

Intervention by H.E. Ravinatha Aryasinha, Sri Lanka's Ambassador to Belgium, Luxembourg and the EU, at the meeting of the European Parliament's South Asia Delegation – 31 March 2009

“Mr. Chairman, given that 38 out of your 56 pages of the documentation for this meeting is on Sri Lanka, I trust Sri Lanka should be given reasonable time at this meeting of the South Asia Delegation, with which we have continued to engage and actively participated in. My understanding of parliamentary democracy is that you hear what everyone has to say, and I demand to be heard.

I would like to say at the very outset that we are all concerned about the situation in Sri Lanka and the people trapped in what is now a small pocket of 21 Sq KM in the Vanni. No one is more concerned about it than us Sri Lankans.

You talk about ‘catastrophe’. The catastrophe in the North of Sri Lanka, Mr. Chairman and members, is that in the uncleared areas, the LTTE is holding as human shields some 50,000 civilians. The catastrophe is that the LTTE is firing at civilians who are trying to escape from its clutches. The catastrophe is that the LTTE is firing heavy artillery out of the ‘no fire zone’. Why the European Parliament, in particular in its last resolution, shied away from directly pointing this out, baffles me.

This Parliament's answer to the problem, is equally baffling. The EU Parliament resolution suggests that there be a ‘ceasefire’. I think it is unrealistic to expect a Government which for 30 years has fought against one of the world's most ruthless terrorist groups and cleared 98% of the area which has been dominated by LTTE, to at this point agree to a ceasefire. It is being asked for, not to save the lives of the 50,000 people whom the LTTE is holding as human shields, but to save the lives of the LTTE leaders, which is what some apologists of the LTTE here are interested about.

Mr. Chairman, therefore the answer is not a ceasefire. The answer is that you members of this Parliament, those who have concerns about Sri Lanka in the international community, that you raise your voices to call upon the LTTE to let the people go, because that is the catastrophe. If the LTTE is to allow people to leave, they will do so. Despite much threat, people are leaving. I have the statistics for last 7 days, where altogether we have seen almost seven thousands people come out to the Vanni. Yesterday alone, 1,048 people came out of the Vanni. Now these people are voting with their feet. If they are so scared of the Government, find conditions unacceptable, they won't be coming. And mind you, please note that 39% of the population of the city of Colombo are Tamils. 54% of the Tamils live in areas in Sri Lanka outside the Northern & Eastern provinces. These are facts Mr. Chairman, Ladies & Gentlemen which you must not lose sight of.

You say international organizations have been denied access to the uncleared areas, but you well know that the ICRC is operating in the uncleared areas. The UNHCR and WFP have been accompanying food, medicine and other supplies into the 'no fire zone'.

It is also alleged that no outsiders are allowed access to the Temporary Accommodation Centers (TACs). That is not true. UN Under Secretary General John Holmes visited these TACs in February, Colombo based Ambassadors including those representing EU countries, the EU delegation in Colombo and your Brussels based colleagues from the European Commission have visited these camps, in recent days. 14 INGOs including Care, Caritas, Save the Children, I understand are providing meals to those in TACs in Vavuniya.

I would also like to announce to you that Dr. Walter Kalin, the UN Secretary General's Special Representative on Human Rights for IDPs will be visiting Sri Lanka commencing tomorrow. This ladies & gentlemen, is clear testimony to the fact that Sri Lanka is carrying out its international commitments in a full and transparent manner and I can assure you that we will continue to do so.

You spoke of those who testified at the Human Rights Sub-Committee meeting yesterday speaking of "harrowing experiences" in the centres housing IDPs. This is a question of how one wants to see things – whether as a glass half full or half empty. Nobody is saying that the conditions of welfare centers in Sri Lanka are perfect. In circumstances like this, nowhere in the world will you find perfect

conditions. But, Sri Lanka is doing its very best. Even if it is not appreciated by the European Commission officials who visited, it has been acknowledged by many others, that the Sri Lanka Government is doing a very difficult job, creditably well, and that while there are shortcomings, that these shortcomings are being rectified.

Some members ask, what the Sri Lanka Government plans to do to evolve a political consensus now that the conflict is coming to an end. I would like to tell you that last week, President Rajapaksa for the 4th time invited the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) which has representation from the Northern & Eastern provinces to join the APRC process which is aimed at finding a lasting settlement. They have unfortunately refused to do so as a group. At the same time, we are however aware that individual MPs belonging to the TNA have at times differed.

Ladies & Gentlemen, much of what I have said does not fit your theory as to what is going on in Sri Lanka. It is well known that when the facts do not add up, it is the theory that has to be changed. It is in such context, that I call upon the members of this Parliament to use whatever influence it has, particularly with Tamil diaspora communities they represent, to bring pressure on the LTTE to let the people go. If you want to help, I think it is high time that this Parliament stopped repeating mere slogans and takes a balanced view on developments in Sri Lanka. Try to help us in dealing with our problems in a pragmatic, meaningful and sensible way, rather than criticizing all efforts taken with very good intention and with considerable efficacy.

Before I conclude, I wish to make two further points.

I would like to draw your attention to a recent article from the 'Le Monde' which details the LTTE's activities taking place on European soil. To use your own word "catastrophe", Mr. Chairman, now that is indeed a catastrophe. I have just returned from Eurojust in the Hague, where we have over the past two days spent time talking about 'LTTE front organizations' and about the danger they pose to Europe. It's time something is done about it.

Finally, I would like to draw your attention to the recent appointment by the LTTE as head of its so-called Department of International Relations, one Mr. Selvaraja Pathmanathan. I want to remind you that this Mr. Selvaraja Pathmanathan is no other than the LTTE's long standing main arms procurer, better known as 'KP',

who has a red corner notice from Interpol against him, in connection with the assassination of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Now the appointment of KP to this position, clearly reflects the cynicism with which the LTTE treats the international community. This is the very same LTTE, Mr. Chairman, Ladies & Gentlemen, which you are trying to save by calling for a ceasefire and stopping the Sri Lankan Government from militarily defeating, when it has come so close to doing so.”

Embassy of Sri Lanka

Brussels

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