri Lankans. In practice this means ... people who have violated the rights of others should be held accountable for their actions."

Also, unlike the Senate report which avoided any reference to a political solution for the Tamil National question or power sharing, Blake, told reporters that a power-sharing arrangement should be implemented to ensure that

all Sri Lankans participate in the democratic process.

"In all my meetings with Government and non-governmental leaders, I expressed my country's hope that the Government and opposition will work together to develop a consensus on reconciliation and power-sharing arrangements that can be implemented to ensure that all Sri Lankans can participate fully in the demo-

cratic process and that democracy can be restored in northern Sri Lanka, so Tamils and others in the North can enjoy a future of hope, dignity, and opportunity."

During his visit Blake, visited Manik Farm in Vavuniya, the largest camp for internally displaced people run by the Sri Lankan government, and met some displaced who had recently returned to Mannar district.

US Congress restricts military aid to Sri Lanka

THE United States Congress imposed military assistance to Sri Lanka and called for the Secretary of State to submit a report on the alleged crime against humanity during the last phase of the 30-year-old civil war there.

The Senate and House Conference report of the 2010 Appropriations Bill published on Friday December 11 directed the Secretary of State to submit a report supplementing her report on October 21 on crimes against humanity in Sri Lanka detailing whether any measures have been taken by Colombo and international bodies to investigate such incidents, and evaluating the effectiveness of such efforts, according to Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency.

A section in the Bill, which deals with US financial assistance to Sri Lanka, restricts any military

assistance to Colombo until the Secretary of State certifies to the Committee on Appropriations that Sri Lanka is suspending and bringing to justice members of the military who have been credibly alleged to have violated internationally recognized human rights or international humanitarian law. The Senate is expected to pass the 2010 Appropriations Bill this weekend, PTI added.

While the report welcomed the defeat of the Liberation Tigers, PTI said the report expressed concern over the displaced Tamils who are still detained in closed camps, as well as other persons who have been imprisoned or are being prosecuted for publicly reporting attacks on civilians.

According to PTI, the Congressional report expressed further concern at the lack of credible steps taken by the Sri

Lankan state to promote reconciliation among Tamils and other minority ethnic groups.

The conference agreement includes a provision directing the Secretary of the Treasury to instruct the United States executive directors of the international financial institutions to vote against financial support for Sri Lanka, except to meet basic human needs, unless certain requirements are met, according to the PTI report.

"If all conditions are met by Sri Lanka, then the Secretary of State should ensure that any military assistance to Sri Lanka be used to support the recruitment and training of Tamils into the Sri Lankan military, Tamil language training for Sinhalese military personnel, and human rights training for all military personnel," the 2010 Appropriations Bill said.

Polls must cover all communities - UK

SRI LANKA'S government must ensure that all communities are involved in next year's presidential and parliamentary elections, including Tamils displaced by the civil war that ended in May, the U.K. said.

"Free, fair and credible elections will allow Sri Lanka's communities to have their say in shaping the country's future," U.K. Foreign Secretary David Miliband told Parliament on December 15.

"It is important for all those who want to play a role in Sri Lanka's future to agree to an inclusive political solution that addresses the underlying causes of the conflict."

President Mahinda Rajapaksa called presidential elections for January 26, two years before his mandate expires. Parliamentary elections must be held before April.

"The U.K. has consistently

maintained that one of the prerequisites for lasting peace in Sri Lanka is a political settlement that fully takes into account the legitimate grievances and aspirations of all communities," Miliband said, according to a statement on the Foreign Office Web site.

The Foreign Secretary also confirmed that UK will continue to work directly with the Sri Lankan government and international partners for an inclusive political process that addresses legitimate grievances and aspirations of all communities, the website said.

Tamils make up almost 12 percent of Sri Lanka's population of 20 million people. Sinhalese account for 74 percent, according to a 2001 census. Nearly a million Tamils have fled Sri Lanka to escape the conflict, more than half of them settling in the U.K. or Canada.