

TAPI Calls for Action based on Department of State's Report on Sri Lanka

The Tamil American Peace Initiative (TAPI) welcomes the US Department of State's "Report to Congress on Incidents During the Recent Conflict in Sri Lanka," released December 7, 2009. TAPI calls on the US Government to act on the report's recommendations for increased US engagement as a necessary component of building peaceful, stable, and democratic Sri Lanka that represents the interests and defends the rights of all its citizens.

TAPI commends the State Department for its even-handed compilation of events and incidents that took place in the Vanni region in the Northeastern part of Sri Lanka early this year. The group believes that the report's impartial exploration of wrong-doings by all actors in the conflict, builds credibility for its accounts and recommendations.

While the war is over and the government-run camps have been open, the future of the Tamil Community is still fraught with uncertainty. The root of the conflict still exists; namely the marginalization of the Tamil population and other minorities at the hand of a state. Additionally, President Rajapaksa's detainment of his opponent General Sarath Fonseka on February 8th demonstrates that the government still lacks respect for free speech and the electoral process. This does not bode well for the Tamil community, who after supporting Fonseka in the elections, are now at increased risk of the President's retribution. For this reason TAPI continues to applaud the report's emphasis on the need for political reform and changes in "the nature of the state," as well as the need to take "difficult steps to resolve the underlying political and socio-economic tensions that led to the conflict."

In addition to the above, TAPI commends and wants to highlight the following key findings from the report:

- Tamil and the Sinhalese tension has existed since Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948. The Sinhalese-dominated Government of Sri Lanka and their mono-ethnic Sinhala military forces have been battling Tamil separatist militants since 1976 and have directed a large number of their attacks against the Tamil population as a whole in the Northeastern province.
- The Government of Sri Lanka and its agents committed the many of the alleged crimes and made deliberate attacks against civilian targets as well as captives and combatants seeking to surrender.
- The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) further exacerbated the plight of the Tamil people by engaging in child recruitment and forcibly prevented the escape of IDPs,
- The Government of Sri Lanka systematically denied essential goods and services to Tamil regions, including food and medicine.
- The Large-scale, arbitrary and extra-judicial arrests, torture, killings, and disappearances of Tamils.

Based on these key findings, TAPI endorses the report's policy recommendations below:

- *“Take a broader and more robust approach...[including] an integrated strategy that leverages political, economic, and security tools for more effective long-term reforms”.* TAPI strongly believes that US leverage will be needed to address constitutional reform that will institutionalize more effective minority representation; and allow for the devolution of power to Tamil areas in the Northeastern parts of Sri Lanka so that Tamils can play a greater role in governing their lives and making decisions that impact their futures.
- *“Support people-to-people reconciliation programs to build bridges.”* After a long war, individual reconciliation will be needed to eliminate prejudices and misconceptions, but this must be reinforced by a government that has so far been reluctant to bridge the tremendous divides that exist between Sri Lanka's peoples.
- *“Continued support for demining efforts in the Tamil areas.”* The United States has been a key supporter for demining; TAPI hopes that, in the post-conflict phase, this US support can be used to leverage the support of other donors in order to hasten these efforts as civilians resettle.
- *“Develop a realistic resettlement strategy for 2010.”* IDPs and refugees require assistance in re-establishing homes and livelihoods upon return. Tamils should have the right to return to their original homes in the areas they were displaced from; this will help speed an economic recovery. They should also be able to return to a secure environment and participate in decision-making that will impact their futures. These fundamental rights will form the basis of Sri Lanka's lasting peace.
- *Revoke U.S. citizenship for any persons who are shown to have committed war crimes.* We urge that those responsible for crimes against humanity and war crimes be quickly identified in order to help Sri Lanka's recovery from a long period of violence. We are also grateful for the language in the 2010 Omnibus Appropriations Bill, which calls for continued inquiry into those crimes.

Other Similar Reports

It is worth noting that this [report](#) from the Department of State is fourth in a series of recent reports all depicting serious violations of human rights and crimes against humanity committed by the Government of Sri Lanka against the Tamil people.

- The EU Commission Report on Human Rights Conditions in Sri Lanka, October 19, 2009. (http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2009/october/tradoc_145152.pdf)
- The Human Rights Watch reports, for instance September 22, 2009. (<http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/09/22/sri-lanka-world-leaders-should-demand-end-detention-camps>)

- Amnesty International Bulletin urging the release of all people held in IDP camps, October 8, 2009. (<http://www.amnesty.org/en/for-media/press-releases/sri-lanka-displaced-now-trapped-between-military-and-impending-monsoon-2>)
- The International Crisis Group, "The Situation in Sri Lanka", October 1, 2009. (<http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=6335&l=1>)