

EU Parliamentary delegation visiting Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's Ambassador to the European Union Ravinatha Aryasinha has welcomed the decision by the European Parliamentary delegation visiting Sri Lanka from 20-26 July to undertake a visit to the Eastern Province to witness the political transformation taking place and to meet with the new Chief Minister Sivanesathurai Chandrakanthan. Noting that this would be the first official contact between the EU and the new provincial administration, since last month a delegation of the European Commission shied away from doing so, he said it was fitting that it takes place between elected representatives of the European people and the elected representatives of the Eastern Province. He said Sri Lanka welcomed the change of position, as it opened the doors for the EU to become a full partner in the development of the Eastern Province which was tasting democracy, after a lapse of 20 years under LTTE domination.

Ambassador Aryasinha made these observations when he addressed the EU Parliament's Delegation for Relations with the Countries of South Asia in Brussels on Wednesday (16 July, 2008). The delegation headed by its Chairman Robert Evans, Socialist Group member of the UK, will include a cross section of the political groups and member states represented within the EU. Besides visiting the East and being hosted to lunch by the Speaker and members of the Sri Lanka parliament, the comprehensive six day programme will include meetings with key members of the Cabinet, political parties representing all shades of opinion, civil society groups and the media. .

Ambassador Aryasinha said the delegation was visiting Sri Lanka at an important time when they could see for themselves the developments that were taking place, particularly since the restoration of normalcy in the East. Noting that several in the delegation had last visited the island in the aftermath of the tsunami, he expressed confidence that they will find that the support given by the EU as well as member countries, had been put to good use. He hoped the EU Parliamentarians will also be able to better understand the continuing challenges Sri Lanka faced in its socio-economic development while fighting one of the world's most ruthless terrorist organizations. .

Responding to a question raised by MEP Evans as to why the Sri Lanka government withdrew from the ceasefire agreement earlier this year, Ambassador Aryasinha said the LTTE had killed the ceasefire agreement on numerous occasions since it entered into it in February 2002, and that all that happened early this year was the ending of a farce. He took their minds back to the circumstances under which the LTTE entered into the CFA and peace negotiations in the aftermath of 9/11, when the group faced considerable international pressure. However, as done in all previous rounds of negotiation with different leaderships of Sri Lanka as well as India over more than 20 years, the LTTE never showed interest in pursuing a political settlement and abandoned talks by April 2003. They merely used the CFA period to re-group, re-arm, to kill its opponents and seek to win international sympathy. He said the prudence or otherwise of the termination of the CFA must be judged by the results shown by the government since its termination. Withdrawal from the CFA had allowed the Government to fully engage Tamil political parties which had chosen to enter the democratic mainstream. While continuing to build consensus on a final political settlement, it had taken tangible steps towards fully implementing the interim proposals of the APRC and done what successive governments for 20 years had failed to do – namely to return the running of the East to the representatives of the province. It had also been able to unambiguously confront the challenge posed by LTTE terrorism, confining its area of operation to a mere two districts of the country. .

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