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“Sri Lanka: Prospects for Peace”

Remarks by Richard L. Armitage, Deputy Secretary of State

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Thank you, Ambassador Schaffer [Director, Center for Strategic and International Studies South Asia Program]. As a diplomat and a scholar, you are a role model. Your actions and your efforts and your care and your devotion to all things South Asia are well known, and well respected. And I am delighted also to see here the Ambassador [Subasinghe, Ambassador of Sri Lanka to the United States]. It seems as though it was just last month that you were visiting us to present your credentials. Come to think of it, it was only a month ago. It looks like you're settling in pretty well.

I have to tell you, Tezi [Schaffer], of course I would come here for this occasion. I wouldn't miss it. Twenty years, as far as I'm concerned, between my visits to Sri Lanka, was too long. And I have a feeling it won't be that long again. I suspect I will be out there again in the not too distant future. I am also delighted to be with all of you here today in a such a reflective setting. You know, one of the things that is most, sort of, uncomfortable and unpleasant about government service is there is no time for reflection. You rarely have the luxury of sitting back and actually thinking about something. And I am delighted to have a few minutes here.

The last couple of months -- and indeed weeks -- have been a busy time of high-stakes diplomacy for our Department of State. Secretary [of State Colin] Powell and I have been to Capitol Hill six times together in the last two weeks -- three testimonies apiece. Of course, we've been talking about such things as Iraq and its biological and chemical weapons and its nuclear intentions; about North Korea's self-inflicted deprivation and desperation, as millions of people are in danger of starving to death from mismanagement and bad luck; and about the high risk of terrorist attacks over this next week. But we've also been talking about the horrible terrorist bombing in downtown Bogota over the last weekend and the implications for the counter-narcotics efforts in the region, as well as the rockets fired at international forces in Kabul on Monday, which narrowly missed the visiting Defense Minister of Germany. It certainly did underscore the importance of our reconstruction efforts in that blighted land.

Given these priorities, I think it is important to start today's discussion on Sri Lanka with a baseline question: why should the United States invest significant attention and resources to Sri Lanka, especially at a time when we have such overwhelming competing interests? Should the United States play a role in this peace process?

Now, I believe the right answer is that the United States should play a role. And there are many credible explanations as to why. There is the pull of opportunity, of ending years of death and years of destruction and bolstering a multiethnic democracy. In the more direct bilateral

sense, Sri Lanka is already a solid exporter to the United States and has the potential with peace and the right reforms to become a significant trade partner. And then there is the push of danger. As we have found out far too often, terror and human misery generally will not ebb away on their own or stay neatly within borders if we look at them as someone else's problem.

I have no doubt that the many experts Tezi [Schaffer] has assembled in this audience could provide more answers to my baseline questions. And when taken together, these answers may even add up to a compelling justification. But the problem is that these answers do not really constitute a clear strategic impetus for the United States or for other nations outside of Sri Lanka's immediate neighborhood, particularly in a time of war and economic uncertainty. It would be tough to make a truly convincing case by sticking to the terms of strict self-interest.

For me, the bottom line in this instance is simple. The United States should be playing a role, in concert with other nations, committing our human and financial resources to settling this conflict because it can be done. And because it's the right thing to do. Because the parties to the conflict appear to be ready to reach a resolution, more so than at any other time in the past twenty years. And because it may well be that it is a resolution that can only be reached with the help of multilateral resources, both moral and material.

Indeed, this may be a key moment, when an infusion of such international support can add momentum to the peace process, helping to stop 20 years of abject human suffering and to smooth the ripples of grief and terror that have spread from this tiny island nation through the region and even around the world. This may be the moment when international support can help to spring this country into prominence as a recovering victim of conflict, terrorism, and human rights abuses, but also as a respected participant in the global community. And while I wouldn't want to oversell Sri Lanka as a model -- this brew of caste, class, religion and race has its own unique flavor -- perhaps this is a nation with lessons to offer the world about how to move from despair to hope, from intractable conflict to workable concord, and, indeed, about how the international community can engage and support such conflict resolution.

So, with your permission, I'll share with you a few thoughts about the direction I see Sri Lanka heading in, and the more promising developments as well as the more problematic challenges, and how I believe the United States and the international community can most usefully participate.

Sadly, I have had the chance to see the costs of war up close. Last summer, I traveled to the Jaffna Peninsula. We first flew over the area in a helicopter and saw below us a blasted landscape, pockmarked with thousands of bomb craters and shell craters. For me, that view reminded me strongly of my time in the service in Vietnam. I really don't think I've seen anything quite like it since. And I'm talking both about the physical devastation and the sense of futility that was unmistakable on the ground.

We ventured into one of the cities that had been largely destroyed, where people were nonetheless starting to return, trying to reclaim lives many may have hardly remembered. Today, some 300,000 internally displaced people have returned to the northern and eastern parts of the country, even though these areas lack sanitation, clean water, and other basic amenities.

This is, to some extent, a demonstration of confidence in the current cease-fire, but it also confirms something else I saw when I was there. We spoke with a cross-section of Tamil society in the area and the mixture of hope and wariness in their words was an unmistakable reminder that in Jaffna, and across Sri Lanka, a whole generation has grown up knowing little other than war, but is now ready for a change.

It was clear to me at the time that the solution had to start there, in the shattered people and bombed-out villages, in the universal longing for a better life. Because while it is clearly taking a firm decision from the parties to this fight to be partners and to act in the interests of peace, it is also going to take a commitment from all the people of Sri Lanka -- Muslims and Buddhists, Christians and Hindus, Sinhalese and Tamils -- from all parts of the country, if agreements made around the negotiating table are going to take hold on the ground.

Now, the challenge for the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE is going to be taking that universal longing and that national commitment and giving people tangible signs of progress and a way to participate in the process. I think they have done a good job to date. First, they have set a powerful foundation. Keeping to the cease-fire for the past year has, as I noted, allowed the public to reach a basic level of confidence. And it is critical that both parties continue to honor and keep this cease-fire. From my point of view, a loss of confidence at this point would be extraordinarily devastating.

December was also a watershed. The negotiators issued a common statement that called for "internal self-determination based on a federal structure within a united Sri Lanka," which created a shared vision for the future of the state, and dealt with many disagreements that destroyed past efforts at a negotiated solution. And in this latest round of talks, which just concluded last week in Berlin, the negotiators turned to concrete issues of humanitarian relief and human rights, including the LTTE's pledge to end child recruitment.

To me, this is all very encouraging. Indeed, two years ago, no one would have believed so much could happen so quickly. But to some extent, the steps taken to date have been the easy ones. And so the negotiations have entered a critical stage, a point at which both sides will have to show the courage to stay the course as they address more difficult issues and make real compromises.

Although the apprehension of an arms-laden trawler during the last round of negotiations and the self immolation by its LTTE crew were most remarkable for failing to derail peace talks, it also called into question the LTTE's commitment to the process. The LTTE is going to have to take a number of difficult steps to demonstrate that it remains committed to a political solution. The Tigers need to honor the restrictions and conditions that the cease-fire -- and future negotiations -- set on their arms supply. Logically, down the road, this is going to include disarmament issues themselves. Internal self-determination, within the framework of one Sri Lanka, is not going to be consistent with separate armies and navies for different parts of the country. For that matter, the LTTE has often pledged to stop the recruitment of child soldiers, but this time, they will have to prove they can carry through and will carry through on the pledge. The LTTE will also have to respect the rights of Muslims and Sinhalese living in areas

under its control. And if the Tigers really want to join Sri Lanka's democratic society on a federal basis, they will also have to accept pluralism within the Tamil community.

Finally, the United States government is encouraged by the vision of the LTTE as a genuine political entity. But for that to happen, we believe the LTTE must publicly and unequivocally renounce terrorism and prove that its days of violence are over. The US will never accept the tactics of terror, regardless of any legitimate Tamil aspirations. But if the LTTE can move beyond the terror tactics of the past and make a convincing case through its conduct and its actual actions that it is committed to a political solution and to peace, the United States will certainly consider removing the LTTE from the list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations, as well as any other terrorism-related designations.

At the same time, the Government of Sri Lanka must institute reforms that address the legitimate aspirations of the Tamil people. This means allowing Tamils the simple right to stay in their own homes and to pursue a living, such as fishing in coastal waters, without prejudice or harassment. But it also means protecting the full range of human rights for all the people of Sri Lanka. In particular, the burden will be on the government, military and civilian officials alike, to prove that they can accord these rights to residents of the northern and the eastern parts of the nation, including the refugees returning to the area. And that they will hold officials accountable for their conduct.

The government obviously also must tackle key economic reforms. Because ultimately, the people of Sri Lanka, not just Tamils but also the Muslim and Sinhalese communities, particularly in the south, will judge the efficacy of the peace process by how it affects their livelihood.

Reaching this vision of prosperity will require a strong and sustained commitment from the Government of Sri Lanka. We should all give due credit to President Kumaratunga. She knew this was the only answer for her country long ago. And her peace plan of 1995 was an important precursor to the progress we see now. Of course today, we owe much of that progress to the Government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, who continues to take bold steps in the direction of peace. But it is clear that if Sri Lanka is to continue moving forward, the Government must move together as one. No individual, no single political party can carry this burden alone. This must be a concerted effort by the President, the Prime Minister, and the parties.

There are those in Sri Lanka who remain skeptical, and truthfully, many come to their doubts honestly. The President, for one, is understandably cautious. But she also has unusual moral authority when it comes to one of the most difficult challenges facing both the government and the LTTE. As the head of state and inheritor of a powerful political dynasty, she is in a unique position to speak on behalf of everyone who serves or who has served in the government and to ask that those who committed atrocities in the past be forgiven. But she is also a victim of this conflict. She has not only lost loved ones to the violence but will personally bear the scars for the rest of her life. And so her forgiveness of those who have caused her pain is equally important.

In such a close community, every one of the 65,000 lives lost in the last two decades is a burden of memory the whole society will have to carry. Indeed, perhaps it is too much to ask for forgiveness, but the people of Sri Lanka must somehow find a way to move forward. This may be the most significant challenge. It will require a concept of justice that falls somewhere between retribution and impunity, which will be absolutely necessary if the country is to reconcile with the past and reclaim the future. I believe President Kumaratunga must play a spiritually significant part in this search for truth and for reconciliation.

These are tremendous challenges. But these are also largely questions of the political will of the parties involved, something that must come largely from within Sri Lanka. The Government of Norway does deserve tremendous credit for catalyzing this political will and ushering the parties to the negotiating table. And the Norwegians deserve even more credit for going one step further.

Today, Sri Lanka has pressing humanitarian needs, as well as longer-term reconstruction, rehabilitation, and reintegration needs. Consider, for example, that there are an estimated 700,000 landmines in the country, and that alone is a nearly insurmountable challenge. Yet this is precisely where the government and the LTTE need to show progress and ways for ordinary people to participate. And they have to do this right away if the peace process is to attract the kind of public backing it requires. But the scale and scope of these needs are simply beyond Sri Lanka's means in the near term. And that is one reason international support is so absolutely critical at this time.

In November, Norway hosted a conference to orchestrate this international support, and where the Norwegians led and where they lead, we, the United States, are delighted to follow. I was pleased to attend on behalf of the United States and to pledge \$8 million in support of programs that meet immediate humanitarian needs, as well as a little over \$1 million for demining. In June, it is my intention to return for the follow-on meeting of donors, which Japan has graciously agreed to host. And at that time, I believe, with a certain assurance, that I will be able to announce significant further assistance to Sri Lanka for both humanitarian and economic aid.

Of course, such international involvement will come at a cost for Sri Lanka. The price tag for sustaining such interest will be progress -- a clear demonstration that all parties to the negotiations have the determination to see this through. As I said at the outset, the fundamental attraction for this outpouring of international interest and certainly for my nation, is that we are not dealing in fantasy but firmly in the art of the possible. By June, both the government, all elements of the government, and the LTTE will need to have made some hard choices and compromises that demonstrate the political will to proceed if they want to meet their ambitions for international support.

Of course, Sri Lanka is hardly the only nation that struggles in the shadow of looming ethnic, racial and religious divides. From Kosovo to Kabul, there are places all over the world that are engaged in a similar fight, many of which have far less going for them in terms of physical infrastructure, in terms of human resources, and in terms of the institutions of democracy. And as Ambassador Schaffer recently wrote, there are other nations, from Northern

Ireland to South Africa, that have already dealt with such challenges with some measure of success. From my point of view, and from my government's point of view, it is reasonable to hope that Sri Lanka will not only be able to add to the legacy of optimism of such past success but will also be able to build a model for peace and prosperity in a multifaceted society.

Tezi [Schaffer], thank you so much. Mr. Ambassador [Subasinghe], thank you.