

Ambassador Aryasinha says EU to re-calibrate its relationship with Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's Ambassador to Belgium, Luxembourg and the EU Ravinatha Aryasinha has said, the rejection by European voters of those who campaigned on a pro-LTTE platform at the recently concluded European Parliamentary elections, should encourage the EU to “re-calibrate its relationship with Sri Lanka” and “engage in a constructive manner in the post-LTTE context”.

Ambassador Ravinatha Aryasinha made this observation when he addressed the cross-party ‘Friends of Sri Lanka’ group of the European Parliament, held on the sidelines of the inaugural session of the newly elected European Parliament in Strasbourg last week.

The Ambassador thanked members of the group who acted as “voices of sanity” in the early part of this year, when a few within the European Parliament sought to embarrass the Government of Sri Lanka during the last stages of its operations to defeat LTTE terrorism.

He said these detractors were wrong in their “diagnosis of the problem” believing that the LTTE had the capacity to transform, as they were in their “recommendation of a solution” in demanding that there should be a ceasefire. He said the Embassy would engage the full spectrum of political groups in the new parliament with a view to keeping them abreast of post-conflict development in Sri Lanka and looked forward to constructive engagement with members interested in Sri Lanka on a sustained basis.

The MEPs were briefed on the action being taken by the Sri Lanka Government to meet the needs of the displaced persons in the aftermath of the elimination of the LTTE leadership. Reminding them that it was less than 8 weeks since the guns fell silent in what was a 30 year long terrorist conflict, the Ambassador said as much as the Government would like to, they could not overnight restore normalcy to the lives of the 287,000 persons displaced, who were placed in this predicament due to the LTTE moving them from place to place to be used as human shields in the fighting. He said it was clear from the many thousands within the welfare villages who had surrendered and others who had been identified as LTTE cadre, that there continued to be a danger of at least some inside being trained LTTE cadre, who could pose a serious security threat and undermine the present peaceful environment. The Government was in the process of separating them from the civilians displaced. The widespread undocumented landmines placed by the LTTE in the areas from which the displaced persons came, also need to be cleared. Additionally basic infrastructure was being put in place in the areas long affected by terrorist action ahead of the return of the displaced civilians. The Government’s target was to resettle a bulk of them within 180 days and already three batches of the displaced had been re-settled or released to their families.

Responding to questions raised by MEPs about recent adverse news reports on conditions within the welfare villages, the Ambassador acknowledged that the needs were substantial and was stretching the capacities of not only the Government, but also the 4 International organizations, 21 international NGOs and 26 local NGOs working within the welfare villages. However, he said recent reports such as the one about 1400 deaths in the welfare villages were without basis. He said the total number of deaths over the past month was only 163, an average of 5.6 deaths per day, which according to Sri Lanka’s Secretary/Health Dr. Athula Kahandaliyanage was well below the internationally set upper “sphere guidelines” of 13.2 per day, for a population approximating that presently within the welfare villages. Ambassador Aryasinha said such motivated reports were an insult to a lot of good people, both local and from abroad, trying to manage a difficult task with admirable resolve and skill and large numbers of Sri Lankans in other parts of the country who were collecting food and other material to be sent for distribution among the displaced persons. He detailed the food and nutritional supplements, water supply, sanitation, education, health, counseling, vocational training, religious and recreational facilities that are being provided within the villages. He also refuted allegations that the ICRC had been asked to end their operations in Sri Lanka, noting that all they, as well as others, have been told is to “scale down” their operations consistent with the changed circumstances resulting from the ending of the armed conflict. He

said previously the ICRC was involved in accompanying food consignments, transporting patients and transfer of bodies of those killed in combat between the security forces and the LTTE - requirements that ceased since 19 May 2009. He added that the public clarification the previous week by 5 government medical doctors who made false statements on civilian casualty figures and attacks, at the dictates of the LTTE in the last period of operations, should be instructive on the need to avoid being gullible in believing the propaganda of the LTTE and its agents abroad and making policy pronouncements based on such propaganda.

Reminding his audience that while the military capacity of the LTTE had been destroyed in Sri Lanka their international network, particularly in Europe, remained well in tact, Ambassador Aryasinha said unless the EU acts urgently to arrest this trend, the situation could get worse, initially for the hosts. He impressed on MEPs the need for the EU and member states to use whatever influence they had on Tamils of Sri Lankan origin, a majority of whom still remained in the category of "refugees", to support peace in Sri Lanka.

The Ambassador noted that while addressing the immediate needs of the displaced persons, the Government was also paying attention to the more medium and long term challenges of creating amity, restoring democracy, expanding infrastructure and generation of livelihood opportunities in the previously terrorist dominated areas which have for decades seen no development beyond local arms manufacturing and construction of bunkers. 22 political parties including the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) had responded to a recent call by President Mahinda Rajapaksa and had constituted the Committee on Development and Reconciliation earlier this month, while the All Party Representative Committee (APRC) was completing its task of seeking to arrive at a consensus on political reform. He also informed members that local government elections will be held in Jaffna and Vavuniya in August, and that as done in the Eastern Province following the eviction of the LTTE from the area, normalcy will be rapidly restored in the Northern Province as well.

Embassy of Sri Lanka
Brussels

19 July 2009