

'Friends of Sri Lanka ' in the European Parliament call on EU countries to maintain Sri Lanka 's preferential trading access to European markets

In letters addressed to the 27 Ambassadors of Member States of the European Union, Geoffrey Van Orden, Chairman of the European Parliament's cross-party 'Friends of Sri Lanka' group and long-standing member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, called on EU countries to "not merely rubber-stamp the inappropriate conclusions taken by EU bodies to cut GSP+ benefits to Sri Lanka..... but to take account of the wider situation and improvements on the ground." He said that the manner in which Sri Lanka "has been singled out from other GSP+ recipients for such harsh punishment was totally unfair and irresponsible."

He cautioned that hostile action against Sri Lanka by the EU "is bound to have both immediate and longer-term consequences both for the well-being of the people of Sri Lanka and for Europe's relationship with that country," and pointed out that such an approach "does no justice to Sri Lanka or indeed to the EU's role".

In his letter dated 29 January 2010, Mr Van Orden also drew the attention of the 27 member countries to an exchange of views on 'Sri Lanka and GSP+' held on 14 January 2010 at the International Trade Committee of the European Parliament, where Spokesmen for three of the main political groups clearly opposed the withdrawal of Sri Lanka's GSP+ status.

Mr. Van Orden added: "it seems to us that after 30 years of conflict and the successful defeat of the LTTE terrorists, the people and government of Sri Lanka now need every possible support in their efforts to rebuild their economy, resettle those that have been displaced and move forward in a new spirit of unity. While we recognise the human rights concerns – we have been most consistent in demanding rigorous attention to these matters and to addressing the legitimate concerns and interests of the Tamil peoples as well as those of the Sinhalese majority – we have also seen marked improvements in the situation on the ground in recent months. This is supposed to be a crucial factor in arriving at judgements relating to GSP+. Efforts to register, release and resettle innocent civilians that had been caught up in the conflict and held temporarily in refugee camps have accelerated. There has been an intensified programme of mine-clearance in areas of habitation and farming that had been contaminated with LTTE landmines, so that people may safely return and begin to rebuild their lives. All this demonstrates the significant effort made by the Sri Lankan authorities in what we can all see as very difficult circumstances."

He recalled that: "EU Member States have long recognised that it is trade rather than aid that provides the best route to economic development in emerging economies. We are therefore most concerned at the determined efforts that are being made to deprive Sri Lanka of its GSP+ status at such a critical period. The effect of such action would be to damage the recovery of the Sri Lankan economy and the employment prospects of hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankans, including some of the poorest in society at the very moment when they need our help".

Geoffrey Van Orden MEP

Email: home@gvo.org.uk

Tel: 01449 744994

GSM: 077 137 42444

Fax: 01449 740073

www.geoffreyvanorden.com <http://www.geoffreyvanorden.com/>