

## NEWS

# US calls for Rajapaksa to reach out

FOLLOWING the election victory of Mahinda Rajapaksa's party, the US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia has called on the Sri Lankan President to reach out to the Tamils and ensure respect for human rights and accountability for past violations.

"I think it's important for the administration of President Rajapaksa to reach out to the Tamils," US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, Robert Blake, told BBC in an interview.

Commenting on the election result Blake said: "I think this is a real important opportunity right now. The President has always said that he would like to get a two-thirds majority in the parliament that would then allow him to amend the Sri Lankan constitution. He has said that he is committed to implementing what is known as the thirteenth amendment which would provide for devolution of power to the provinces, including to the Northern Province. He has also I think committed to reconciliation. So I think it is very important now that that proceed. So, we'll have to see how these elections turn out. It appears that he will indeed - his party will - enjoy a majority. I think it is too early to say whether he is going to get that two-thirds majority. But it is likely that he is going to benefit from some crossovers as well. So it is possible that he could get to the two-thirds level."

Blake said the it was impor-

tant for the Tamils to 'that they're going to be able to live a future of hope and of opportunity, that the internally displaced people that are now in camps -- there are still approximately 100,000 of them -- that they be allowed to go back to their homes'.

"And if all of those things are achieved and there's greater respect for human rights, and I think also some accountability for some of the past violations, I think all of those would contribute a great deal to this reconciliation that I was speaking of," Blake added.

When asked if he is worried about nepotism in Sri Lanka, Blake said there has been a long tradition of that kind of family business in the country.

"The Bandaranaiques, before the Rajapaksas, and several other families, have had that kind of thing. So I don't think that's unusual in the Sri Lankan context. I think what is important, again, is that there just be free and fair elections and that the Sri Lankan people perceive that there's a fair process," he observed.

Meanwhile, the US embassy in Colombo, which has consistently denied allegations made by ruling party leaders that it supported the opposition at recent elections, said the United States was looking forward to working with Rajapaksa's new administration.

"We look forward to working with the newly elected Sri Lankan government," the embassy said in a brief statement.



The close relationship between the US and Sri Lanka has become strained over war crimes allegations

## Re-polling, fraud allegations

SRI LANKA will rerun voting at 18 polling booths where the parliamentary election was affected by violence, officials said on Sunday, April 11. The elections department cancelled voting at the booths in two electoral districts after allegations of intimidation and other violence. The final official results have yet to be declared because of the delay.

"The voting will be conducted on April 20 and those results will be announced on the same day so that the new parliament can meet on April 22 as previously scheduled," a district official said.

Earlier, the Centre for Monitoring Election Violence said it asked the elections commissioner to annul results and hold re-votes in 13 polling stations — out of more than 11,000 nationwide —

because of reported violence and fraud.

Campaign for Free and Fair Elections (CAFFE), a private election monitoring body, said thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) — Tamils displaced by war — were "denied their right to vote due to the non existence of clearly defined guidelines in relation to voter identification papers. CaFFE elections observers were temporarily stopped by security officers from taking photographic evidence of these incidents as they unfolded in the close vicinity of Menik Farm (IDP camps in Vauniya in north Sri Lanka)."

Daily Mirror quoted another election monitor, People's Action for Free and Fair Election, reporting several incidents of election violence including a shooting

incident in the southern city of Galle where several houses and a vehicle were damaged.

The main opposition party, United National Party, has accused the election of not being free and fair. UNP General Secretary Tissa Attanayaka told Daily Mirror that there were several reports of voter intimidation, chasing away of polling agents from the opposition parties and some agents being abused. "This has not been a fair poll. We will hold discussions soon to decide on what steps should be taken," Attanayaka told Daily Mirror.

More than 80,000 security forces were deployed across the country on election day to prevent violence. Independent observers said 72 people had been admitted to hospital due to violence.

## Sri Lanka gloats over US war crimes video

FOLLOWING months of American calls to investigate the possibility of war crimes during the final stages of the conflict last year, Sri Lanka can hardly believe its luck. In a strange turn of events, Sri Lanka has slammed the US after the emergence of a video depicting the US air force firing at and killing 25 civilians in Iraq, including two Reuters journalists.

The Sri Lankan Government's Defence Spokesperson, Minister Keheliya Rambukwella, is reported to have called on the US to investigate its own troops before pointing fingers at developing countries.

"These are the world's so called super powers. They have always tried to bully developing countries but have ignored the blood on their hands. This is nothing new, it has been happening for years. They say we are guilty but we all know what happened Iraq," Minister Rambukwella told Daily Mirror online.

He went onto to add that the US had 'conveniently forgotten'

its own issues in Iraq, whilst accusing Sri Lanka of human rights abuses.

Mocking Ban Ki Moon's attempt to appoint an expert panel to investigate Sri Lankan war crimes, the minister taunted the UN over its silence and asked why the UN secretary general had not appointed an expert panel to advise him over US war crimes in Iraq.

American news channel, Fox news, reports that a senior US military official working at the Department of Defence, stated off the record, 'an investigation of the incidents confirmed our belief that these attacks were justified. The individuals who were killed, apart from the Reuters journalists, were involved in hostile activity.'

The video, filmed on 27th July 2007, shows US forces 'indiscriminately slaying' civilians near Baghdad, Iraq. It was released by an investigative organization called WikiLeaks amid allegations of US secret agents threatening to assassinate the group's founders.

## Sri Lanka humiliated by US snub

THE US has rejected the Sri Lankan Defence Ministry's request for advanced training at US military academies, for its senior military officers, in view of Sri Lanka's questionable human rights record.

According to the Sri Lankan newspaper, The Sunday Times, the Defence Ministry submitted three lists of senior officials, all of which have been turned down.

The US embassy spokesperson, Jeff Anderson, is reported to have stated that such training pro-

grammes required certain assurances including the safeguarding of human rights.

'It is because of concerns in this area that some military cooperation with Sri Lanka has been suspended' Jeff Anderson stated. He pointed out that the US and Sri Lanka had long history of partnership.

Incensed by such a snub, the Sri Lankan army has allegedly prohibited US air mobile units to partake in joint training exercises involving the two nation's Special

Forces. Prasad Samarasinghe, Sri Lanka's military spokesperson, is reported to have said he is not aware of such a development and therefore declined to comment any further.

Political analysts view the US's latest move as a direct call on Mahinda Rajapakse to conduct an independent war crimes investigation and establish a war crimes tribunal into the deaths of over 20,000 Tamil civilians during the final stages of the conflict last year.