

U.S. slams LTTE over arms smuggling. (2003, February 12). *Yahoo news.*

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COLOMBO (Reuters) - The United States said on Wednesday a recent attempt by Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels to smuggle weapons was highly destabilising and could cast doubt on their desire for peace.

Three rebel weapons smugglers set their boat on fire and blew themselves up last week after neutral truce monitors discovered them carrying an anti-aircraft gun, several hundred rounds of ammunition and hand grenades.

"The apparent attempt to smuggle arms into Sri Lanka during the course of the peace process was highly destabilising and could call into question the Tigers' stated wish to pursue a negotiated settlement," the U.S. embassy said in a statement.

"We urge the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) to commit itself fully to peace and desist from arms resupply efforts," it said.

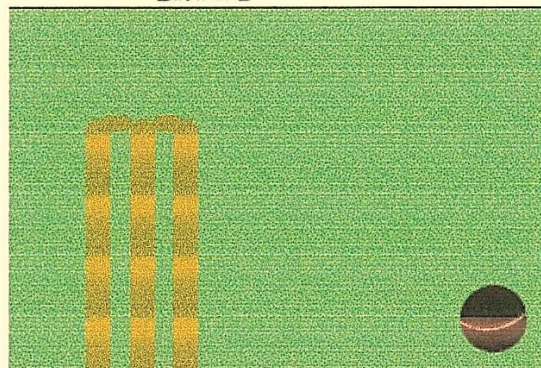
Norway brokered last February's truce and has been mediating talks to end the war that has killed 64,000 since 1983. Pressure from the United States to stop the fighting has grown since the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington.

The rebels' sincerity has come under increasing scrutiny since the sea-suicide incident and because of persistent allegations that they continue to recruit child soldiers in their campaign for self-determination for minority Tamils.

The U.S. embassy statement praised the two sides for taking up human rights issues at a fifth

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round of talks in Berlin last week, but was sceptical about the Tigers' pledge to work with the U.N. children's agency UNICEF to end child recruitment.

"Regarding child soldiers, the LTTE has promised on several occasions in the past that it would end this odious practice; we expect the Tigers to honour their pledge," it said.

Both sides were blamed in another test of the ceasefire agreement on Wednesday when army officers forcibly removed military belts from eight female LTTE cadres in the northern Jaffna peninsula.

Neither side is supposed to wear military gear in the other's areas, but truce monitors said the army reacted with undue force in quelling about 100 protesters who gathered in defence of the rebels.

"At least five were attacked for no reason. They (the army) had long sticks and were beating people," Teitur Torkelsson, spokesman for the monitors, said.

After meeting monitors, the army agreed it would file complaints about truce violations to the monitoring mission before taking action. The rebels agreed that cadres would not wear military belts in government areas.