

GLOBE EDITORIAL

Asia's unending war

The Boston Globe

October 22, 2006

SRI LANKA'S intermittent war between successive governments and the secessionist movement known as the Tamil Tigers has been going on for nearly a quarter century and has taken 65,000 lives. It is one of the most vicious and intractable conflicts in the world, but receives less attention than other wars that involve American interests more directly.

Episodes of gruesome bloodletting on both sides this fall demonstrate that a 2002 ceasefire survives only on paper. At the same time, Pakistani arms deliveries to the government and a consequent expectation that India will provide military aid (albeit covert) to the Tamils threatens to transform Sri Lanka's civil war into a proxy war between South Asia's two principal antagonists. So the Bush administration did well last week to dispatch Richard Boucher, assistant secretary for South and Central Asian affairs, to Sri Lanka to press for a political solution to the island's civil war.

During a visit last June, Boucher staked out a sound principle for resolution of the conflict. The United States believes, he said, that the Tamil ethnic minority that predominates in the north and east of the island nation ought to have some form of self-rule in its own homeland. Vague as this formula may be, it does point the way to a political rather than a military solution in Sri Lanka, including a durable, peaceful coexistence between the mostly Hindu Tamils and the Buddhist Sinhalese majority.

But for Boucher's visit Thursday and Friday to have a practical effect, it will have to be followed up with concrete measures. Although American officials are prohibited from engaging in contacts with the Tamil Tigers because the group is on the US terrorism list, the Bush administration should give whole hearted backing to the Sri Lankan government's participation in peace talks with the Tigers later this month in Geneva.

To demonstrate Washington's seriousness about a permanent peace that provides for Tamil self-government and human rights in a confederal Sri Lanka, the administration ought to prevail on the central government to withdraw its armed forces from the Tamil areas in the north of the island. The Sri Lankan government should also be told that as a humanitarian gesture, it would be wise to open the road to Jaffna, the sole main artery connecting the Tamil areas to the rest of the country.

Peace in Sri Lanka must be accompanied by justice for the island's Tamil minority. That justice and that peace should be seen as building blocks for the security in Asia that is sure to become more and more important to the United States. ■