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Embassy Row

By James Morrison

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Water wars

A high-ranking diplomat at the Sri Lankan Embassy yesterday complained that news reports about fighting at a rebel-held reservoir inaccurately portrayed his government as the aggressor and downplayed the fact that rebels had unlawfully shut off water to pro-government villages.

An Associated Press report in yesterday's edition of The Washington Times quoted a spokesman for the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and Norwegian envoys assigned to monitor a cease-fire that has nearly collapsed because of renewed clashes that have left about 900 dead in recent months. The report left the impression that the government unleashed artillery attacks after the rebels offered to reopen the sluice gates that control the flow of water to 60,000 civilians in an eastern area of the South Asian island nation.

"What the government is doing is a legitimate use of force to restore essential supplies to the people," said **Ravinatha Aryasinha**, the deputy chief of mission at the embassy. "The government will not be blackmailed by the LTTE."

He said the government attacks will continue until the rebels return control of the reservoir to government authorities who operated the water supply until the rebels seized it July 20. The town of Muttur, supplied by the reservoir on the Mavil Aru canal, is on the government side of the cease-fire line, he added. The shut-off of water has destroyed 15,000 acres of crops.

Both the United States and European Union label the LTTE a terrorist group because it attacks civilians and was one of the first to use suicide bombers. The rebels have been fighting for a separate homeland for the minority Tamil population since the 1980s.

Mr. Aryasinha also complained that his government was unaware that Norwegian envoy **Jon Hanssen-Bauer** had met with the Tamil rebels on Sunday but rejected any conditions offered for reopening the reservoir.

"There can be no negotiations on the water issue," Mr. Aryasinha said. "The government of Sri Lanka is not aware of what the LTTE has told Mr. Hanssen-Bauer about it."

Mr. Aryasinha said the government will not back down on future rebel violations of the cease-fire, explaining that earlier decisions by the government not to respond in some cases "have been taken as a

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sign of weakness" by the rebels.

"The government remains committed to the cease-fire," he said, "but in instances where the LTTE acts in the manner it did on the Mavil Aru water issue or in seeking to drive out the civilians to take over Muttur, the government will give a robust response."

Support still strong

Americans still strongly support Israel in the fourth week of its fight to disarm Hezbollah in Lebanon and clearly blame Iran and Syria for manipulating the militants in their goal of crushing the Jewish state, according to a new public opinion poll.

"Despite a series of dramatic events over the past week -- the bombing of a civilian apartment building in Qana, a brief cease-fire and an escalation of the ground war by the Israelis -- the American public remains strong and stable in its views of the conflict," said pollster **Stan Greenberg**, after the results were released on Friday.

"Americans stand with Israel," added **Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi**, president of the Israel Project, which sponsored the poll. "They understand that both Iran and Syria are backing Hezbollah and that Hezbollah is acting as the proxy for Iran's and Syria's ultimate goal of destroying Israel."

Sixty-seven percent of 850 likely voters surveyed last week agreed that Israel's actions are justified, while 21 percent disagreed. They said Israel's conflict was with Hezbollah and not Lebanese civilians by a margin of 68 percent to 21 percent.

In response to a question in which more than one answer was allowed, 56 percent cited Iran and 51 percent Syria as the two sponsors of Hezbollah. Last month, only 38 percent picked Iran and 36 percent cited Syria in response to a similar question.

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