

Speeches

Colombo, Tuesday March 17, 2009 | S. Ramanan for Internews

Q: How is the new Obama administration already changing the US foreign policy and how is this going to affect Sri Lanka?

President Obama wants to lead by example in the world and I think that was shown in some of the decisions that he made in the first week of his administration. First, by stating his intention to close down the detention facility in Guantanamo Bay within a year and secondly, by announcing that the United States will no longer engage in torture, as a matter of policy. Those were very important signals I think to the rest of the world.

Beyond that the President has said that he wants to strengthen our partnerships around the world. He wants to engage both our enemies and our allies alike. I think there is a new pragmatism in his foreign policy. For example, his willingness to talk with the Iranians, to perhaps discuss issues like Afghanistan. I think you are going to see overall much more pragmatic foreign policy and if things are not working, the President has a very flexible mind and is willing to look at new alternatives. When it comes to Sri Lanka, our policy in Sri Lanka has been constant through many different administrations, both Democratic and Republican, and that has been to support in every way we can to promote peace in this country.

Q: What are the US government's strategic goals in Sri Lanka?

Our main goal remains to try to help to promote peace. We think that by achieving peace one can do so much to promote prosperity here, and reduce all of the problems that have been associated with the conflict, like human rights and humanitarian problems. We want Sri Lanka to take its rightful place as one of the most developed and moderate countries in the region, a country with a great deal of opportunity once it can get beyond the conflict. So we focus a lot on promotion of peace, but part of that certainly has to be to focus on solving the humanitarian situation and also greatly improving the human rights situation.

Q: How do you go about achieving those goals?

We go about it in number of ways. First of all through advocacy - that is the purpose of diplomats around the world. We work very closely with the President and others within his cabinet to try to promote peace and the various aspects of that. We also have a quite important program under the US Agency for International Development to help not only with the conflict situation, for example we are the largest donor of food aid food assistance to the internally displaced people in the Vanni, but we also have a very important program in the East to try to help stabilize and develop that very important region of Sri Lanka.

Now that the LTTE has been evicted from that area we think there is an opportunity to build peace and prosperity in that multi-ethnic part of Sri Lanka and that could be a very positive example of how the North might be managed as part of future efforts there. We are engaged in trying to encourage new private sector activity to create jobs for young people so they will no

longer feel they need to resort to violence and to join paramilitaries. We are working a lot to try to encourage a much improved security atmosphere through, for example, disarming the paramilitaries. We have tried on issues like child soldiers to encourage the TMVP and the others to completely release all child soldiers and we are also working to improve governance in the East through helping independent media and civil society to grow.

Q: You have mentioned the opportunities for the youth in the East. Could you explain about your plans? What kind of jobs or training will be available for the youth in the East?

As you said the most important thing is to create jobs and provide opportunities for the young people and we feel the best way to do that is through private sector activities, not through government jobs. So we set up a public private partnership fund whereby we will partner with private sector companies, Sri Lankan private sector companies and potentially foreign companies as well, to create new opportunities for employment. You may recall, under our Tsunami relief program, we had a very ambitious vocational training where we built nine different vocational training facilities in the Southern and the Eastern parts of the country and those have been very successful.

The next step is to get some of the big companies to come in and invest. I think by partnering with us they can take advantage of good access that we have in Colombo to the various ministries if they have problems. For example, we have very good partnership with Brandix which is going to build up a new apparel factory in the East. We have been working with big companies like Hayleys to promote agricultural partnerships in the East. There are a number of those kinds of efforts under way. Surely we would like to do more and there are lots of opportunities there in the East.

Q: Does the financial crisis have any impact on the humanitarian assistance extended by the US or do you still want to continue with your proposed plans?

Thus far we have not really seen a major impact on our assistance in terms of the humanitarian assistance. Those kinds of decisions are made usually a year or two in advance and the money is budgeted for that so I do not anticipate there will be major changes on that side of it. It is possible that there could be an impact in terms of the reconstruction. That will be one of the many factors that the new administration has to consider when we think about ways we might help with the reconstruction of the North.

Q: How specifically does the US government try to address the humanitarian crisis in Sri Lanka's North and the East, where hundreds of thousands of families have been displaced?

I think we need to separate that answer into two different questions because they are really displaced in two different parts of the North now. *Seventy five thousand or so are still trapped in the North where the LTTE refuses to allow them to leave and refuses freedom of movement.* There we are primarily calling on both sides to protect the civilians. First of all, it is incumbent upon the LTTE to let them go and allow them freedom of movement. We also think it is very important that both sides refrain from shelling either out of or into the safe zone where any shell that lands will kill at least ten or twenty people and wound many more. We are very much

disturbed that there have been hundreds of civilian casualties just in the last weeks and more than two thousand killed since late January and many thousands wounded. That is the primary concern of ours.

The secondary concern is to make sure that we work with the government and the UN and the ICRC to ensure that adequate supplies of food and medicine reach all of those IDPs. You know most of them have been displaced numerous times, so they are completely dependent on outside assistance for their survival. There have been reports of shortages of food, very serious shortages of medicine and the levels of mortality are extraordinarily high in the safe zone because of the lack of medicine.

In the South (of the Vanni) we work closely with the UN, ICRC, and the government to try to ensure that the camps in Vavuniya are managed up to international standards. Again, as I said earlier, the United States is the largest donor of food assistance to IDPs. We have given about 28 million dollars worth of assistance over the last year. We are also the largest donor to both the UN and the ICRC in terms of our assessed contributions. We have a very important role to play and it is up to the personnel in the area to make sure that things are running well and that food is being distributed in proper way and getting to the right people.

I think it is very, very incumbent upon the government to make sure that camps are run according to the international standards. One of the propaganda points that the LTTE is making is that it is safer in their view for the civilians who are now trapped in the safe zone to stay in the safe zone than it is for them to move to camps. We don't believe that is true. The Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs Sir John Holmes recently visited Sri Lanka and had an opportunity to tour the camps and his basic conclusion was that basic needs are being met. Certainly there is over-crowding in the camps and certainly there are some other issues, but basic needs are being met. The UN and the ICRC and the others are working cooperatively with the government to address whatever the remaining concerns there are.

Q: After the completion of the so-called “humanitarian operation” in the Vanni, how do you want to assist the IDPs in the North?

We will be governed a little bit by what happens on the ground. Those who are now in the North in the safe zone will be temporarily resettled in interim camps down in the south and in Vavuniya, perhaps elsewhere, and we have consistently urged the government to resettle them as quickly as possible. We are encouraged that the government has announced that 80 percent of them will be settled by the end of this year, and that they intend to begin very soon to resettle those in Mannar and Vavuniya back to their original homes. That will be a very important consideration for us in terms of future support to make sure that our aid is going to support only these interim camps.

When we look at longer term reconstruction opportunities, first and foremost it will be important for the government to come forward with the plan of where it sees the needs, where the government itself will be putting its own resources and where therefore the international community can be of most assistance. We look forward to that and we shall encourage our friends in the government to work cooperatively and to consult local and international NGOs

about what their needs are and have a very participatory and open process as they come forward with their own plan.

Another very important consideration is the kind of political arrangement the government puts forward for the North and specifically that it comes forward with candidates for provincial council and chief minister positions who enjoy the full support of the people of the North - particularly the Tamils and the Muslims of the North so they can be confident that their leadership understands their concerns and is fully committed to addressing those concerns. A very open democratic process in which the international and local organizations are allowed to monitor elections will be a very important principal for us and will help to determine how much we can assist in the reconstruction of the North.

Q: The Eastern province was officially liberated by the government in November 2007, but still IDPs are living in camps. What sort of measures can be taken to help them to return and resume their lives in their own villages?

To be fair, the vast majority of IDPs have been resettled already in the East. It is true there are some left, but a far greater concern is now the IDPs in the North. In the East the main priority is to complete the de-mining process so that they can return to their villages as quickly as possible. We encouraged the government to do that and I think they are committed to doing that. Beyond that, as I said, we are working a great deal on stabilization and development programs.

Q: How do you see the human rights situation in Sri Lanka? How can the US government help support the Sri Lankan government to improve the human right situation here?

The United States has been concerned about the deterioration in human rights over the last several years in Sri Lanka; specifically we have been concerned by the very high levels of abductions, disappearances, extra judicial killings and the threats to media freedom.

In terms of what we can do about it, it is really most important for the government to address these issues and we surely do our best to bring this to their attention. We publish an annual human rights report that is quite detailed and based on the best available information we have from a wide range of sources including the government. We also have a very active dialogue with the government, with NGOs, and victims of human rights abuses to protect those, particularly the journalists and the lawyers, who are most at risk.

We also encourage the government to address the problem of impunity - that is the failure to bring anyone to justice for any of the human right crimes that have been committed. I think there are lots of very important human rights priorities and it is particularly important now because human rights problems have disproportionately affected the Tamils here. National reconciliation is going to have to be achieved after the end of the fighting in the North. Improving the human rights situation will be a very important part of that.

Q: US Assistant Secretary for Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher talked about an alleged process to evacuate the people from the Vanni. What can you comment on that?

There has been a lot of misconceptions about a US led evacuation. Let me categorically say that there are no US plans to lead an evacuation of civilians. There was a team here for a brief period of time to look at contingencies for how we might assist if we were asked to do so by the government and by the LTTE. So far we have not received any such request. There are no active plans at this moment by the US military or any other US government agencies to evacuate the civilians.

The very first thing that must happen, as I said earlier, is for the LTTE to decide to allow these civilians to leave. We are now devoting whatever efforts we can to persuade the LTTE to do that. That is the first and foremost consideration. If the government and the LTTE decided the best way to do that is through the US, we will be glad to consider that request but there is no such request on the table.

Q: I think recently the LTTE asked the UN to visit the Vanni to witness the current situation. They also mentioned that if the people wanted to leave with the UN they don't have any objection about it, but the LTTE clearly stated that the UN must first get opinions from the people about the evacuation. What do you want to say about that scenario? If the LTTE requested the same from the US government, would you evacuate the people from Vanni?

This is something we always say, that the LTTE should allow the civilians to exercise their freedom of movement. If the civilians want to leave they should be allowed to leave. In a way I am glad to hear that the LTTE is prepared to ask that. But I don't think we need the UN or anyone else to do an evacuation, they should just be allowed to go. The ICRC sends ships almost every day to evacuate the wounded. If the LTTE is willing to let the people go, they must put them in the ships and let them go. I do not think we need UN for that. I am little skeptical about this particular announcement.

Q: What sort of actions could be done to improve media freedom in Sri Lanka? How can the US Government assist in this?

Media freedom is one of the central concerns now in the human right situation in Sri Lanka. It is of concern because many journalists have been killed over the last several years and many others have been harassed, intimidated, or their families have been harassed. Many journalists are afraid and many members of civil society are afraid and that has a very chilling impact on public debate, particularly about the war.

The people that have been most at risk are those who try to provide most independent reporting on what is going on in the war. Frankly I do not think that should be seen as an unpatriotic effort, as it often is cast in the media here. The US makes a great effort to provide opportunities for independent media to go into Iraq or to go into Afghanistan. During the American military efforts there the reporters were embedded with American military units and reported freely on what was going on, in fact American media were the ones that first reported on things like the Abu Ghraib scandal. Had it not been for the independent media who were in Iraq that story would have never come to light.

The media play a very important role in ensuring accountability and that it is one of the reasons why we really believe this is an important part of ensuring human right here. Therefore, in terms of what needs to be done, I think that those that have killed or harassed or intimidated journalists need to be brought to justice. They need to be punished. There needs to be a clear policy that that kind of behavior will not be tolerated and so far there is not such a clear policy. There is a very high degree of impunity, as I said earlier, and I think that is the main priority on the media freedom front.

Q: How can the US government assist Sri Lankan journalists to improve their abilities and careers? Do you have any plans?

We do not really have scholarships for journalists. We have a wide range of exchange programs where many Sri Lankan journalists have benefitted, like the International Visitors Program where they go to the United States for periods of two to four weeks to various kinds of programs. Sometimes they are related to specific skills, like environmental reporting or human rights reporting, and some are general programs, like what we had during the American election. We also try to arrange for American experts to come here to Sri Lanka and meet with our counterparts, and we take advantage of our digital video conferencing capabilities to put Sri Lankan media in touch with American counterparts to discuss various matters. So there are a whole range of different efforts underway. We have supported the development of independent media in places like the East as well.

Q: Years from now, if you were asked by someone to tell a story about Sri Lanka what would you tell? What memory would linger in your mind?

That is a hard question. My family and I have had a wonderful experience in Sri Lanka, including many friends we have made and many wonderful travel experiences we have had around this country. If I had to recount one story it might be the time I spent last year when we went on a hiking trip up in the Knuckles range of Sri Lanka, one of the most beautiful and wild parts of your country. I was going with some Sri Lankan friends who were a little bit concerned about my safety, much more concerned than I was! They arranged for some Sri Lankan Army commandos to come with us, allegedly to provide security for me. I protested that I did not need any kind of security, but they were insistent and they came with us. I also liked to have them because it was fun to talk to them. One evening we were staying at our friend's quarters and the people who were working there were Tamils. I was really struck how these Sinhalese Army commandos instantly struck up a very friendly and positive rapport with the Tamil people of that area and it showed me that the vast majority of people in this country do want peace. They are very happy to live in harmony with each other. Here we live in the fishbowl of Colombo, where politics are highly polarized and politicians have for twenty-five years been unable to come to grips with the central problems facing this country, which is why we have this civil war going on for so long. But the people, if left to them themselves without the politicians, can quite easily get along very well and in fact they want peace. The Tamils, Muslims, Sinhalese and others still very much want to live together. There are no issues about racism, chauvinism or anything like that which one hears about in Colombo.

It is important for political leaders to understand that they should not try to sew division between people, but take advantage of the great support that exists in this country for peace and try to use that advantage to create peace. That is my hope for Sri Lanka and that will be my greatest memory - of all the decent and moderate peace-loving people that I have met in this country.

Q: One more question, the last one. What would you like to comment about the USAID funded Internews' Lifeline Humanitarian Information Service?

I am very proud of everything that Lifeline has accomplished and we are pleased to be able to support Lifeline. It is extremely important to have the opportunity to reach out to IDPs and other segments of society, to have them understand that people like the American Ambassador and the American government are very much concerned about their welfare and are working very hard to address their needs and to make sure the government and others address their needs. I think organizations like yours [Internews] fulfill a very important function in helping to articulate and surface some of the issues that IDPs are facing. I really commend you for the important work you are doing and for the efforts to really reach out to this very important segment of Sri Lankan society. IDPs are numerous in this country, particularly some of the longer term IDPs. I can imagine that they sometimes fear that their problems have been neglected for many years. They have not been forgotten. It is important for them to know that.

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