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“UK Government believes that minorities in any country must have their right to practice the fullest and impossible expression of self determination”.....“We are extremely concerned about how this government behaves and treats the Tamil community. We are using all the means available to us to press the government to do otherwise” – UK Foreign Minister Lord Mark Malloch Brown

Rt. Hon Lord Malloch Brown who is the Deputy Foreign Secretary and also the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Minister who has specific responsibility for Britain's relations with countries in Asia and Africa – including Sri Lanka attended a meeting yesterday, 15 September, organised by the Harrow (West) Member of Parliament and Parliamentary Under-Secretary of Department for Business, Enterprise & Regulatory Reform Rt. Hon Gareth Thomas to discuss the current situation in Sri Lanka with his Tamil constituents. This meeting was also attended by Hon Robert Evans Member of European Parliament for London, Member of Parliament for Leicester (East) and the Chairman of the Home Affairs Select Committee Rt. Hon Keith Vaz and Harrow Councillor and Leader of the Association of Tamil Councilors Thaya Idaikadar.

Well over a thousand Tamils turned up for this meeting from all over London. As the hall including the balcony could only hold just about a thousand people, due to Health and Safety Regulations a few hundred Tamils who came late had to stand outside the building to show solidarity.

Lord Malloch Brown in his introductory speech said that it is enormously important that Ministers like Gareth and he should have more of such opportunities to understand the concerns of people. It is therefore very appropriate that they met with the Tamil community considering the current situation in Sri Lanka for the Tamils.

He said that he was in Sri Lanka in July and he went there for two reasons (1) to see for himself on how the situation was evolving and secondly because he was criticised in the government circles in Colombo for his strong statement at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) meeting in March this year protesting against the human rights violations of the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL). This resulted in an invitation given by both the President of Sri Lanka Mahinda Rajapakshe and the Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama.

He said that both sides (the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam - LTTE) were party to breaking of the Cease Fire Agreement and it is wrong to blame just the one side for the breakdown. The government has won a significant victory in the East of Sri Lanka and has held an election with partial participation of some political parties due to the security situation. “I wanted to see the local government myself”. On the one level the situation is secure and peaceful than before. However, he did not see political reconciliation that will bring everyone to the democratic political process.

In the north however where the fighting is heaviest is resulting in large numbers of displacement of people. The government's order for United Nations and other INGOs (International Non Governmental Organisations) to leave this area is leaving the international aid efforts being severely affected and for the international community unable to independently verify the real situation on the ground. Our High Commissioner in Colombo has made repeated representations to the GoSL seeking assurances for free flow of food and medical supplies to the people of North.



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Both sides should allow access to the international humanitarian workers to help the people of North. "We are extremely concerned". We have through the Secretary General of the United Nations and our High Commissioner made representations to both parties to ensure free and safe access remain opened for humanitarian workers to assist the people of North.

British Government's overriding position is that there is no military solution to this problem in Sri Lanka. This problem should be resolved by finding a political solution. This message was relayed by me to the President, his brother the Defense Minister, the Foreign Minister and the Chairman of the All Party Representative Committee (APRC). UK government funded a trip of members of the APRC to visit Northern Ireland to see for them at first hand of conflict resolution. The aim was to aid the thinking so that they will come with innovative solutions and to re-start the political process.

We believe people of Tamil areas to have political self-government within a united Sri Lanka. - This comment prompted a few in the audience to abruptly stop clapping that almost started. The Minister joked looking at the direction where the clapping originated and said "great sentence except for the last couple of words" meaning that the audience did not appreciate the 'united Sri Lanka' bit of his statement.



As part of European Union the UK government believes that minorities in any country must have their right to practice the fullest and impossible expression of self determination. The thousand or more Tamil crowd erupted by clapping and jeering.

We will urge the GoSL to re-start the political dialog. We believe both sides were responsible for the breakdown of the Cease Fire Agreement. Both sides lost the trust of each other. Both sides should make gestures and concessions to be able to re-start the political process.

Lord Malloch Brown's speech was followed by questions and answers.

Sample of the questions and answers in summary are given below. Most times, more than three or four questions were answered at the same time.

1. International Governments including my government Britain, keep saying that there got be a negotiated settlement. For us, lay people, this soft, and behind the scene diplomacy isn't working. If anything, things have got worse for us Tamils - Government of Sri Lanka has become more hard-line. Do you have any evidence to suggest that your approach is working? And why do you keep carrying on the same path, whilst you know it isn't working?
2. Approximately, 40,000 British Tamils stood in pouring rain for 'Pongku Thamil' (Uprising of Tamils) day at Roehampton Vale sports ground and demanded that our Government should recognise Tamils right for separate homeland in Sri Lanka. Who do you think that the British Government should listen to, British Tamils - your own citizens, or a failed state that is tens of thousands of miles away?
3. Could you please spell out the position of the British Government with regard to the elections in the East? Does Britain regard that Eastern election as legitimate? And does the

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British Government recognise the Para-military administration that is terrorising the population in the East with guns and abductions?

Firstly I understand your anger towards the government of Sri Lanka. But we must also acknowledge that it is a democratically elected government and therefore it is not an authoritarian government to be classified as a failed state in that sense. It is not like this government is unpopular in the country. It is very popular in large parts of the country. Sadly it is not so in the Tamil parts of the country.

It is a democratically elected government which has chosen to prosecute a military campaign against a separatist group. We need to recognise the reality that Britain is a long way away from Sri Lanka but we have certain means and tools available to us to influence but it is beyond our powers to force a solution to this problem.

There are certain persuasion tools if you like, for example the European Union has GSP+ which Sri Lanka enjoys as a trade preference. This is a very powerful tool. If Sri Lanka wants to continue to enjoy this benefit then they need to implement all of the 27 human rights covenants and conventions. We are pressing Sri Lanka through the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and we are using all these channels to press the GoSL but there are no easy answers to this problem.

All we can do is force the resumption of political talks. We can by pressing a democratically elected government to deal with its minorities in a proper way.

4. You were one of those who were instrumental in getting the Government of Sri Lanka evicted from the powerful 47 member UN Human Rights Council. We as Tamils will always be grateful for your commanding speech at the Council meeting in March 2008. However, since then there have been many human rights violations that have taken place in Sri Lanka. You have been pressing for a permanent presence of UNHRC office in Sri Lanka. We all know that the present government has formally rejected that idea. What further actions do you intend taking along with the Commonwealth member states and the European Union to condemn the rejection and enforce such an office in Sri Lanka?
5. Withdrawing the GSP Plus offers a great opportunity for UK to demonstrate its public dismay to the Government of Sri Lanka of Sri Lanka's appalling human rights track record and its inability to implement the main 27 international conventions & covenants. EU withdrew GSP plus from Republic of Belarus in June 2007 for lack of evidence of its full implementation of the relevant conventions of the International Labour Organisation. Could you give us an assurance that Britain, along with its EU partners, will take this issue seriously and demonstrate our dismay to Government of Sri Lanka when GSP Plus is due for renewal later this year?
6. You went to Eastern Sri Lanka and shook hands with Pillayan who is still a leader of an armed Para-military group. The Tamil Diaspora was very disappointed with that act of yours. You may wish to defend yourself saying you need to meet everyone to bring about a lasting peace in Sri Lanka. If that is the case, why did you not feel it is important to meet

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Prabakaran the leader of LTTE and get his views? Is it not the time to lift the ban on LTTE to create an atmosphere to facilitate peace talks bearing in mind the LTTE has never broken any laws in Europe, USA or Canada in short anywhere in the world?

We have been pushing for a permanent presence of the UNHRC office in Sri Lanka. We will continue to push for this through the new head of UNHRC as we did through her predecessor just as we press for firm action against child soldiers' issue. We will keep going on that.

We certainly take the GSP+ issue very seriously. On the one hand it costs Sri Lankan workers their jobs but on the other hand GSP+ is a trade concession, preference granted to certain countries in return for those countries' compliance of certain human rights covenants and conventions. The ball is in the Sri Lankan court to demonstrate that they are in compliance of all those conventions and covenants. Both Gareth and I as Trade Minister and Foreign Minister have already shared this view with our Sri Lankan counter-parts, even recently. They have to do a lot to secure the extension of GSP+. It will be a collective EU decision.

Regarding Pillayan, he was a man involved in acts of terrorism previously and it is a real issue about our approach to him should be. Yes he is been elected in a flawed election. Nevertheless an election it is. There were security problems for all parties to participate. However he is an elected local government leader and on those grounds that I met him. Meeting somebody doesn't in anyway mean endorsing their position. If it did we couldn't meet a lot of leaders around the world.

As to why I didn't meet the LTTE leader Prabakaran, for one he is not exactly easy to find under the current circumstances. Also he is a leader of a proscribed organisation. We will maintain contacts, such contacts to advance peace. This government fully supports proscribing the LTTE.

7. United Nations estimates that over 250,000 internally displaced people in Wanni which is the LTTE controlled area. In the first 15 days of August over 38,000 people were displaced. Government of Sri Lanka has ordered the humanitarian agencies to withdraw from Wanni. What is the British Government doing about this unfolding tragedy without saying that "we, the British Government is doing all what we can by pressing the Government of Sri Lanka to send food and medical supplies" - When is any British aid going to reach Wanni?
8. When Kosovo became an independent nation you are on record for saying Kosovo is an exception? Could you please explain how the Tamil's case for independence is different to the one of the Kosovo's?
9. In the entire history of the world, only 3 countries have used aerial bombardment against its own citizens - Soviet Union in 1920 to 1930 to suppress internal dissent. Saddam Hussein against the Kurds in Iraq and Indonesia against the people of East Timor. Sri Lanka is the fourth. How is the British Government protesting against such a violation of human rights of the Tamils? Why isn't the current government doing what the John Major's government did for the Kurds by creating a safe haven?

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10. At various points in the past our government has implemented sanctions against various governments such as Zimbabwe, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan etc. to condemn and to register protest. How many more Tamil lives have to be lost and how many more Tamils have to be displaced before Her Majesty's Government implement sanctions against the Government of Sri Lanka? When will it be the right time to implement sanctions against Sri Lanka?

British aid and British humanitarian assistance will continue. Humanitarian Assessment Team has been dispatched to assess access routes and the ground situation.

As Foreign Minister I come across all sorts of minorities in different parts of the world wanting to cease existence with the majority and form self government. We cannot support every one of them as fragmenting nation states will be difficult to sustain international affairs.

Right now we have been very clear in supporting a large measure of self government within a united country. If ultimately more to happen and the Tamil Region is to become an independent state we will support that only if the whole of Sri Lanka felt that it is the best way to sustain peace between the two communities. We will not do it against the will of the majority Sri Lankans.

Regarding indiscriminate aerial bombardment, we have been pressing on human rights violations by the GoSL. We will through the UN Secretary General, through UN Human Rights Council and through the GSP+ mechanism we will keep the human rights issue live until it is resolved. We are determined to put international pressure on either side to ensure human rights are not violated.

At this point Rt. Hon Gareth Thomas MP announced some details of what the Assessment Team will do. He said that by speaking to NGOs, INGOs, UN and ICRC the team will find out the real ground situation. From their report is what my department will decide how best to channel supplies and funds to assist the internally displaced people of Vanni.

11. If you apply the same principles that were applied to proscribe the LTTE as a terrorist organisation to GoSL, do you agree that you will have to proscribe the GoSL as a terrorist state?
12. What do think that the proscription of the LTTE has achieved with regard to the conflict in Sri Lanka? Do you agree that time has come to re-visit the issue of proscription?
13. If you agree that the government of Sri Lanka was wrong to unilaterally withdraw from Cease Fire Agreement then please tell us what have you done to put that right? And what has been the result of your actions?
14. Did you know that 95% of Tamils voted in 2004, for LTTE as their sole representatives?

We are extremely concerned about how this government behaves and treats the Tamil community. We are using all the means available to us to press the government to do otherwise. However the current government remains as a democratically elected government in power at the moment. Government of Sri Lanka was elected through a ballot box.

It is not for Britain to solve the problem. Just like in Zimbabwe, both parties within the country with the help of the big regional neighbour like the Republic of South Africa have to solve their own problems.



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Since 2001 when the LTTE was proscribed there has been only a single attempt to de-proscribe in October 2007. This was rejected by the Home Secretary in February 2008. Appeal against this decision is possible.

As far as I know the LTTE has never stood for a democratic election. (People shouted TNA's mandate...TNA's mandate)

15. What is Britain doing about the internally displaced people and why can't Britain take this matter through the UN Security Council?
16. As journalists are prohibited by the government from reporting from the Vanni and other parts, did you realise that the information that you are getting is at least 6 months out of date. As a journalist who worked both in Sri Lanka and in the UK I am asking what if any the UK Government has done to prevent journalists being killed, abducted and arrested?
17. Britain played a major role in proscribing the LTTE within the European Union. It is a well known fact. Britain with its imperial past which created this turmoil in Sri Lanka. You created this problem by merging more than one kingdom that existed into a single country. Now you better sort it!

It is a judgment that the British Government has made to deal with this issue through the UNHRC rather than the UN Security Council. It is a tragedy that such a large number of people have been internally displaced. Through UN, ICRC and others we are seeking from both parties to ensure safe passage and access for supplies of food and medicines to reach the affected people.

You are absolutely right that there should be access given to journalists. We are constantly pressing through the EU and the UN to protect against these abductions and disappearances.

We do not have the right to tell any country how to rule or run their country. All we can do is with our international partners we can press for better governance and compliance to human rights laws.

At this point Rt. Hon Gareth Thomas MP declared that the Foreign Minister will be leaving now to engage in other official matters. Just when the two Ministers were coming down the stage stairs, a young Tamil stood in front of the crowd and chanted "we want Tamil Eelam"... "we want Tamil Eelam"... "our leader is Prabakaran"... The crowd repeated these slogans very loudly and clearly.



Hon Robert Evans Member of European Parliament related his experiences during his various visits to Sri Lanka. He was non-apologetic for his team's press statement after their recent visit to Sri Lanka as an EU Delegation. He explained the various excuses that the GoSL gave to delay and possibly shorten their trip to the East of Sri Lanka where he was scheduled to meet Pillayan, the new Chief Minister and spend time exploring the ground situation without any government agents present. He said that they were amazed how the government claims on the one hand that the East has been 'cleared' yet the delegation was not allowed to travel to Batticaloa (East of Sri Lanka) due to security problems. In the end, the delegation never went to the East of Sri Lanka at all.

He also said how he found the LTTE running a very efficient general administration and hospitals within the Vanni area soon after Tsunami struck Sri Lanka.

The meeting came to a close soon after 8.30pm.

- Ends -

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Notes to Editors:

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