

Sri Lanka protests aspersions cast on Government in recent EU Parliamentary Delegation statement to President Pottering



Sri Lanka's Ambassador to the European Union (EU) Ravinatha Aryasinha on Monday (25 August) protested to the President of the European Parliament Dr. Hans-Gert Pottering, on the aspersions cast on the Sri Lanka government in a statement issued by Robert Evans, Member of the European Parliament, who headed a group of MEPs of the European Parliament's South Asia Delegation, at the conclusion of a 5 day visit to Sri Lanka from 21-25 July 2008.

Ambassador Aryasinha said Sri Lanka was keen to engage with the European Parliament cutting across country and party lines, and it was in that spirit that a comprehensive programme was arranged for the visiting EU Parliamentary delegation, in the period requested by them, despite the heavy commitments of the SAARC Summit the following week. He expressed the displeasure of the government on the manner in which the 2 day visit to the Eastern Province was sabotaged at the 11th hour by the European representatives and their effort through a pre-departure statement and press conference to blame the Sri Lanka government for having "despite repeated assurances, endless complication resulted in the party being turned back from Ratmalana airport, destroying months of preparation, time and expense".

Ambassador Aryasinha said it was patently clear from the sequence of events that the government was very keen to ensure that the delegation got the opportunity to experience first-hand the transformation that had taken place in the Eastern Province over the past year. It was particularly keen that the parliamentarians do so, as in June 2008 the EC office in Colombo, for reasons not made clear, similarly prevented a member of the EC delegation attending the Joint Commission from interacting with the newly elected Chief Minister of the Eastern Province.

In the recent instance, the government had initially offered air transportation for the visiting delegation at the request of Mr. Evans, but this was subsequently refused by the EC delegation office in Colombo which claimed they will make an alternate arrangement using a UN plane. Eventually the plane to be deployed was a aircraft chartered from a South African company, which had arrived in Sri Lanka only 2 days prior to the visit with limited time for obligatory security clearance of the aircraft and familiarisation of the route by the crew, and the government was in the process of expediting the clearance of the aircraft, when the visit was unilaterally aborted by the visiting delegation.

President Pottering was also informed that it had subsequently been brought to the Sri Lanka Government's attention that the EC office in Colombo had previously reserved and even paid a deposit of US \$ 2500 for an aircraft to carry the delegation from a local company which conducted regular flights to and from Trincomalee, which was in possession of the relevant clearances and was

familiar with the route. A letter addressed to the EC Office in Colombo by the Foreign Ministry on 8th August 2008 drawing attention to this matter and seeking clarification, has yet to be replied by the EC Office.

Ambassador Aryasinha said this issue had received much attention in the Sri Lankan press following Mr. Evan's statement blaming the government, with several reports also drawing attention to Mr. Evan's apparently long standing relationship with the LTTE. He said in the light of the emerging evidence, in order that this unfortunate incident does not undermine the esteem in which the EU Parliament is held in Sri Lanka, this matter must be inquired into in a transparent manner, a determination made as to who on the EU side sabotaged the visit to the East and why, and the accusations levelled against the Sri Lankan government retracted.

The President appreciated Sri Lanka's efforts to engage the European Parliament through the South Asia Delegation and also the Friends of Sri Lanka group and stated that he looked forward to welcoming a parliamentary delegation from Sri Lanka to the EU Parliament. President Pottering expressed concern about the turn of events concerning the recent visit and requested a report from his office on this matter. He also emphasised that this should not discourage Sri Lanka's engagement with the European Parliament.

Earlier, Ambassador Aryasinha expressed appreciation to President Pottering for the personal role he had played in expediting the rapid Tsunami assistance package which was granted to Sri Lanka through the European Parliament and also for his intervention in obtaining assistance from the German Government. President Pottering was pleased to hear of the near completion of the Tsunami rebuilding and also the return of normalcy to the families affected by the disaster.

Responding to a question whether there was optimism with respect to the situation in Sri Lanka, Ambassador Aryasinha briefed President Pottering on the political developments in the Eastern Province, where the security forces have been able to rid the province of terrorism which enabled the government to hold provincial elections and establish democratic rule. The President of the European Parliament was also briefed on the ongoing military operations in the Northern Province and the success of the security forces in avoiding civilian casualties. The President was also informed of the political developments taking place under the APRC process, which would offer a comprehensive political settlement.

The Ambassador also informed the President that a large amount of funds was being collected in Europe for bolstering the LTTE through the Tamil diaspora by front organisations spread throughout Europe in the guise of cultural, religious and social organizations. He said the Sri Lanka Government had called for the listing of these organizations, as the EU had done with respect to the LTTE, and sought the cooperation of the European Parliament in this regard.

Embassy of Sri Lanka

Brussels

29 August 2008