

## US urges Sri Lanka progress on human rights

A top US official Tuesday urged the Sri Lankan government to "progress on human rights" and hold "free and fair election for the Eastern provincial council" scheduled for early next month, a US embassy statement here said.

According to the statement, the US's principal deputy assistant secretary for south and central Asian affairs Don Camp made these remarks after holding talks with the government ministers, officials, leading political figures, civil society leaders, and business representatives during his two-day stay in Colombo.

"Many of the issues we discussed are difficult ones, particularly on human rights and the resolution of the conflict, but the US will remain engaged in the hope of seeing progress," Camp was quoted as saying.

Claiming that the US values the dialogue with Sri Lanka, as well as the lines of communication it maintains with Sri Lankan political, business, and civil society leaders, the visiting US official described his meetings as "useful and frank, in the way of long-time friends".

"Camp also welcomed initial measures to demobilize TMVP (Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Puligal - an LTTE breakaway group) child soldiers, urged progress on human rights, and stressed the importance of free and fair elections in the East, without violence or intimidation," the US embassy statement said.

The government troops last year recaptured the former LTTE strongholds in the Eastern Batticaloa, Trincomalee and Amparai districts. Amid the government move to hold provincial council polls for the East, the TMVP last week released seven child soldiers.

The US remarks on rights situation in Sri Lanka came as the ruling coalition led by President Mahinda Rajapaksa vowed Tuesday that it would continue an official probe into serious rights abuses despite the withdrawal of foreign observers who accused Colombo of "lacking political will to find the truth".

"The government's commitment to probe (the grave rights violations) remains unwavering, despite the decision taken by the members of the International Independent Group of Eminent Persons (IIGEP) to prematurely relinquish their mandate," Human Rights Minister Mahinda Samarasinghe told reporters here.

The IIGEP, which is led by former Indian chief justice P.N. Bhagwati and includes experts from the European Union, United Nations, Australia, Canada, India, France and the US, was formed in 2007 to oversee a Presidential Commission of Inquiry into 16 cases of major human rights abuses in Sri Lanka.

It wound up its operations last month, alleging that it was unable to ensure the adherence international standards in these probes due to "absence of will" on the part of the Sri Lankan government.

*P. Karunakharan (© IANS / India eNews)*