Summer Journey Solidifies U.Va.-Sri Lanka Connection, Participants Say

October 16, 2009 — Eighteen young Sri Lankans spent four days in March at the University of Virginia, soaking up American history, Jeffersonian ideas on democracy and practical political advice from accomplished public servants like former U.S. Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger. Their visit was part of the inaugural Global Perspectives on Democracy program of U.Va.'s Center for Politics.

The Sri Lankans' hosts, Center For Politics staffers Meg Heubeck and Daman Irby, were so touched by their guests from halfway around the world that they hopped on a plane in July to continue the program's citizen-to-citizen diplomacy on the ground in Sri Lanka, an island nation located off the southern tip of India.

On Thursday evening, Heubeck and Irby gave a report on their trip and the situation in Sri Lanka, with help from 1971 U.Va. graduate Ashley Wills, who was U.S. Ambassador to Sri Lanka from 2000 to 2003.

Speaking to a crowd of about 40 gathered in the Colonnade Club, Heubeck and Irby touched on some of the highlights of their 22-day visit from July 31 until Aug. 23. Joined by three other Americans, their trip was the return leg of the U.S. Department of State cultural exchange program, managed by Relief International, that brought the Sri Lankans here in March.

Culture shock started as soon as they stepped off the plane, Heubeck explained, as a heavily armed soldier in purple camouflage greeted them. A 26-year civil war had ended just two months before their arrival, and other vestiges of the militarized state included checkpoints every few hundred yards on the main thoroughfares of the capital, Colombo.

The American group left Colombo on a roughly circular route across much of the country. Along the way the countryside was "Edenic," Heubeck said, echoing Wills, who called it the most beautiful place among the dozens of countries he'd lived in during his diplomatic career.

The trip had plenty of uplifting moments. They attended a festival in the ancient city of Kandy that drew tens of thousands to watch a parade of elephants, bedecked in regal red robes and sparkling jewels. One bore a local holy relic, a tooth of the Buddha, through the streets.

At one school they visited, just outside a run-down, bullet-hole-riddled cafeteria was a freshly painted "suggestion box," an example of the spirit and determination of Sri Lankans to make the best of whatever situation they face, Heubeck said.

Meeting with Sri Lankans across the island who were facing similar uphill struggles, "I found it to be such an inspiring place," she said. "It has a huge place in my heart. We care very much about what happens there."

On the trip, Heubeck and Irby helped launch the first international branch of the Center for Politics' Democracy Corps initiative. Democracy Corps Sri Lanka [http://democracycorpsrilanka.ueuo.com/] is being led by two of the Sri Lankans who visited U.Va., Chaminda Perera and Hemantha Ubeysakara, who briefly joined Thursday's presentation via video conference from Colombo.

Although it was 4 a.m. there, the two were full of smiles as they described the program's goals: increasing democratic participation and civic engagement among young Sri Lankans, and empowering young leaders to solve problems within their communities.

Sri Lanka is in a transition period and the future of its democracy hangs in the balance, Wills.
explained in his overview of Sri Lanka's history leading up to recent anti-democratic shifts by the government of President Mahinda Rajapaksa.

Sri Lanka's 26-year civil war was a conflict between the nation's two main ethnic groups, the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority. The conflict, at heart, is a result of tribalism, Wills said.

Tribalism is present in most countries, he said, noting how he had witnessed it during his diplomatic postings in Iran, Romania, South Africa, Belgium, India and pre-breakup Yugoslavia.

Tamils and Sinhalese have shared the island of Sri Lanka for more than 2,000 years, much of that in relative peace. But during 150 years of British colonial rule, Wills explained, the Tamil minority received preferential treatment, giving them better access to higher education, training as doctors and lawyers and bankers, and awarding them the lion's share of plum positions in the nation's civil service.

Since independence from British rule in 1948, the Sinhalese majority has controlled the democratic government and aggressively turned the tables, exercising systematic discrimination against the Tamils. Although the Sinhalese face no threat of losing their dominance, Wills explained, they feel that their cultural identity is threatened by the Tamils, who dominate the population of the nearby southern tip of India, where the 75 million Indian Tamils far outnumber the Sinhalese of Sri Lanka.

Ethnic strife and Sinhalese oppression eventually led to the armed insurgency of the Tamil Tigers, which started in 1983 and finally was defeated in May, as Rajapaksa's troops captured the Tigers' headquarters and killed their leader.

The newfound peace is an opportunity for the nation to reconcile longstanding tribal and ethnic mistrust and resentment, but Sri Lanka is squandering the opportunity, Wills said, noting that colleagues within the U.S. embassy there used to joke that Sri Lanka is a nation that "never misses an opportunity to miss an opportunity."

In a pattern reminiscent of other South Asian leaders who have worked to establish a dynasty of some sort, Wills said, the victorious Rajapaksa, beloved among the Sinhalese for ending the civil war, has been moving the country in an anti-democratic direction, curtailing press freedoms and aggressively intimidating most forms of dissent.

With the help of aggressive Chinese investment, Sri Lanka's economy is growing at a 6 percent annual rate – though the years of civil war left plenty of chronic underemployment, particularly among Tamils, Wills said. Rajapaksa's government is cementing power, and xenophobic diplomatic gestures toward America, reminiscent of bluster from Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, have strained ties with the U.S., long one of Sri Lanka's biggest allies.

Some have warned that Rajapaksa is on track to establish a government much like the repressive authoritarian regime that rules Burma with Chinese support, Wills noted, but that's unlikely because of Sri Lanka's democratic heritage.

Greater democratic engagement will be key to Sri Lanka surviving the current challenges, Huebeck noted. "Sri Lanka was once a thriving democracy, and can be again. It's just a matter of them choosing to do so."

— By Brevy Cannon