

The Washington Times

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Targeting the Tamil Tigers

Published October 18, 2006

Any hope that the militant Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam would respond to diplomatic pressure and renounce their terrorist tactics ahead of the cease-fire negotiations scheduled for the end of the month was murderously subverted by a suicide attack that killed more than 100 Sri Lankan sailors this week. Although the government is poised to enter peace talks backed by political consensus for the first time, its willingness to negotiate the end of violence in Sri Lanka is being undermined by the rebel group's continuing violence. The talks are still scheduled, but will only provide salvation for the war-torn South Asian nation if the Tamil Tigers can be forced into truly renouncing violence -- an unlikely prospect.

Legitimate cease-fire talks require the Tamil Tigers to match the government's level of commitment to peace. In the past two decades of peace efforts, however, this hasn't happened. The Tamil Tigers have entered negotiations and cease-fire agreements with a disingenuous promise of peace only to use the break in hostilities to secretly regroup, rearm and relaunch their offensive. The Tamil Tigers are not interested in peaceful coexistence; their only goal is to win substantial territorial concessions, which is a nonstarter for the Sri Lankan government, and justifiably so. The Tigers, furthermore, lack any real support of the Tamil people and intimidate their opposition into silence.

This is a negotiation between a state and the terrorist group that pioneered the use of suicide bombing. Under no circumstances can they be considered equals, and it's essential that the international community, as it works to put the country on the right track, pronounce this distinction ardently. (Indeed, the United States refuses to negotiate with any terrorist groups.)

Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher, who has rightly noted that the Tigers are a "terrorist group that needs to be treated accordingly," travels to Sri Lanka this week to meet with government officials and members of a Japanese envoy working in the country. While the trip should convey U.S. concern with the violence, the only effective way for the international community to pressure the Tamil Tigers is by targeting the group's world-wide fundraising network.

The recent arrests in Baltimore of six men accused of purchasing weapons, including Russian-made surface-to-air missiles, for the Tigers, which came only a few months after similar arrests were made in a sting operation in New York, are the first concrete actions taken since the United States classified the

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Tamils as a terrorist organization in 1997. These important arrests should be followed by forceful prosecution. This is precisely the kind of action that U.S. authorities need to take to disrupt the flow of money and weapons to the Sri Lankan terrorists, which is the only way to force the group into earnest negotiations.

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