

EC President Barroso hopes for effective dialogue at Joint Commission



President of the European Commission (EC), Jose Manuel Barroso has expressed hope that the forthcoming Sri Lanka- EC Joint Commission scheduled to be held in Colombo from 9-11 June 2008 would provide a forum for a meaningful dialogue.

President Barroso made this observation when he received the credentials of Sri Lanka's new Ambassador to the European Union Ravinatha Aryasinha at the Commission headquarters in Brussels on 29 May 2008.

Ambassador Aryasinha said the Sri Lanka-EU relationship was being further strengthened following the process which commenced with the Sri Lanka- EU Troika meeting held in March 2008, and that it was important to maintain this momentum, through sustained contact as partners, who showed mutual respect for each other. Responding to concerns raised by President Barroso on developments in Sri Lanka, Ambassador Aryasinha said, while Sri Lanka valued constructive suggestions made by friends on what could be improved, the positive developments taking place in Sri Lanka despite trying circumstances, also needed to be acknowledged. He added that unbalanced statements that disregard the context and tended to exaggerate the problems were not helpful.

Taking the current debate on the extension of GSP+ facility to Sri Lanka as an example, Ambassador Aryasinha said this facility keeps over 350,000 in direct employment, has significantly contributed to poverty reduction, empowered women and uplifted the rural economy. He regretted the tendency seen in recent statements and actions by the EU to disregard the significant achievements of Sri Lanka in relation to the environment, labour and good governance, and to singularly focus on human rights, in the context of the GSP+ review. He said many positive aspects on human rights were glossed over, including the recent Supreme Court advisory opinion affirming the justifiability of the ICCPR in Sri Lanka, the marked decline of violations over the past year, the prosecution of those including security forces personnel responsible for violations, the effort through the Presidential Commission of Inquiry to identify the perpetrators of alleged human rights abuses and the vast strides made in restoring the rights of the people of the Eastern Province through the revival of the economy and the holding of Provincial Council elections after a lapse of 20 years.

The EC President agreed on the need for providing a fair & balanced reaction on the part of the EU, and encouraged the Government of Sri Lanka to debate issues that Sri Lanka feels are under-represented or misrepresented. He said Sri Lanka must not misunderstand the expression of concerns with regard to human rights, as it was not peculiar to Sri Lanka, but was one done in good faith with all of the EU's partners. President Barroso said elections to the Eastern Provincial Council was a development in the right direction. While appreciating the difficult situation Sri Lanka was placed in due to terrorism, he emphasized that the EU had listed the LTTE as a terrorist group.

Ambassador Aryasinha appreciated the action taken by the EU with regard to the LTTE in 2006, but noted that this notwithstanding, LTTE front organizations in European countries continued to support terrorism in Sri Lanka, especially through fund raising. He urged that action be taken against such groups abusing European systems.

Earlier last week, presenting credentials to the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, represented by the Secretary of State of Slovenia, Mr Andrej Ster, Ambassador Aryasinha also called upon the EU to arrest the tendency of front organizations, including entities engaged in broadcasting terrorist propaganda, saying it undermined the credibility of the listing of the LTTE by the EU. He pointed out that this was a generic issue which states and international organizations had to address, if state entities were to stay ahead, in the fight against terrorism. Secretary Ster asked that documented evidence in this regard be presented to the EU authorities.

Ambassador Aryasinha told Secretary Ster that Sri Lanka was particularly thankful to the leadership provided by the Slovenian Presidency (January-June 2008), including that represented through the French Ambassador in Colombo, for presiding over a period which saw the strengthening of the Sri Lanka-EU relationship through a higher level of engagement, following the recent EU Troika meeting and forthcoming Sri Lanka-EC Joint Commission meeting.

Mrs. Saroja Sirisena, Head of Chancery and Mr Deeptha Kulatillake, Minister (Commercial) concurrently accredited to Brussels, were associated with Ambassador Aryasinha.

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