

# Embassy Row

James Morrison ([Contact](#)) Monday, June 30, 2008

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## Surf's up

Surfers around the world have discovered a new place to ride the waves, a tear-shaped island in the Indian Ocean called Sri Lanka.

Despite a civil war that has claimed 70,000 lives over 30 years, the island the size of West Virginia is especially popular with Israeli surfers, and the government is planning to install cameras along the best beaches so surfers can monitor the waves over the Internet.

All this is good news to **Ambassador Bernard Goonetilleke**, who served as Sri Lanka's envoy in Washington for the past three years and is retiring to his homeland after a 40-year diplomatic career. At 63, however, he is not planning to hit the surf, but he sees its potential for tourism.

The surfing phenomenon is a sign of hope for his troubled nation, Mr. Goonetilleke said in an interview at the Sri Lankan Embassy. The eastern region has some of the best waves, but it had been under the brutal control of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) until the government recently drove the rebels out of that stronghold.

The Eastern Province held elections last month, and a former Tamil rebel is now the chief minister of the region.

"This could be the Hawaii of the Indian Ocean," Mr. Goonetilleke predicted. "When that happens, people will be too busy making money to go back into the jungle and fight."

The ambassador said his government knows that redevelopment in the east is the key to peace in the region. The rebels have retreated to a strip of territory in the northern part of the island, but will remain a threat until Tiger leader **Velupillai Prabhakaran** agrees to negotiate seriously

and end his quest for a separate homeland for the ethnic-minority Tamils.

Mr. Goonetilleke defended his government against charges from international human rights groups and noted that prosecutors have brought cases against hundreds of suspects accused of abusing civilians. The government has engaged in a half-dozen rounds of talks with the Tigers, who use negotiations to regroup or refocus their attacks, he said.

"We held talks in 1985, '87, '90, '95, 2002 and 2006. Each time, the LTTE walked away from the table," he said, adding that he was involved in the 2002 negotiations. "They have engaged in a 30-year destructive war and achieved nothing."

As for himself, Mr. Goonetilleke thinks he has achieved some success in his tenure in the United States. The Bush administration added the Tamil Tigers to its terrorist list in 2003 and has closed many Tamil charities accused of raising money for the rebels. However, he has spent more time explaining to congressional critics, human rights groups and nonprofit organizations the dangers facing Sri Lanka.

"Most of my time has been spent explaining what is happening in my country to people who do not understand the real dynamics of the danger facing my country," he said.

### **Diplomatic traffic**

Foreign visitors in Washington this week include:

#### **Tuesday**

Prime Minister **Gediminas Kirkilas** of Lithuania, who presents the Lithuanian Millennium Star award to Lee Edwards, chairman of the Victims of Communism Foundation. On Wednesday, he discusses trans-Atlantic relations in a briefing at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Foreign Minister **Gordan Jandrokovic** of Croatia, who discusses security in southeast Europe in a briefing at the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

#### **Wednesday**

**Temuri Yakobashvili**, state minister for reintegration issues of the republic of Georgia. He discusses his country's tense relations with Russia in a briefing at the Hudson Institute's Center for Eurasian Policy.

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Page 1

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