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European Parliament Report says “it strongly believes there is room for constructive and principled engagement between the EU and Sri Lanka”

The Report of the European Parliament’s Delegation for Relations with South Asia following their visit to Sri Lanka from 22-26 February 2011 for the 6th EP/Sri Lanka Inter-Parliamentary Meeting was tabled in Brussels last week. The report presented by the Chair of the Delegation Ms. Jean Lambert (Greens/UK), details the Delegation’s interactions in Sri Lanka with the Hon. Speaker, senior Ministers, members of Parliament, Senior Officials, EU country diplomats and INGOs, as well as field visits to Jaffna and Vavuniya where they also inspected EU funded projects.

The ‘conclusions’ contained in the report, which comments on the aspects of development cooperation, devolution and reconciliation, practical steps suggested and Inter-Parliamentary cooperation, state that “the EP South Asia Delegation would like to underline that it strongly believes there is room for constructive and principled engagement between the EU and Sri Lanka – despite the disagreements of the past and the fact that, in some areas, differences in perceptions still subsist”. It also “calls on the diaspora to play a positive role in supporting this approach by working constructively with the elected Tamil leadership in Sri Lanka”. (Full text of ‘conclusions’ are appended below)

In comments before the South Asia Delegation following the visit, South Asia Delegation Chair Ms. Lambert noted that " In a nutshell the feeling of the EP Delegation was that this visit was productive and the EP Delegation heard about detailed plans of the Government to rebuild the North and felt that there certainly have been very positive moves". She made a special reference to the Interim Recommendations of the Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission and said "these were generally judged as positive ones: the Delegation would therefore call for their swift implementation, and expects that the final report of the LLRC will be public". She also highlighted that the EP Delegation was especially encouraged by the creation in the Sri Lanka Parliament of a formal counterpart body in the form of an 'EU Parliamentary Friendship Association'. "The EP Delegation believes this form of engagement is the way forward" she added.

Taking the floor, the Quaestor of the European Parliament, Ms. Geringer de Oedenberg (S&D/ Poland) warmly thanked all that have been involved in planning the programme of the visit which was "superbly organised" and provided Members with an "excellent overview" of the political situation and the challenges faced in Sri Lanka.

In observations on the report at the 15 June 2011 session of the South Asia Delegation, Sri Lanka's Ambassador to Belgium, Luxembourg and the EU Ravinatha Aryasinha observed that the 6 day visit by the high powered delegation of the European Parliament was important for several reasons. By receiving the delegation and facilitating their travel to areas of their choice, GOSL had acted with considerable transparency – something not fully appreciated in some quarters. Welcoming the constructive attitude visible in the Delegation's report, he urged MEPs belonging to all major parties in Parliament who undertook the visit and saw with their own eyes the difficult but important work that is on-going in Sri Lanka at present to ensure reconciliation and development, to share their experience with other fellow MEPs, so as not to allow fringe elements in Parliament to distort the image of Sri Lanka. He hoped that the spirit of "mutual respect and mutual cooperation" which appears to have been the hall mark of both the meetings held in Sri Lanka, as well as the report of the delegation, should become a template for future Sri Lanka-EU relations.

The Parliamentary delegation to Sri Lanka included Ms. Jean Lambert (Greens/UK) Chair of the Delegation for Relations with South Asia, Mr. John Attrad-Montalto (S&D/Malta) 1st Vice Chair of the Delegation and member of the Committee of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Thomas Mann (EPP/Germany) 2nd Vice Chair of the Delegation and Vice Chair to the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, Ms. Joanna Geringer de Oedenberg (S&D/Poland) Questor of the European Parliament, Mr. Niccolo Rinaldi (ALDE/Italy) Vice Chair of the ALDE Group and member of Committee on International Trade, Mr. Nirj Deva (ECR/UK) Vice Chair of the Committee on Development and member of Committee on Human Rights and Mr. Slavi Binev (Non Attached/Bulgaria) member of Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs.

Sri Lanka Embassy
Brussels

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A. Conclusions

- First and foremost, the EP South Asia Delegation would like to underline that it strongly believes there is room for constructive and principled engagement between the EU and Sri Lanka – despite the disagreements of the past and the fact that, in some areas, differences in perceptions still subsist.

Development cooperation

- The EP Delegation is aware of the major challenge which Sri Lanka is facing in reconstruction and development terms, particularly in the North, and underlines that assisting existing efforts in this precise field is already a priority under the existing Country Strategy Paper; the Delegation is encouraged by the assurances it has received on facilitating NGO access to the North.

Devolution and reconciliation

- In order to achieve lasting reconciliation, the EP Delegation believes it is crucial to address primarily issues affecting, language, land, education and political power sharing with the Minorities. The Delegation realises these issues are complex and that overcoming a bitter legacy of conflict will need sustained efforts and good will on all sides in order to achieve meaningful devolution within a unitary state.
- The views of the EU and the EP on the need to further substantially relax the current antiterrorism and emergency legal framework are well known;
- In the same vein, the EP Delegation would also call on the Diaspora to play a positive role in supporting this approach by working constructively with the elected Tamil leadership in Sri Lanka.

Practical steps suggested

- With lasting reconciliation being primarily the focus of a political process, the EP Delegation would nonetheless suggest starting to resolve well known issues such as:
 - Issuing death certificates in the many cases where it is clearly established that a person cannot be found ;
 - Either releasing, either charging those in detention ;
 - Establishing a plan to gradually bring the military presence in the North more in line with actual defence requirements ;
 - Further strengthening civilian administration in the North, with specific responsibilities on development and rehabilitation, and
 - a parallel increase of the presence of the minorities at all decision levels of the Northern Rehabilitation Task Force.

Interparliamentary cooperation

- The Delegation would very much welcome a visit from the National Assembly in order to continue the discussions from this visit. These could focus on how the European Parliament could support initiatives to strengthen the capacities of the National Assembly, for instance through the EP's Office for the Promotion of Parliamentary Democracy, as suggested during the talks.