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International community LTTE and civilians

Continued from yesterday



Concluding the Statement delivered by Foreign Affairs Minister Rohitha Bogollagama, in Parliament on April 7, 2009

This is clear testimony to Sri Lanka carrying out its international commitments fully and transparently, which will continue. It is rather baffling that the denial of access having been included in the British statement considering that a Foreign and Commonwealth Office Director visited a welfare village in Vavuniya, last month. Also it may be noted that the UN and ICRC together with 14 INGOs including Care, Caritas, Save the Children have been working in these welfare centres. With regard to access to the then uncleared area, which Sir Holmes in an interview with BBC World Service described as 'a pocket', stated that the UN was "certainly not present in that pocket itself" and said that since it is a dangerous area, he was not sure whether the UN actually wished to go into that area.

It is this very fact of the prevailing security situation in the conflict area, that access had been restricted into that region. The welfare centres housing the IDPs, were established over a short period of time.

International visitors

Nobody in the Government is claiming that the conditions in these Centres in the North are perfect, but the best is being done in the circumstances. Many international visitors to the Centres have acknowledged that the Government is doing a difficult job creditably, and the shortcomings are being rectified. It is important to understand that we cannot get it right in one go. The UNHCR as the lead agency for IDPs has in a recent report welcomed the initiatives by the Government in keeping with its objective of providing maximum relief to ensure the well-being of the IDPs without neglecting security. In this context, the development of establishing a visitor centre to enable contact with one-another, friends and relations is noteworthy.

The UNHCR has also welcomed the recent initiatives of the Government to begin the release of persons with special needs, where 371 have already been released, and begun re-unifying separated families inside IDP sites. Nearly 600 more elders have been approved to be sent to their families and 1,108 persons have rejoined with their families who have been displaced in the different IDP sites. Telephone facilities have been established at the main sites and the UNHCR is continuing to work on a set of principles with the Government in enhancing the conditions further. One such is maintaining the civilian character of the IDP sites and the UNHCR report states that it is encouraged by the positive initiatives to this end at the Jaffna site. It was also satisfied with aid distributions so far. It is therefore clear that the Government is firmly in the saddle in providing facilities to civilians to ameliorate their plight in trying conditions.

Welfare camps

It is rather disappointing that the British Foreign Secretary has sought to make the point to us that these welfare

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Peace Process of

DEFENDERS OF THE NATION

Department of Government Information

camps be temporary and the IDPs returned to their homes.

It seems to be forgotten that when the Security Forces successfully liberated the Eastern Province, the Government was able to within eight months settle 80 percent of the displaced in their original place of habitation. The



Government committed to welfare of IDPs. Picture by Rukmal Gamage

Government has never

suffered any illusion that the welfare centres are temporary. Resettling the displaced is a priority and would be done at the earliest when their safety could be ensured. While the Government would wish to replicate in the North its achievement of re-settling the displaced as in the East, it would pursue this noble objective in keeping with the situation on ground, which includes heavy mining of the Vanni area by the LTTE before its retreat.

Time lines are generally pursued in order not to lose sight of the ultimate objective and in this case re-settlement of the IDPs is an imperative priority to the Government.

Military solution

Steps taken militarily readily show tangible results, while on the political side it is that more difficult to measure progress. So there are howls of protest from the international arena that the Government is seeking a military solution - this is a misnomer.

The APRC process which is aimed at finding a lasting settlement with the involvement of political parties has progressed steadily and it would not be long before the proposals are unveiled. President Rajapaksa for the fourth time invited the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) which has representation from the Northern and Eastern Provinces. Unfortunately as a group they rejected the invitation, through individual MPs of the TNA have at times differed.

Political parties

Having a solid partnership of the stakeholders from all political parties is imperative to evolve a lasting political settlement. The Government continues to seek the cooperation of all stakeholders some of whom pull away. The International Community therefore during their contacts with the Sri Lankan polity could impress upon them the need for working together.

I wish to take this opportunity to brief on Sri Lanka's position with regard to the appointment of the British Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Sri Lanka, which seems to be regularly surfacing in British polity culminating in Foreign Secretary Miliband expressing disappointment at its continued rejection by the Government, "despite earlier assurances from the President that the Government would engage with the envoy". You would recall that the Cabinet rejected this unilateral appointment as it contravened the basic principles governing international relations and the requirement for consultation and reciprocity. Neither proper procedure nor consultations had been undertaken by the British Government, prior to the said appointment, which are time honoured traditions in diplomatic practice. In this context, wider consultation on the appointment of a Special Envoy would have been expected, as at the very outset it had been made known that this initiative would be unhelpful for Sri Lanka in pursuing a sustainable solution to the conflict. In fact, having learnt of the impending announcement by the British Prime Minister I personally requested the British High Commissioner to seek its delay to discuss

and consult on the issue, which did not come to pass, resulting in a unilateral appointment.

British-Sri Lanka relations

Since then, in deference to the traditional warm British-Sri Lanka relations and to find a way around this impasse, I have continued to discuss the issue with Foreign Secretary Miliband and the Foreign and Commonwealth Minister Lord Brown. Sri Lanka welcomes constructive engagement with the International Community and in this context I have proposed that Lord Brown undertakes a visit, as a follow up to his last in June 2007.



It is however regrettable to note from the statement that while the British Government envisages to "continue to press the Sri Lankan Government to reconsider", the position, in the meantime Des Browne, the Special Envoy "will engage with representatives of other countries, UN agencies, NGOs, Parliamentarians and community representatives with an interest in Sri Lanka".

European diplomat

This only concretizes the unilateral nature of this appointment and such engagement by Browne has precipitated further difficulties for the Sri Lanka Government. In fact his participation at a Conference in London recently where it was resolved to establish a sovereign state of Tamil Eelam - the doctrine of the LTTE, proscribed by the UK - and his utterances in that forum, justifies Sri Lanka's stated position on that appointment.

It was not so long ago that a European diplomat observed to me that currently the war is not on terrorism but propaganda and that the International Community has fallen victim. His analysis is spot on, when delving through the utterances which fall off the lips of representatives of august assemblies abroad and statements churned out by international entities which are a litany of falsehoods, drafted on the propaganda material fed to them by LTTE operatives and espoused in the interest of domestic political compulsions. Such rhetoric lacks clarity and demonstrates no understanding of ground realities. In some instances it is regrettable that these measures have contributed to queer the pitch of longstanding bilateral relations.

Sri Lankan agenda

Some sections of the international community has tended to push an agenda with the Government at their pace, rather than at a pace the Government could practically implement due to the conditions on ground. After all, a sustainable solution to the conflict has to be pursued in terms of a Sri Lankan agenda.

The Government is the best place to achieve this objective to which end the International Community could play an important and constructive role. The Sri Lankan Diaspora with their commitment to the country of birth and dedication to the well-being of their brothers and sisters could complement this endeavour. I reiterate my call made at the recently held ground breaking Diaspora Dialogue, to join hands with us in the historic and noble tasks of reconstruction and reconciliation. Concluded

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