US continues to provide aid to demining training in Sri Lanka

Colombo - The United States will continue to provide humanitarian demining assistance to Sri Lanka in accordance with an agreement signed between the two countries in August last year, the US embassy here said on Thursday.

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A graduation ceremony for Sri Lankan army engineers trained under the US Department of State's Humanitarian Demining Project was held on Thursday at the Sri Lankan School of Military Engineering at Embilipitiya southeast of capital Colombo.

"The training is a continuation of US humanitarian demining assistance to Sri Lanka," the US embassy said in a statement. The training which will cost approximately 2.2 million US dollars began in August 2003 and will continue through June this year, the statement said.

The new phase of demining assistance prepares Sri Lankan military forces to clear mined areas of Sri Lanka to international standard. The US government is the first donor to work with the Sri Lankan army on humanitarian demining, it said.

At the graduation ceremony, James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission at the US embassy said that since late 2003 the newly trained Sri Lankan regiments have cleared 311,304 square meters of land and removed and destroyed over 600 mines.

"They are helping Sri Lankans in the north and east recover their homes and their livelihoods," he said. The US government supported the Norwegian-brokered peace process during former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's two year regime. Wickremesinghe's United National Party was defeated by President Chandrika Kumaratunga's United People's Freedom Alliance in the April 2 parliamentary election.

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