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Comment on the ‘current status of GSP+ concessions to Sri Lanka’ by Ravinatha Arvasinha, Ambassador of Sri Lanka to Belgium, Luxembourg and the EU

1. No formal decision on “temporary suspension” of GSP+ has been taken by the European Council. They have time till later this month.
2. Clearly many of the concerns that had given rise to the European Commission’s psychological impetus to review Sri Lanka’s suitability for the continuance of the GSP+, have already been addressed on the ground. In such context, any “temporary suspension” at this time would amount to, " having taken the temperature of a patient when he has a fever, then pronouncing him dead ten months later after he has recovered and is doing well."
3. Sri Lanka believes that the termination of trade concessions such as GSP+ is not a mere mechanical process that can be done arbitrarily, but one that should be decided upon fully cognizant of its associated political and socio-economic ramifications at the time of doing it. At a time when the EU has shown considerable understanding and willingness to accommodate the practical difficulties faced by some current GSP+ recipient countries at variance from the norm with respect to the 27 UN conventions, it is hard to understand why the same rubric is not being applied in the case of Sri Lanka.
4. At a debate on this issue held on 14 January 2010 at the European Parliament’s International Trade Committee where the above points were made, spokespersons of the EPP, ALDE and the ECR (parties which represent the majority in the European Parliament) also pointed to this unfair manner in which Sri Lanka has been singled out from among GSP+ recipients for unfair treatment and unambiguously urged that the Council refrain from acting hastily against Sri Lanka on this matter.
5. Sri Lanka values its long-standing relations with the EU, and has, and will continue to engage with the European Institutions in order to address the remaining issues of concern, in a manner that does not compromise Sri Lanka’s national interest. However, such engagement needs to be on terms respectful of one another and with sincerity and purposefulness by both parties. Sri Lanka expects the EU to do the same. There should be no setting of unattainable targets, no shifting of goal posts and no attempt to use Sri Lanka-EU relations to serve domestic political agendas.

6. Sri Lanka remains hopeful that better sense will prevail upon member countries of the EU, who themselves have faced similar situations in their long history and are acutely conscious of the complexity of 'democracies fighting terrorism' – a phenomenon Sri Lanka, thankfully, has been able to overcome.

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