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“Enormously important to have HR Observers & a broader International presence in Sri Lanka” – British Foreign Minister

At the House of Lords today, Wednesday (30 April 2008), during an oral questions and answers session, the UK's Foreign Minister Lord Malloch Brown said that “there have been a number of tragic deaths of civilians and politicians in recent months in Sri Lanka. There has been a pick-up in violence, which is extremely alarming, and targeting of political leaders. We have been pressing - most recently in my speech to the Human Rights Council - for the High Commissioner for Human Rights to be allowed to open an office in Sri Lanka because we think it is enormously important to keep human rights observers and a broader international presence in that troubled country.”

This was in response to a question raised by Lord Hylton which was about the recent deaths of one Sri Lankan parliamentarian (Mr. K. Sivanesan – Tamil National Alliance Member of Parliament) and one Roman Catholic priest (Rev Father M.X. Karunaratnam) alleged to have been killed by mines placed by Sri Lankan Government forces.

The noble Lord Malloch Brown further commented regarding a question by Lord Howell of Guildford on the International Independent Group of Eminent Persons (IIEGP) that “it was intended to provide an international legal opinion on the internal presidential commission of inquiry into human rights abuses. The members were so disappointed because they felt that advice was not being followed that they have essentially thrown in the towel. That is a real commentary on the seriousness of the human rights situation in Sri Lanka”

Whilst most noble Lords were raising questions concerned about the deteriorating human rights situation in Sri Lanka, Lord Naseby (Life Baron & President of All Party Parliamentary Group for Sri Lanka) was concerned about ‘Tiger’ funding. It is also worth noting that at a Foreign & Commonwealth Office organised seminar on 25 February 2008, the Life Baron Lord Naseby stated that “I am a trained fighter pilot. Sometimes civilians get killed when you bomb from the air.”

The full Hansard record of the proceedings on Sri Lanka is given below:

Lord Sheikh asked Her Majesty's Government:

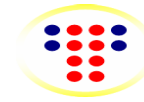
What steps they are taking to achieve peace in Sri Lanka.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Lord Malloch-Brown): My Lords, my right honourable friend the Foreign Secretary and I have made it clear to the Sri Lankan Government that the UK stands ready to support a process of reconciliation. We continue to urge the parties to the conflict to place peace above self-interest and to engage with Sri Lankans from all communities. A sustainable solution to the conflict should promote democracy and stability and uphold international human rights principles. Only a just and inclusive political process can achieve this.

Lord Sheikh: My Lords, I thank the Minister for that reply. The fighting and turmoil in Sri Lanka is causing not only problems in the country but a great deal of distress among Sri Lankans who have settled here.

In November 2006, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland visited Sri Lanka. We have achieved peace in Northern Ireland, and I believe, because of our historic ties, that what we have learned in Northern Ireland can be of assistance in relation to the problems in Sri Lanka. On 1 April, the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister came here and had discussions with Ministers. Subsequently there was fighting on 23 April. Is there any merit in sending a

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ministerial delegation to Sri Lanka? And can we continue with our financial support in order that that can be used as an incentive to achieve peace?

Lord Malloch-Brown: My Lords, the noble Lord makes a very good point about the comparison with Northern Ireland. The former Prime Minister, Tony Blair, pressed this point on the Sri Lankans and sent people with expertise on the Northern Ireland solution to advise them. On 1 April, when the Foreign Minister was doing his briefing, I again reminded him of the Northern Ireland parallel and offered to make expertise available to him.

As to the point about a ministerial visit, I will be visiting Sri Lanka in the coming months.

Lord Hylton: My Lords, what information do the Government have about the recent deaths of one Sri Lankan parliamentarian and one Roman Catholic priest alleged to have been killed by mines placed by Government forces? Also, will the Government and other members of the Commonwealth ask for humanitarian and human rights observers to be allowed access to that country?

Lord Malloch-Brown: My Lords, I will need to return to the noble Lord on the specific incident that he raises. There have been a number of tragic deaths of civilians and politicians in recent months in Sri Lanka. There has been a pick-up in violence, which is extremely alarming, and targeting of political leaders. We have been pressing—most recently in my speech to the Human Rights Council—for the High Commissioner for Human Rights to be allowed to open an office in Sri Lanka because we think it is enormously important to keep human rights observers and a broader international presence in that troubled country.

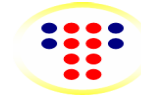
Lord Dholakia: My Lords, does the Minister accept that neither terrorism nor the military action by either party will resolve the present crisis in Sri Lanka, and that the only valid process is a political one? Is he aware of the deep divisions within Sri Lankan communities in this country—within the Tamil and Sinhalese communities? The problem of conflict between the communities has been highlighted. Will the Minister have a word with the Minister responsible for community cohesion to ensure that action is taken so that community relations between different factions are not harmed?

Lord Malloch-Brown: My Lords, I echo the noble Lord's first point: there is only a political solution, and we urge both sides to revert from this militarised approach and return to genuine political negotiation to solve this issue. I and other noble Lords in this House are all too aware of the divisions among the Sri Lankan communities in this country. I fear that the issue may go beyond the capacity of the Minister for social cohesion, as it is so deeply rooted in the conflict in Sri Lanka. I suspect that the solution here, too, lies in a solution back home in Sri Lanka.

Lord Naseby: My Lords, is not my noble friend who asked the Question right to say that there is an analogy with Northern Ireland? Cutting funds from Noraid to the IRA ensured that both parties came together. There is welcome news: that three Sri Lankans have recently been investigated in depth for providing funds to the Tamil Tigers. Should we and the authorities in this country not be more active in ensuring that bogus charities and fundraising events are stopped? That money goes straight to the Tamil Tigers.

Lord Malloch-Brown: My Lords, the noble Lord knows that the LTTE is a proscribed organisation in this country. Wherever there are suspicions that moneys are being transferred to it, we have sought to investigate. However, these are hard allegations to prove. I nevertheless agree with the noble Lord's basic underlying point: we should all appeal to Sri Lankans in our communities to understand that supporting terrorism with their contributions is not a contribution to peace in their country.

British Tamils Forum



Lord Howell of Guildford: My Lords, does the Minister know anything about the international eminent persons group in Sri Lanka, of which the British member is Professor Sir Nigel Rodley? I understand that the group broke up in disarray and disagreement yesterday and left Sri Lanka. Can the Minister give us any update on that?

Lord Malloch-Brown: My Lords, yes. The group was assembled by the President of Sri Lanka based on nominations from countries such as ourselves; we nominated Sir Nigel. It was intended to provide an international legal opinion on the internal presidential commission of inquiry into human rights abuses. The members were so disappointed because they felt that advice was not being followed that they have essentially thrown in the towel. That is a real commentary on the seriousness of the human rights situation in Sri Lanka.

Source: Today in the Lords – Publications (Hansard):http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld/ldtoday/03.htm#hddr_1

This site is now changed to the Publications dated on 30.04.2008

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200708/ldhansrd/text/80430-0001.htm#08043096000005>

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Notes to Editors:

British Tamils Forum



British Tamils Forum exists to harness the skills and the knowledge of the members of the forum, well-wishers and significant others including mainstream decision makers in the UK with the aim of alleviating the sufferings of the Tamils community in the Island of Sri Lanka and to further their right to self determination within a democratic frame work under pinned by international law, its covenants and conventions. The forum was set-up in 2006 when, with the support 88 British Tamil community organisations, it also published an open letter in the Times newspaper. For more information admin@tamilsforum.com and/or visit: www.tamilsforum.com