Dr. Liam Fox MP – Shadow Defence Secretary

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March 14th 2009 Hilton Hotel, Colombo It is a pleasure to be back once again in Sri Lanka and I am grateful to the government for the invitation to visit the country for which I have such great affection. Sri Lanka lives in momentous times. The next few months are probably the most important since independence and will shape this country for the next generation and beyond. The decisions which are taken by politicians now will not only influence the internal development of Sri Lanka but how it is perceived in the world outside. It is a time for statesmanship not partisan politics and one where leaders must want to be judged by history rather than the contemporary electorate.

It now appears likely that Government forces will militarily defeat the LTTE. This will bring a historic opportunity for reconstruction and reconciliation which will require the political and economic commitment of the whole nation. It will offer a chance for this country to face the challenges of the 21st century globalised economy in a more positive and meritocratic way, free from the handicaps of ethnic division and violence. Any nation which wants to prosper in a competitive global economic environment must use the talents of all its citizens, without regard to ethnicity, armed with the necessary tools of economic empowerment and education. As the conflict with the LTTE moves to a seemingly inevitable conclusion the most urgent concern is for the safety of civilians trapped in the conflict. It is essential that every effort is made to evacuate innocent citizens who might otherwise be used as a human shield. In my discussions with the President and his ministers it was reassuring to hear about coordination with the international community to help achieve this and the offers from other nations to help potential evacuation. This morning I met with the International Committee of the Red Cross to get an update from them on the current situation. Today up to 1000 people are being evacuated, mostly the sick and wounded and their carers. The scale of the task is such that international help and co-operation will be required and it is imperative that both sides in the hostilities maximise the chance of safe evacuation with the minimum risk possible of civilian casualties. But while the military can win wars it is politics and economics which will be required to win the peace. A creative and constructive political initiative will need to be reinforced by a massive investment in reconstruction and resettlement, with particular attention paid to the development of necessary infrastructure. The sheer scale of the task ahead, including the challenge of de-mining and the creation of necessary infrastructure, is of a magnitude that will require international assistance. The international community will need to play its part in this process and the government of Sri Lanka will need to take every measure possible to facilitate this. It is essential that every effort is made to normalise the political situation in the North as quickly as possible. In the circumstances no early election will be perfect but it will be an important start to a process where the Tamil population in the area can be fully integrated into democratic politics. The TNA will have an important contribution to make to this process and I hope that they will be fully involved. This will be important not only for the perceived legitimacy of the elections themselves but also for the TNA and their ability to shape the future. For long-term stability it will be necessary to minimise the risk of any residual terrorist activity and funding. Genuine political and economic reform will reduce the risk of political support for any potential insurgency but it will also be necessary to divert the flow of funds which has supported LTTE military activity into reconstruction. That is why I have suggested to the government that there should be a new, independent, Sri Lanka Construction Fund developed. This would have transparent and independent governance and be used for investment in development projects and economic empowerment rather than conflict. The international diaspora could then be sure that any financial aid they gave would result in material benefits rather than weapons of war. In my discussions with the President yesterday I made clear my own willingness to help in establishing such a project.