

by **Hassina Leelarathna**

LOS ANGELES, CA -

The US Treasury Department's recent clampdown on the Tamil Rehabilitation Organization (TRO) accusing it of raising funds on behalf of a designated terrorist group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), throws the spotlight once again on the shadowy 'LTTE lobby' whose access to powerful US lawmakers helped to legitimize this and other Tiger fronts allowing them to operate with no road bumps for almost a decade. A close look into this nexus brings up the possibilities of ethics violations, if not more serious wrongdoing. Our investigation shows that TRO operatives and individuals whose addresses or phone numbers are linked to the TRO regularly made contributions to the campaign funds of the very legislators who have actively promoted the separatist cause and been harshly critical of Sri Lanka's war on the Tigers, pointing, in turn, to the startling realization that not only did some US politicians help legitimize a terrorist group's cause and operations but they also may have benefited financially from it.

High on the list are representatives Brad Sherman, (D-CA-27), Rush Holt (D-NJ-12), Danny Davis (D-IL-7), and David Price (D-NC-4) - all names familiar to Sri Lankans as being 'pro-Eelam', if not 'pro-LTTE.' For sheer audacity, though, it is Congressman Sherman, who stands out most since he is not only a member of the powerful House Foreign Affairs Committee but he also holds a position no less than chairman of the congressional body tasked with managing and coordinating the United States' efforts to combat terrorism - the House Subcommittee on Terrorism and Human Rights.

"TRO passed off its operations as charitable, when in fact it was raising money for a designated terrorist group responsible for heinous acts of terrorism," said Adam J. Szubin, Director of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), explaining the action taken November 15 to freeze the U.S.-held assets of the TRO. The Treasury went on to say that the TRO had raised funds on behalf of the LTTE through a network of 'individual representatives' and that it was the preferred conduit of funds from the US to the LTTE.

Since the TRO hung out its shingle in the US, almost ten years ago, these individual representatives, many of them successful Tamil professionals, have been the LTTE's foot soldiers, active in several states, raising funds while establishing and developing political contacts.

The 'symbiotic' relationship between Sherman and the TRO may be traced back to 1999 when he was the chief guest at the opening fundraiser of the TRO office located at 18352 Keswick Street, Unit 10, Reseda, California, in the San Fernando Valley. Several prominent doctors and other Sri Lankan Tamils known for pro-separatist activism were present at the crowded event. Just a few weeks after that, on June 24, 1999, a contribution of \$300 to the Sherman for Congress Fund was made under the name of Mr. Kandiah Perinpanathan from this same TRO office address. The contributions have been continuing until recently:

6/24/1999	- \$300
2/28/2000	- \$500
3/7/2000	- \$800
3/7/2000	- \$200
3/7/2000	- \$1000
9/14/2000	- \$850
4/23/2004	- \$250
8/22/2006	- \$250
4/1/2007	- \$500

Total contributions made from the TRO office address in Reseda to the Sherman for Congress Fund since 1999: \$4,650.

'Coincidentally,' a few weeks after the TRO office opened, two more Tamil donations were made to the Sherman Fund, all on the same date - June 24, 1999. One donation was from a physician in Northridge who made a contribution of \$500. The other was a donation of \$750 by a well-known pro-Eelamist doctor from Lancaster who was among the participants at that TRO event the congressman attended.

The Lancaster doctor's contributions over the years are as follows:

6/24/1999	- \$750
11/6/2000	- \$500
10/25/2004	- \$375
11/1/2005	- \$2,000
4/27/2006	- \$1,000

Other contributions known to have been made by Sri Lankan Tamils to the Sherman campaign fund in the past nine years are about \$10,000, counting only those funds of \$250 or more.

The relationship between Sherman and the San Fernando Valley TRO comes to focus again in the wake of the tsunami. Sherman, like several other US leaders, urged Americans to make donations to the victims of the disaster, with the difference that while others steered donors towards established charities such as the Red Cross, he gave the number-one spot to the TRO. In a press release dated January 7, 2005, Sherman provided a list of groups collecting donations. The first group on that list was the 'Tamil Rehabilitation Organization, TRO-USA, 18352 Keswick Street, Unit 10, Reseda, CA 91335.' In addition to providing the TRO with huge mileage, by this endorsement Congressman Sherman reveals his awareness of the existence of the TRO

office and its location, which, in turn, points to the fact that the lawmaker was endorsing the very group that was regularly trickling money into his campaign.

Following the Treasury Department action against the TRO, this writer asked Congressman Sherman's office for comments, mentioning the Congressman's close ties to the group as evident from his presence at the opening of the TRO office in the San

terrorist list.

The response has been, well, we don't do that, which basically means that we're not acting to encourage the Tamil Tigers to improve their behaviour.

Perhaps deputy - principal deputy assistant secretary - you could outline here what actions do we want the Tamil Tigers to take or refrain from.

**CAMP:** Actually, I think it's fairly straight-

two unidentified individuals to Sri Lanka in 2005 were paid with \$13,150 laundered through a US bank. The source of those funds - whether they were raised for 'charity' or extorted from the Tamil diaspora - is not known. But Davis revealed to the media that over the years, campaign donations totalling around \$5000 had trickled into his campaign fund from Sri Lankan Tamils in the US, some of it may well have been from the TRO's individual

December 26, 2004 the following list of phone numbers was provided by the TRO and published on TamilNet, the pro-LTTE website, as its contacts for collecting donations.

Seattle, Washington - 360-5140747 ; North Carolina - 919-7837519; Chicago, Illinois - 920-9070911; Columbus, Ohio - 614-8322010; New Jersey - 609-7797746; California: 661-9421036; 626-8067178; 626-3368334; 916-2533945; 408-7368094; Florida - 954-3454236; Florida - 954-6756883; Florida - 239-8502571; Kansas - 620-3436292;

Tennessee - 615-3086862; MA - 9427087; New York - 718-6579463; Maryland - 301-7292722; NY (Buffalo) - 716-8648236; Texas - 972-3702532.

With a few exceptions, where unlisted, the above numbers were traced to Tamils, one a prominent attorney practicing in California who was also a mover in the establishment of the TRO office in Reseda. A campaign contribution of \$250 went to Congressman Sherman from one of the individuals traced and a contribution of \$500 went from another to North Carolina Congressman David Price (D - 4th Dist.)

But outgoing Price, and just as bad as Sherman, is Congressman Rush Holt, who has clearly put his mouth where LTTE money is. For several years, Holt has been receiving campaign funds from Ranjan Ramanathan, a man identified as the TRO's New Jersey state coordinator. The 56-year old Ramanathan an organizer of the 2006 'LTTE Heroes Day' where the Tamil Tiger flag was raised and LTTE combatants and suicide bombers eulogised, is no stranger among Democrats. His name was in the news recently when it was revealed that he was an approved solicitor of funds for the Hillary Clinton presidential campaign. The Clinton campaign quickly took his name off its website after questions were raised as to whether the Tigers had infiltrated her campaign. But, Ramanathan's relationship with Holt is well-cemented with his known contributions to Holt's campaign since 2003, paid out several times during each year, totalling \$8114.

And the contributions have not gone unacknowledged. On July 23, 2007, when US Tamils held a 'peace rally', where they issued a proclamation that 'Eelam Tamils constitute a nation,' blasted the Sri Lankan government, and collected signatures to cut US military aid to Sri Lanka, one of Holt's senior aides was on hand to lend moral support. "Chris Gaston, Senior Aide to Congressman Rush Holt came to the rally and met with the contingent that attended the rally from the Congressman's home state of New Jersey," a press release by the organizers said.

Holt has definitely been a significant player in the LTTE strategy of attacking the Sri Lankan government for human rights violations and calling for international intervention in the country's internal matters. He has actively touted the 'Tamil homeland' concept in addition to lobbying for a US 'special envoy' to Sri Lanka. In February 2007, diaspora Tamils signed an online petition thanking Holt for his initiatives, particularly, for calling for a special high-level US envoy to oversee Sri Lankan affairs. "I wish to convey to you that you and your colleagues have won the hearts of the Tamils living all over the US and all over the continent of Europe," the thank-you letter signed by over 300 Tamils said.

Holt's most recent effort on behalf of the Eelam lobby was a letter to President Bush, co-authored with Congressman Price, in July of 2007. Signed by forty legislators, including Sherman and Davis, it called for the enhancement of the UN presence in Sri Lanka and increased US pressure on the Sri Lankan government to 'take active measures to end extrajudicial killings and disappearances.' Almost as a postscript, the authors threw in a call to the Treasury Department to 'enhance efforts to disrupt LTTE financing.'

The platitude is interesting not just for the flimsy effort at balancing things out and showing some action against the LTTE but also for the attempt by the congressmen at distancing themselves from the frontline of LTTE fundraising in the US. Who do they think is raising funds for the LTTE? It is hard to believe that these US politicians have not connected the dots between LTTE financing and LTTE lobbying, that they have missed the obvious - that the same Sri Lankan Tamils who turn up at their offices lobbying the Eelam cause (using the 'humanitarian' guise) are also, for the most part, fundraisers for the Tigers.

The depth and extent of the nexus between US politicians and the LTTE lobby have yet to be unraveled but the evidence points to culpability way beyond the nod US legislators are reputed for giving the Tamil Tigers. A proper investigation into LTTE fundraising will have to factor in the complicity of US lawmakers, especially those who themselves have been recipients of funds made via individual TRO/LTTE operatives.

## US Lawmakers with ties to LTTE money

**Congressmen Brad Sherman, Rush Holt received thousands in campaign funds from TRO operatives**

"In the case of Congressman Danny Davis his connection to the LTTE may have gone unnoticed if not for another notable event. The Democrat from Illinois gained notoriety a few after the August 2006 arrest of 11 LTTE operatives in the US for allegedly conspiring to procure military hardware and attempting to bribe US officials to remove the Tigers from the State Department's list of terrorist organizations. *The Chicago Tribune* broke the story of how Davis and an aide snuck into the LTTE-controlled Wann, on a \$7500 junket paid for by the Federation of Tamil Sangams of North America (FeTNA) an umbrella organization of Tamil groups. Davis admitted taking the junket despite knowing that FeTNA and the LTTE were connected. He also admitted having had contact with one of the arrested men, Murugesu Vinayagamoorthy, a British doctor."

Fernando Valley and his tsunami appeal. The most recent campaign contribution of \$500 on 4/17/07 made by Mr. Perinpanathan was also cited.

Sherman's press secretary Roger Lotz responded saying he searched the congressman's schedule but was unable to find a reference to the 1999 TRO fundraising event. He also stated: "You indicate \$500.00 was donated by Mr. Kandiah Perinpanathan. In an eighteen-year political career, the Congressman has raised well over \$10 million dollars for his own campaigns as well as for his fellow Democrats. So, I don't assume he has "close ties" to each contributor."

It is possible that Sherman's presence at the 1999 never got to his official calendar. But his presence at that event at the Keswick Street address was well-documented in a first-hand account by journalist Deeptha Leelarathna. Besides, his ties to LTTE lobby in the US cannot be so easily dismissed in the light of his numerous, at times, outrageous, public pronouncements calling for the setting up of a separate state in Sri Lanka and his obvious bias towards the Tigers.

In a letter to Secretary of State Madeline Albright dated September 1, 2000, Sherman called for US intervention to partition Sri Lanka into 'two autonomous democratic political structures' by using a referendum, similar to that conducted in East Timor; the Tamil people could determine whether they want a confederation or a separate state as endorsed by the Tamil people in the last democratic elections held in 1977 in the north and east of Sri Lanka..."

On March 15, 2006, in an exchange with Donald H. Camp, principal deputy assistant secretary of state for South Asia who was giving testimony before the U.S. House International Relations Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific Sherman revealed that he had asked the State Department to design a roadmap to get the LTTE off the terrorist list and went to the extent of drawing parallels between the US War of Independence and the LTTE war.

**SHERMAN:** I've urged the State Department to design a road map for the Tamil Tigers, so that they would know what steps they would need to take to get off the

forward. The LTTE was put on the terrorist list, because of their violent activities.

What they would need to do would be to basically renounce terrorism, renounce violence in...

**SHERMAN:** What is the difference between terrorism on the one hand, and waging a legitimate guerrilla struggle on the other? What is the difference between Al Qaida and George Washington?

**CAMP:** If I could...  
**SHERMAN:** (inaudible) George Washington did use violence.

**CAMP:** Last I checked, though, he did not blow up buildings with civilians. I mean, the LTTE has been famous for its attacks, its suicide bomb attacks on civilian targets.

As the exchange proceeded, Sherman argued that the LTTE should be taken off the list and that the group used terrorism only as a tactic and not as an objective. "Seeking some degree of autonomy for northeast Sri Lanka is not a terrible objective," the Congressman declared.

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Rush



Hillary



Sherman

representatives.

While the US Treasury has not named them, a clue to the identity of some of these 'individual representatives' has been provided by the TRO itself. Within hours of the tsunami hitting the shores of Sri Lanka on