

The Honorable Hillary Clinton
The Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

March 11, 2009

Dear Madame Secretary:

As you are aware, the humanitarian crisis in Sri Lanka continues to deteriorate, a situation we have been following closely and with increasing alarm. The International Committee of the Red Cross recently warned of an “impending catastrophe” and estimates that 150,000 civilians remain trapped in the Vanni - the region of northeast Sri Lanka where war is being waged between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

On February 24, the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on the Near East and South Asia held a hearing on the crisis in Sri Lanka. In their testimony, the witnesses described horrific atrocities by the LTTE. They recounted how the LTTE conscripts child soldiers and hides among the civilian population, inviting bombardments on densely populated areas. Furthermore, they refuse to let entrapped civilians leave the area. This egregious disregard for human life underscores why the United States designated the LTTE a foreign terrorist organization.

Yet, the Sri Lankan government has acted no more responsibly. Not only does it refuse to grant humanitarian aid workers access to the conflict zone, there are reports that it also shells civilians and hospitals in the so-called “safe zone” for Tamil citizens. Descriptions of government camps for civilians fortunate enough to leave the conflict zone reminded us of detention centers, rather than safe havens for refugees. In addition to the violence and dismal humanitarian situation, we are also concerned about the state of Sri Lankan democracy. Since fighting intensified over the past year, President Rajapaksa’s government has been waging a war against the media. Journalists have been murdered and imprisoned; their cases have gone uninvestigated and their perpetrators unpunished.

The situation in Sri Lanka is unacceptable and must be remedied as quickly as possible. We commend your recent statement with UK Foreign Minister David Milliband that called on the government and the LTTE to adhere to a ceasefire, allow access to humanitarian agencies, and resume political discussions to bring the long-standing ethnic conflict to an end. An enduring peace can be achieved only through a political solution that treats the Tamil minority as equal citizens under the law. Without such an agreement, the violence will only continue.

In the short term, we believe the United States must continue to call for a ceasefire and make emergency humanitarian aid available to people in the

conflict zone. The government should be urged to allow humanitarian agencies into the Vanni as expeditiously as possible, as well as to permit international oversight of refugee camps. For the longer term, we also encourage you to work with our friends and partners to create a unified group of donors that would condition long-term reconstruction assistance on tangible steps by the government to effectively address the underlying causes of the conflict. The Government of Sri Lanka will require large amounts of assistance for reconstruction. This will include assistance from multilateral institutions, such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, as well as from bilateral donors. We urge you to ensure that the United States constructively uses its voice and vote in these institutions to help convince the Sri Lankan government to change its behavior. Finally, we urge you to instruct our Embassy in Colombo to explore the possibility of providing temporary refuge to Sri Lankan journalists who legitimately fear for their safety and well-being and to encourage other governments to take similar measures.

We appreciate your efforts to bring an end to this crisis.

Sincerely,

Robert P. Casey, Jr.
Patrick Leahy
George V. Voinovich
Sherrod Brown
Joseph I. Lieberman
Barbara Mikulski
Richard Burr