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## Australia thanks Sri Lanka for facilitating safe return of Australian nationals

Wednesday, 11 March 2009

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The Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Stephen Smith has thanked the Government of Sri Lanka for facilitating the safe return of 3 Australian members of the Sri Lanka national cricket team, which came under attack by terrorists in Lahore last Tuesday(3rd March 2009).The Minister conveyed the Australian Government's deep appreciation ,when he telephoned his Sri Lankan counterpart, Rohitha Bogollagama in Colombo today(7th March 2009).He also expressed his sympathy and concern for the members of the cricket team and their families who had been traumatised by this ordeal. He informed the Sri Lankan Minister that he had spoken to Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi and had offered assistance in the investigation into the incident, including the provision of forensic experts. Minister Smith also conveyed his Government's gratitude to the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister for having facilitated the safe passage of an Australian national, who had been trapped in the uncleared areas in the North in a food convoy earlier this year. Minister Bogollagama thanked the Australian Foreign Minister for his expression of concern for the Sri Lankan cricketers and added that the Government considered itself duty-bound to ensure the safety and well being of the 3 Australian members of the cricket team,as well as in facilitating their expeditious and safe return to Colombo. He highlighted the fact that the terror strike in Lahore was the first occasion where Sri Lankan nationals had been targeted abroad, although thousands of innocent Sri Lankans have perished as a result of the numerous brutal acts of terrorism carried out by the LTTE within the country over the last two and a half decades. Hence, this attack aimed at Sri Lankans abroad is a cause for deep concern to the Government. Minister Bogollagama took the opportunity to brief his Australian colleague of current developments pertaining to the humanitarian situation of the civilian population held captive in the narrow coastal strip in the Mullaitivu district, as well as the facilities being provided by the Government to the many thousands of Tamil civilians, who have braved the bullets of the LTTE and fled to Government controlled areas and sought sanctuary. The Foreign Minister underscored the urgent need for the international community to call upon the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora to exert pressure on the LTTE to free the innocent civilians immediately. Minister Bogollagama also pointed out to the Australian Foreign Minister that the Government has decided to designate two safe corridors for the trapped civilians to escape and come out to the cleared areas. He reiterated the Government position that the security forces have always respected the sanctity of safe zones, where the civilian population has been pushed into by the LTTE, and will continue to desist from directing retaliatory fire, despite the incessant attacks by the LTTE against them, using the civilians as human shields.The Minister also highlighted the paramount concern of the Government for the safety and welfare of the civilian population who are being forcibly held against their will by the LTTE and is deeply troubled by their untold misery and suffering. Therefore, he said that despite numerous practical difficulties, the Government will continue to keep these people supplied with food, medicine and other essential items. In this regard, he noted that the Government has arranged for a shipment of 500 tons of food and essential supplies to be sent by sea to Mullaitivu for these people over this weekend. Minister Bogollagama reaffirmed the Sri Lankan Government's commitment to fully engage the international community in addressing the humanitarian situation in the North.

Ministry of Foreign AffairsColombo

7th March 2009