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Ambassador Aryasinha says “mischievous media reports have distorted the international perception of developments in Northern Sri Lanka”

Sri Lanka’s Ambassador to Belgium, Luxembourg and the EU Ravinatha Aryasinha has said, a series of mischievous reports filed over the past two weeks based on LTTE propaganda, had distorted the international perception of the ground situation in Northern Sri Lanka. This had detracted from sufficient attention being paid to the difficult task being accomplished by the government and the security forces, as well as the atrocities committed against civilians by the LTTE. He pointed out that by spreading blatant falsehoods, which they subsequently denied or corrected, some journalists, as well as Spokespersons of UN Agencies and INGOs operating in Sri Lanka, had caused considerable damage, as those who read the original sensational story which was “newsworthy” in the West, didn’t have any knowledge of the subsequent denials, as they received no attention.

Intervening in a session of the South Asia Delegation of the European Parliament chaired by MEP Robert Evans on Wednesday (11 February 2009), Aryasinha gave a factual account of the status of affected civilians within and outside the un-cleared area, and the government’s future plans for re-settling the displaced persons and evolving a political settlement. He also provided documentary evidence on several cases of distorted media reports to MEPs. He noted that while he had no illusion that the thinking of those who might have for the past 25 years or so fed off Sri Lanka’s troubles could be altered, he wished to appeal to the good sense of those who might be interested in reason, and to underline the main strands of the dis-information spread by the LTTE in recent days.

Referring to a report by the Associated Press (AP) of 29 January 2009 headlined “Sri Lankan health official says more than 300 civilians killed, 1,000 wounded in fighting”, which claimed that “Dr. Thurairajah Varatharajah, the top health official in the region, revealed the figures in a desperate appeal to the government and aid groups for medicine and blood transfusions for those injured in the fighting”, he said the same AP, the following day, ran an advisory to editors to “kill” the story, as “the source denies he wrote the letter that said more than 300 civilians had been killed and 1,000 wounded in fighting in northern Sri Lanka”.

Similarly, having on 4 February charged that “Puthukkudiyiruppu Hospital was hit by cluster munitions”, the UN’s Colombo based spokesman on the same day, apologized to the Government for the comment, saying “the UN did not point a finger at the military” and that they “accepted the Sri Lankan statement that it did not have any facility to fire cluster munitions”.

Referring to allegations by the ICRC to the local media on 7 February, picked up by the international press, blaming the Government “for the plight faced by the patients and civilians in the uncleared areas of Mullaithivu”, Aryasinha said, Dr H A P Kahandaliyanage, Secretary, Ministry of Health had pointed out to the ICRC that “had

you heeded to the request made by me to move these civilians, patients and medical staff west, towards the Security Forces who were waiting , ready to receive and take them to Vavuniya”, instead of deciding “that they should go to Puthumattalam, which is away from the desired safe area”, “the plight that these civilians, patients and medical staff are currently in, might have never occurred”.

He said the damage caused by these ill-judged statements and distorted information compounded a difficult situation, adding that he had not seen the same persons/agencies drawing attention to the LTTE’s despicable tactics of using civilians as human shields, firing artillery batteries and heavy mortar from within the ‘safety zones’, or using its suicide cadres/firing on those Tamil civilians trying to flee the LTTE dominated areas. He said it was obvious that these acts are reprisals against Tamil civilians for defying the LTTE orders, as well as possibly a desperate attempt to trigger an ethnic backlash. He regretted that upto now the EU had been silent about these recent incidents.

Aryasinha appealed to members of the European Parliament, to support efforts to bring an end to this conflict, prevent the LTTE seeking a safe haven in Europe through its numerous front organizations and to support the restoration of normalcy in the areas regained. In order to do so, he said, it is imperative that members look at the emerging situation in Sri Lanka within ‘a post-LTTE paradigm’, that supports democratic forces of the Tamil community – both in Sri Lanka and the diaspora, who are keen on re-building the country. Doing otherwise would not only be a setback to the rare success a country has achieved in militarily defeating a terrorist organization - the LTTE, but also runs the risk of allowing the cancer of terrorism to spread within European society. He noted that already Tamil children and youth in Europe are being indoctrinated and terrorism and martyrdom glorified, while members of the LTTE through their front organizations could use their expertise in money laundering, human smuggling and gun running possibly to support other terrorist groups as well.

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