

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 5, 2009

The Honorable Hillary Clinton
Secretary of State
Department of State
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Clinton,

We write to applaud your public and private efforts to press the Sri Lankan government to protect the rights and lives of its people during the conflict with the LTTE terrorist group. While that conflict is now over, its survivors – and hopes for reconciliation and democracy in Sri Lanka more broadly – remain in great jeopardy, and your leadership is still urgently needed. With our friends and allies, we must continue to use all of our leverage with Sri Lanka, including our support for international lending, to encourage respect for basic human rights and a sustainable political settlement.

As you know, the final months of the conflict in Sri Lanka took a terrible toll on civilians, in part because the LTTE unconscionably held hundreds of thousands of civilians as human shields, but also because government forces indiscriminately shelled the area where these civilians were concentrated. Despite repeated appeals from you and President Obama, as well as from the United Nations and many other governments, the Sri Lankan government continued to target these civilians, and to prevent humanitarian groups from helping those who managed to flee. To this day, against all the evidence, the government denies that its actions caused any harm to Tamil civilians – a position that will make reconciliation even more difficult to achieve.

The government continues to deny the United Nations, humanitarian organizations, the media, and human rights organizations access to the former conflict zone. There is no way to confirm that there are no civilians, including wounded, left on the battlefield. The International Committee for the Red Cross has been denied access since May 9th. Nearly 300,000 internally displaced persons are now detained in what appear to be internment camps, from which they are prevented from rejoining their families. The government's insistence on detaining these people has led to severe overcrowding and hardship. While aid workers now have some access to these camps, the government places severe restrictions on their work – including prohibiting them from speaking with camp residents. Aid workers who criticize the government's handling of the situation have been threatened with expulsion from the country.

Government officials and pro-government commentators have made chilling statements equating dissent with treason, and accusing journalists and civil society activists who called attention to its abuses of being in league with the LTTE. In a country with a history of disappearances, such statements are an invitation to violence. Already last week, a leading Sri Lankan Journalist, Poddala Jayantha, was attacked and abducted near his home. Meanwhile, the government has taken into custody more than 9,000 people with alleged LTTE ties; while it has a legitimate interest in separating combatants from civilians, we are deeply concerned that it has denied the United Nations and the ICRC the ability to monitor the screening process. Among those detained are three doctors who heroically treated civilians trapped in the conflict zone and who spoke out to the world about government shelling.

This is an extremely dangerous period in Sri Lanka. Hundreds of thousands of survivors of the conflict remain in need. Many other brave Sri Lankans who spoke out against abuses by both the LTTE and the government are facing daily threats to their freedom and their lives. All need the protection that comes from principled pressure and engagement by the United States and the international community.

In the final days of the fighting, you rightly said that it was “not an appropriate time” to consider a large IMF loan to the government “until there is a resolution of the conflict.” While the LTTE has, thankfully, been defeated on the battlefield, we have clearly not seen a resolution of the conflict. Indeed, the government’s statements and actions threaten to deepen, rather than heal, the nation’s divide.

With the government still refusing to address any of the major concerns that you and others have raised, we believe it would send the wrong signal to approve the IMF loan. It would suggest that to gain international support, the Sri Lankan government did not need to heed the world community’s concerns; it merely needed to win the war. Before receiving major financial support, the government should first take at least some steps to reassure the world that it is adjusting its policies, by allowing access to the conflict area and international monitoring of the screening process, placing IDP camps under civilian control, releasing IDPs and reuniting them with their families, and pursuing reconciliation with critics rather than squashing dissent.

Sri Lanka was the first humanitarian and human rights crisis to emerge on the Obama administration’s watch, and your response and the President’s have been strong and principled. We urge you to continue this approach.

With best regards,



PATRICK LEAHY
United States Senator



ROBERT P. CASEY, Jr.
United States Senator