

**U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations**  
**Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South and Central Asian Affairs**  
**Senator Robert P. Casey, Jr.**  
**Opening Statement for Hearing on Recent Developments in Sri Lanka**  
**February 24, 2009**

Today, the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South and Central Asian Affairs meets to examine the ongoing violence and humanitarian crisis in the island nation of Sri Lanka, a tragedy overlooked for far too long. The people of Sri Lanka have suffered for years as a result of the violent conflict between the Government of Sri Lanka and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam – also known as the LTTE, or the Tamil Tigers.

This hearing will serve a dual purpose. It will assess the humanitarian crisis exacerbating a conflict that has killed and displaced countless Sri Lankans, and according to the United Nations, trapped 215,000 civilians in the northern Vanni region of the country. In addition, the hearing will examine the prospects for a political settlement that will both end the war and implement reforms to end systematic discrimination against the Tamil population and ensure they are treated as full and equal citizens of Sri Lanka.

For the thousands of civilians trapped in the Vanni region, the situation has turned increasingly dire. As LTTE leaders find themselves encircled by the Sri Lankan military, fighting now occurs in an increasingly small, densely populated area, even spilling over into a government-declared “safe zone” for Tamil citizens. The LTTE, a ruthless group designated as a terrorist organization by the United States, Sri Lanka, and others, carries out suicide bombings and hides among the civilian population, inviting military attacks on these densely populated areas. Compounding the problem, the LTTE forbids many civilians, including some local staff working for international humanitarian organizations, from leaving the region. I am particularly appalled by reports of children being conscripted by the LTTE. The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF)’s Representative in Sri Lanka recently stated:

*“We have clear indications that the LTTE has intensified forcible recruitment of civilians and that children as young as 14 years old are now being targeted. These children are facing immediate danger and their lives are at great risk.”*

After two decades of fighting the LTTE, the Sri Lankan military has achieved substantial progress and has made it clear that it plans to eradicate all remaining remnants of the Tigers. Indeed, the Sri Lankan government has rejected recent calls for an immediate ceasefire, including a plea by Secretary of State Clinton and UK Foreign Secretary Miliband to institute a temporary no-fire period. Unfortunately, in its attempts to secure a total victory, the Sri Lankan military has at times exhibited an appalling disregard for the lives of noncombatants. I am particularly concerned by allegations of Sri Lankan soldiers firing indiscriminately upon civilian areas, as well as inside the safe zone. Heavy artillery fire and air strikes are killing innocents and causing serious

damage to hospitals. In a disturbing admission, Defense Secretary Rajapaksa told the BBC that hospitals outside the safe zone were legitimate targets.

The few remaining hospitals are undermanned and full of victims. Almost all access to the region for international humanitarian aid workers has been cut off, and as a result, entrapped civilians in the north of the country are being deprived of basic necessities, such as food and medical care. Many Tamil youth are at risk of malnutrition, susceptible to disease, and deprived of education. Humanitarian relief must be allowed to reach those innocent civilians suffering in the conflict zone.

Civilians in the North have few good options. Stay and face deprivation of basic needs for survival. Try to flee and risk being shot at by the LTTE. Reach a safe zone and come under assault by government artillery. Or leave for a government-controlled refugee camp, only to find themselves living in dismal conditions and under suspicion of being affiliated with the LTTE. This is truly an unacceptable situation that must be remedied as quickly as possible.

Elsewhere in Sri Lanka, we are witnessing the erosion of basic civil liberties and human rights. Journalists are being murdered and imprisoned, placing freedom of speech in severe jeopardy. In particular, the murder of renowned journalist Lasantha Wickrematunga in January sent alarms throughout the international community. Wickrematunga was a Sinhalese who dared to publish articles critical of the government's handling of the conflict. According to the International Crisis Group, the professional nature of his murder and the subsequent commando attack on MTV studios point to the involvement of senior Sri Lankan government and military figures. It is disheartening to hear the Defense Secretary tell the BBC that, "Dissent in a time of war is treason." The implications of that statement for Sri Lankan democracy are chilling.

An end to the violence is necessary, but that alone will not bring an end to the conflict, nor will it alleviate the human suffering taking place in the North and throughout Sri Lanka. While the government frames its war against the LTTE as a war against terror, there exists a broader ethnic conflict between the minority Tamils and majority Sinhalese that has spanned decades. Should the war end and the broader Tamil population continue to face systematic discrimination by and inadequate representation in the Sri Lankan national government, the Tamil Tigers could once again be driven underground to carry out acts of terrorism, perpetuating another go-around in this vicious cycle of violence. So far, there are few indications that a political deal is imminent. The Government of Sri Lanka will not negotiate directly with the LTTE. But it does not appear as though the government has much interest in finding alternative Tamil interlocutors, nor have the Tamils presented a credible alternative to the LTTE.

In recent weeks, Members in both Houses of Congress, including the distinguished Chairman and Ranking Member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Kerry and Senator Lugar, have voiced their growing concern about the deteriorating situation in Sri Lanka. Our witnesses' testimony and the questioning that will follow will undoubtedly highlight the abuses taking place; but I hope they will also offer

thoughtful approaches for the U.S. and international community to facilitate an end to the conflict and the beginning of a lasting peace.

We are honored to be joined by a respected panel of witnesses. Ambassador Jeffrey Lunstead served as the U.S. Ambassador to Sri Lanka from 2003 to 2006, his final post in a distinguished career in the Foreign Service. Ambassador Lunstead's deep affection for Sri Lanka and its people were apparent as he oversaw United States relief and reconstruction efforts in Sri Lanka following the devastating tsunami of December 2004. Since his retirement from the Foreign Service, Ambassador Lunstead has been vocal in raising awareness about the crisis in Sri Lanka. In January, he brought five former U.S. Ambassadors to Sri Lanka together to write a candid letter to President Rajapaksa that supported his government's fight against the LTTE, but also expressed concern about the erosion of the rule of law and democracy in Sri Lanka. I also note that Ambassador Lunstead holds his PhD from the esteemed University of Pennsylvania.

Dr. Anna Neistat is a senior researcher at Human Rights Watch and a specialist in humanitarian crises, who has reported extensively on the tragedy in Sri Lanka. She recently returned from the island and contributed to a HRW study on abuses against civilians in the conflict zone. In 2008, she authored a poignant study on the disappearance and abduction of people in Sri Lanka, entitled "Recurring Nightmare." In addition to her involvement on Sri Lankan issues, Dr. Neistat has served as the Director of the Human Rights Watch office in Moscow, where she examined the conflict in Chechnya and other human rights problems in the former Soviet Union.

Our final witness is Bob Dietz, the Asia Program Coordinator for the Committee to Protect Journalists. Mr. Dietz has travelled extensively across South Asia, often into hostile and dangerous environments. He recently returned from Sri Lanka, where he documented violence and abuses committed against journalists. Prior to joining the Committee to Protect Journalists, Mr. Dietz was an editor for Asiaweek magazine and served in the World Health Organization. We appreciate his presence here to elaborate on the increasingly dangerous environment in which Sri Lankan journalists are working.

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