

Foreign Minister underscores Sri Lanka's multi-faceted relationship with the European Union

Sri Lanka values its historical and multi-faceted relationship with the European Union (EU) covering a number of areas of mutually beneficial cooperation, which has now developed into a robust partnership. Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama made these remarks when an EU-Troika delegation led by the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, Madam Helena Bambasova, representing the incumbent Presidency of the EU, accompanied by other members of the delegation called on him at the Foreign Ministry today (12 May 2009), prior to the official talks with the Sri Lankan delegation.

The EU-Troika delegation, comprising senior officials representing the current Czech Presidency, the incoming Presidency of Sweden, the European Commission and the General Secretariat of the Council is on a 2 day visit to Sri Lanka, as part of the continuing dialogue between the two sides.

Minister Bogollagama gave a comprehensive briefing to the visiting delegation on the current situation in the country, during which he highlighted the Government's successful efforts in countering terrorism after almost 27 years of conflict arising from the violence and terror perpetrated by the LTTE against the people of Sri Lanka. He noted that today, the LTTE is confined to an area less than 3.5 square km in extent in the safety zone declared by the Government for the protection of civilians. However, he stated that the LTTE is holding the civilians hostage, as human shields, putting their lives at risk, and continuing to defy repeated calls by the international community to lay down its weapons and surrender, in order to bring a speedy end to the conflict. The Government's immediate concern is for the safety of the civilians who have been entrapped in the no-fire zone and is therefore actively pursuing efforts to rescue them from the clutches of the LTTE and also to arrest the LTTE leaders and bring them to justice.

The Foreign Minister stated that the Government is now focusing its attention on the post-conflict scenario, in particular to resettle all the civilians who have been forcibly displaced by the LTTE, in their original places of residence, no sooner such places have been cleared of mines and made suitable for human habitation. He noted that the Government's intention is to resettle 80% of the IDPs before the end of this year. In this regard, Sri Lanka has a wealth of experience gained in the recent past in competently handling IDP situations, including the rapid rehabilitation and resettlement of people who lost their homes and livelihoods in the December 2004 tsunami disaster, as well as the expeditious resettlement of IDPs in the Eastern Province within a period of nine months in 2007, after the LTTE was evicted from the Province.

The Czech Deputy Foreign Minister, Madam Bambasova responding to Minister Bogollagama's remarks, reciprocated his sentiments on the excellent relations between the EU and Sri Lanka in a number of spheres of common interest. She recalled her earlier visit to Sri Lanka 4 years ago in the aftermath of the tsunami

tragedy and congratulated the Government on the improvement of security in Colombo since her last visit. Noting that the EU listed the LTTE as a terrorist organization in 2006, the Czech Deputy Foreign Minister reiterated the EU's support for Sri Lanka's current endeavour in countering terrorism.

Following the call on the Foreign Minister, the EU-Troika delegation held official talks with the Sri Lankan side headed by Foreign Secretary, Dr. Palitha Kohona during which a range of issues of mutual interest, including combating terrorism, humanitarian issues, post-conflict development, political outlook for Sri Lanka, as well as the GSP+ facility and related issues were taken up for discussion. This free and frank dialogue enabled both sides to gain a better understanding and appreciation of each other's positions on these matters.

During their stay in Sri Lanka, the EU-Troika delegation is scheduled to hold discussions with the Minister of Export Development & International Trade, Prof. G.L. Peiris, the Minister of Science & Technology, Prof. Tissa Vitarana and Senior Advisor to the President, Basil Rajapaksa, as well as undertake a visit to a welfare village in Vavuniya housing IDPs and also visit the Eastern Province, in order to gain an insight into the post-conflict development achieved in the Province.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs
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