Sri Lanka to take note of Holmes' views - Kohona says diplomats satisfied with camps

Friday, 20 March 2009
Last Updated Friday, 20 March 2009

By Sunil Jayasiri and Sandun A Jayasekera The government yesterday said it had taken note of the recommendations put forward by the United Nations Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs, Sir John Holmes, on his recent visit to the island recently.

“We welcome any recommendation, and as a whole, they were positive,” Human Rights Minister Mahinda Samarasinghe told media yesterday. He said, on his return, Sir Holmes had sent a set of recommendations, dealing with the camps set up for Internally Displaced People, which he visited during his stay in Sri Lanka, to President Mahinda Rajapaksa. “His proposals included ideas on how those camps could further be improved in order to provide better facilities for IDPs,” the minister said adding, “Mr. Holmes had extended his satisfaction on the facilities at the camp and these recommendations are for further improvements to the facilities there.”Minister Samarasinghe also said that on behalf of the President, he had sent a reply to Sir Holmes. “Those recommendations were very constructive and practical but we had to postpone some of these recommendations taking into consideration the security situation,” the minister said. According to the minister discussions are underway with local authorities to implement most of these recommendations. The number of civilians fleeing the uncleared areas is gradually increasing as they value their freedom more than anything else, Essential Services Commissioner General S.B. Divaratna said yesterday. He said by last Monday, 45,519 civilians had arrived in the newly liberated areas and on Wednesday alone more than 1500 people had crossed over. Addressing the media at the Information Department auditorium, he said the government was taking all steps to facilitate the crossing over to the liberated areas of these civilians. He said transporting essential commodities to Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi had become easier after the opening of the A9 highway. In the first two months of 2009 alone, the government has sent 71,000 metric tonnes of food items and another 15,000 of other essential commodities such as fuel and clothes to Mullaitivu and Vavuniya through the Vavuniya Oddusudan route, he said. The government has continued to also send medicine, medical equipment and even building materials to the north despite heavy LTTE resistance, Mr. Divaratna said. “We are carrying out these humanitarian operations against so many odds. The LTTE does not want the government to dispatch these items to the people in the north as their intention is to show the world that the people are dying of starvation, from diseases or from injuries sustained in the cross fire,” he said. When the food was transported by sea, the LTTE fired at our ships. The Essential Services Commissioner General’s Department then hired smaller ships to dispatch food in smaller quantities of between 50 and 100 metric tonnes. Boats were then used to bring the stocks from the ships anchored in mid sea ashore. Food convoys were targeted by the LTTE and food lorries had to return on many occasions when the Department started to supply food using land routes, he said. Mr. Divaratna assured there was no reason why anybody should die of starvation, diseases or injuries. Kohona says diplomats satisfied with camps By Jamila Najmuddin The government said yesterday it operated in a transparent manner, when dealing with civilians fleeing LTTE-held areas and the diplomats who visited these camps over the weekend confirmed this. Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona told Daily Mirror a group of diplomats who visited displaced peoples’ camps in Vavuniya last week to get a first hand view of the situation were of the opinion that conditions in those camps were better than camps set up in other war torn countries. “One of the envoys told me the conditions in camps in Vavuniya were much better than in countries such as Darfur or Eastern Congo. What needs to be mentioned is that the international community did not help us set up these camps but instead the government did it on its own,” Dr. Kohona said. He said the visit by the diplomatic community to the refugee camps in Vavuniya last week was the second since their visit to the area on March 4. The delegation that visited the camps last week included French, Russian, Indonesian and Korean Ambassadors, the Deputy Chief of Mission of Japan, his second secretary, the Maldivian High Commissioner, and the United Nations Director General. Meanwhile Dr. Kohona said the government was not prepared just yet to accede to requests by the international community to visit the camps as it was not the government’s intention to set up ‘IDP related tourism’ where the international community visited the camps and gaped at civilians who had escaped from the clutches of the LTTE. He said while the government maintained transparency when dealing with the refugees, the visits by high-level delegations to these camps disturbed the entire establishment while the security in the area too have to be placed on high alert during such visits. “Because of these problems, we hope there are fewer requests to visit these refugee camps,” Dr. Kohona said. He said discussions were underway between the government and the European Union for a delegation to visit the country sometime soon to get a first hand view of the conditions in the refugee camps though the dates and the agenda for the visit were yet to be finalized. “Our consultations with the EU are ongoing and its visit to the country is nothing new as last year too an EU delegation visited the country,” Dr. Kohona said. Last year, a six-member EU delegation visited the country and held extensive discussions with foreign ministry officials, ministers, opposition party leaders, senior government officials, civil society groups and the media.Courtesy: dailymirror.lk