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Gotabhaya says Gen. Fonseka alerted him to US move

by Shamindra Ferdinando

Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa said the government would do everything possible to thwart US moves to use Chief of Defence General Sarath Fonseka as a 'source' against the Sri Lankan political and military leaders. The government had acted swiftly and decisively after Gen. Fonseka had brought the planned US action to his notice, the Defence Secretary said.

Rajapaksa told *The Island* that General Fonseka, who was in the US on a brief visit had alerted him last Friday (October 30) to the US move. A US government official had contacted Gen. Fonseka on Wednesday (October 28) and informed him that there was a requirement to 'interview' regarding the Defence Minister in connection with alleged human rights violations during the war against the LTTE.

When Fonseka had pointed out that the President held the Defence portfolio, the US official had said that he referred to Gotabhaya Rajapaksa.

Responding to our queries, the Defence Secretary said that he had not been aware of the plan until he received a call from Gen. Fonseka, who, on the basis of legal advice obtained by him, asserted that the US request could not be ignored.

The Defence Secretary had replied that the US move could not be considered action directed against only him but the entire Sri Lankan leadership.

Rajapaksa said he had immediately contacted Ambassador Jaliya Wickremesuriya in Washington and raised this issue with him. "The Ambassador, too, claimed that he wasn't aware of the US move," he said. The embassy was directed to provide necessary assistance to Gen. Fonseka, he said.

The Defence Secretary said Ambassador Wickremesuriya had sought a clarification from Robert Blake, who in charge of South and Central Asian Affairs. Blake had denied any knowledge of an investigation conducted by the Department of Immigration and Homeland Security. Blake had said that the US State Department had nothing to do with such an inquiry.

On Gotabhaya Rajapaksa's request, his brother Basil had contacted US Ambassador in Sri Lanka Patricia A. Butenis, who, too, claimed that she was unaware of a US move to 'interview' Gen. Fonseka. Basil Rajapaksa had contacted Butenis shortly after Gen. Fonseka reached Gotabhaya in Colombo.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa has also directed the Foreign Ministry to take up the issue with the US government.

Government sources told *The Island* that the US Department of Immigration and Homeland Security would target Gotabhaya Rajapaksa as he was a US citizen. Sources said that the US seemed to be trying to 'fix' Gotabhaya on the basis of his US citizenship, whereas several key LTTE operatives, including V. Rudrakumar responsible for funding the war in the Sri Lanka, remain free.

Sources said that the government had to intervene at the highest level recently when the US blocked a previously arranged visit to the US by Navy Commander Vice Admiral Thisara Samarasinghe. Nothing could be as ridiculous as this against the backdrop of continuing US -Sri Lanka military-to-military training programmes, sources said. US military personnel had been to the East for joint training exercise with the SLN in the first post-LTTE era joint exercise.