

Text of a letter dated 11 September 2008 on the visit of an European Parliamentary delegation to Sri Lanka addressed to Mr. Hans-Gert Pottering, President of the European Parliament by Mr. Geoffrey van Orden, Member of the European Parliament and Chairman of the EU Parliament's 'Friends of Sri Lanka' group, received by the Sri Lanka Mission in Brussels.



"Mr. Hans-Gert Pottering MEP,
President of the European Parliament,

Dear President,

I write to you in my capacity as Chairman of *Friends of Sri Lanka*, the informal cross-Party group in the Parliament which seeks to improve understanding and foster good relations between Sri Lanka and MEPs.

During the period 20-25 July, a small group from the Parliament's Delegation for Relations with South Asia, led by Robert Evans MEP, visited Sri Lanka. I was not able to participate in this visit but I have spoken to certain Members who did, read the negative press coverage and correspondence between various parties, and been informed by the Sri Lankan authorities of their concern and displeasure at the turn of events. (I can provide a full dossier if you require it).

The Government of Sri Lanka went to a lot of trouble, as is their custom, to provide generous hospitality and make every possible arrangement for the Delegation. This included a visit to the troubled Eastern Province, recently liberated by Government action from the grip of the LTTE (Tamil Tigers).

During the preparations for the visit, the Government had offered to transport the Delegation to the East on one of its aircraft, but bizarrely, this was declined on the grounds of wishing to show 'impartiality'. Instead, a provisional booking on a scheduled civil flight by Deccan Air was made by the Commission office in Colombo. It was then found that the UN was intending to start a new and cheaper air service and so the booking was changed to the UN service. However, this involved an old aircraft coming from South Africa, arriving for the first time in Sri Lanka 3 days before the proposed trip, with no clearance from the Sri Lankan authorities and an aircrew that had no knowledge of the route. Not surprisingly, this created some confusion and a few hiccups. The Delegation never got to the East.

Instead, the Delegation leader held a press conference and issued an offensive and tendentious press statement – effectively a biased statement that only served the interests of the LTTE, which certainly did not reflect the views expressed by the European Parliament, and which implied that the authorities were responsible for the failure of the visit to the East. Not surprisingly, there was extensive and very negative press coverage and the reputation of European Parliamentarians has been damaged.

This comes at a very sensitive moment. The Government is making progress in overcoming terrorism and removing LTTE control from more areas in the North of the country. At the same time, some seek to undermine Sri Lanka's position in the GSP+ arrangements.

Further damage would be done to the good relation between the Parliament and Sri Lanka if the Delegation leader were now to publish a negative report in justification of the actions by the Delegation, and to offer no apology for its contribution to the recent events.

Yours sincerely,

Sgd. Geoffrey van Orden

Copy to:

H.E. Ravinath Aryasinghe, Ambassador of Sri Lanka"