

US envoy raises muted concerns about democratic rights in Sri Lanka

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During his visit to Sri Lanka on May 8-10, US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher for the first time made reference to US concerns over the abuse of basic democratic rights by the government and the country's security forces.

The Bush administration has backed Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse and his renewed war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to the hilt. While denouncing the LTTE as "terrorists" and pressing other governments to ban the separatist organisation, the White House has deliberately ignored the Sri Lankan military's open breaches of the 2002 ceasefire and the government's anti-democratic methods.

Boucher's latest comments on human rights in Sri Lanka were very limited and, in the context of the barbaric US occupation of Iraq, completely hypocritical. But the fact that a senior US official made any such reference at all is a significant indication of the scale of the crimes being perpetrated by the Colombo government, the military and allied armed paramilitaries.

During his visit, Boucher met President Rajapakse, his brother and Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, top officials and military officers. Boucher travelled to Jaffna in the northern war-zone and spoke to military commanders, local religious leaders, politicians and officials.

At a press conference in Colombo on May 10, the US official began by again denouncing the LTTE as "a terrorist group" that "recruits child soldiers, extorts money, kills people, blows up buses, and attacks government facilities". He reiterated US support for the Rajapakse government, highlighting US "defence cooperation with the Sri Lankan military" and Washington's efforts to pressure other countries "to slow the ability of the Tamil Tigers to get supplies, to get money, and to get weapons".

At the same time, Boucher made clear that in his discussions with Rajapakse: "We have talked quite a bit about the human rights situation. And there are two aspects that concern us most. One is abductions and killings, and the second is freedom of the press... We [in the US] remain very concerned about some of the killings, the killings of aid

workers, killing of people at various places on the island that have occurred in the last year or so."

On the issue of press freedom, he added: "We have seen a lot of different reports. We've seen reports of intimidation, reports of government power being used on newspapers and journalists; and then of course, we've seen killings and violent acts committed against newspapers and journalists."

In the same breath, Boucher effectively exonerated the government, claiming it had laid down proper guidelines for arrests and that politicians and officials were "committed" to their implementation. Speaking of the notorious pro-government paramilitary groups, he carefully avoided any reference to the close collaboration of the armed forces and the government in their operations.

Boucher's comments came amid growing outrage in Sri Lanka and internationally over the operation of pro-government death squads, directed mainly against the Tamil minority in Colombo and the war zones in the north and east of the island. Since Rajapakse won office in November 2005, hundreds of people have been killed or "disappeared" by these shadowy gunmen. In virtually none of these cases have any of the perpetrators been detained, let alone prosecuted and punished. Many others are being held without charge under the country's draconian Prevention of Terrorism laws.

The SEP (Sri Lanka) and *World Socialist Web Site* are currently campaigning for Sri Lankan authorities to investigate the disappearance of SEP member Nadarajah Wimalaswaran and his friend Sivanathan Mathivathanan on March 22 from navy-controlled islands near the northern town of Jaffna, and the murder of SEP supporter Sivapragasam Mariyadas last August. To date, no serious police investigation has taken place in either case.

Human rights organisations have been waging broad campaigns to bring the scale of atrocities in Sri Lanka to international attention. During the recent cricket World Cup, Amnesty International (AI) called for all sides to "Play by the Rules" and pushed for international human rights monitors on the island. Defending its campaign, AI noted:

“Increasing abductions, illegal killings and child recruitment in Sri Lanka are all going on unchecked and victims do not receive justice. The intensified fighting over the last year has forced over 300,000 people to flee their homes. At least 1,000 people have been forcibly disappeared since the beginning of 2006.”

The US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) wrote an open letter to the Pope prior to Rajapakse’s visit to the Vatican last month, drawing attention to the Sri Lankan government’s record as well as that of the LTTE. “Enforced disappearances attributed to state security forces are also on the rise. In the Jaffna peninsula alone, the government’s Human Rights Commission has recorded 707 cases of missing persons since December 2005, 492 of whom are still missing. In the vast majority of reported cases, witnesses and family members allege that security forces were involved or implicated in the abduction,” it stated.

The HRW letter also noted that “impunity remains the norm”, explaining: “Sri Lanka’s law-enforcement authorities have proven woefully incapable of dealing with the abuse. The peace secretariat’s statement of March 8 provides the results of police investigations into nine cases of abductions and ‘disappearances’, but this represents a small fraction of the total number of cases reported every month.”

HRW also highlighted threats against the media and government critics. “At the same time, the government is using the ‘war on terror’ paradigm to intimidate the media, non-governmental organisations, and others with independent or dissenting views. Human Rights Watch is deeply concerned that the government, driven by the Sri Lankan defence establishment, is dismissing critics as allies of the LTTE and traitors of the state,” it wrote.

Sunanda Deshapriya, the convener of the Free Media Movement, commented recently: “The people in the north and east do not have the right to have a newspaper, no newsprint. The journalists have no right to life, they can’t take any photograph they want, they can’t access the Internet as they like.” He stated that 17 journalists and media workers had been killed in the past 15 months.

The government’s attitude to the media, particularly the Tamil-language, was underscored by an internal debate over whether or not to allow Boucher to meet with the staff of *Uthayan*, a leading Tamil newspaper in Jaffna. The *Sunday Times*, which revealed the discussions, noted that Rajapakse had quizzed his foreign minister over “why such permission was granted”. Government MPs had expressed their opposition to any meeting with the “pro-LTTE” press. In the event Rajapakse relented, under strict conditions. But the very fact that Rajapakse was considering blocking a top US official from such a visit is graphic confirmation of his

government’s attitude toward any media critical of official policy.

HRW also produced a detailed report in March demonstrating that one of the pro-government militias—the Karuna group—is actively involved in recruiting child soldiers. The report, which the Rajapakse government immediately denounced, is significant because one of the main charges levelled at the LTTE is its involvement in this practice. HRW not only identified particular cases of child abduction but also provided first-hand evidence of the open collusion of the Karuna group with the military in the Batticaloa district—something the government regularly denies. Boucher, who condemned the LTTE’s recruitment of child soldiers, had nothing to say about the similar methods of the Karuna group.

Criticisms have been expressed in the US Congress, reflecting concerns that Washington may be associating itself too closely with the Rajapakse government’s flagrant abuse of democratic rights. Republican senator Richard Lugar, a senior member of the Foreign Relations Committee, wrote to Rajapakse in March warning that US aid may be in jeopardy. “I am concerned that the worsening of Sri Lanka’s indicators may jeopardize funding from the MCC [Millennium Challenge Corporation] account,” he stated.

Britain announced early this month that it was suspending \$3 million in debt relief aid, citing concerns about human rights abuses and huge defence spending. During Boucher’s visit, a diplomat in Colombo told AFP that Japan, Sri Lanka’s largest aid donor, was also planning to meet with international activists who were demanding aid be linked to the government’s human rights record.

Like Boucher’s comments, these cosmetic moves will do nothing to halt the Rajapakse government’s brutal war or its vicious repression. But they do indicate both the widespread and criminal character of the Sri Lankan military’s activities, and the growing opposition on the island and internationally.



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