
Only 13th amendment for now, says Lankan envoy

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From S Murari, Chennai Chennai, 08 July, (Asiantribune.com): Sri Lankan High Commissioner to India C Romesh Jayasinghe said here on Tuesday that President Mahinda Rajapaksa, who was committed to a political solution despite the elimination of the LTTE, would for now give effect to the 13th amendment of the Constitution on devolution of powers to the Tamil provinces.

Obviously referring to Mr Rajapaksa's promise that he would give the Tamils "13th amendment plus" once terrorism was eradicated, the envoy said "the President intends to proceed pragmatically by relying on the constitutional provisions for devolution that have already been enacted through the 13th amendment adopted after the India-Sri Lanka agreement of 1987". Addressing a seminar on "Post-conflict Sri Lanka and India's role", organised by the Observer Research Foundation and the Department of International Studies of the Stella Maris College here, Mr Jayasinghe indicated that the President could not go beyond 13th amendment for now as it would require an amendment of the Constitution by a two-thirds majority followed by ratification by the people through a referendum. He said: "In advancing the political process, the President and his government would be mindful that our Constitution is rigid in nature, requiring for amendment a 2/3 majority in Parliament, with some entrenched clauses needing even thereafter approval by the people at a referendum. Since Sri Lanka's change in 1989 from the previous first-past-the-post system to a proportional representation system, no party has obtained a two-thirds majority. In fact, President Rajapaksa depends for his parliamentary support on a coalition, with his own party, the SLFP, having less than 1/3 of the seats in a legislature with a total strength of 225". Therefore, the President had to proceed pragmatically. Though the 13th amendment became part of the statute 22 years ago, it could not benefit the northern and eastern provinces as the LTTE was present in those areas. The envoy said the implementation of the 13th amendment had already started in the east following the provincial polls held in May 2008 and the election of a Chief Minister. Now that the LTTE was no more, elections would be held in the north also. He said the completion of provincial elections in the north "will be an important milestone in further strengthening national amity". The envoy said the President, to give a further impetus to his search for a political solution, had set up an all-party committee under him which would meet once a month. The committee would address issues of national reconciliation and development. "It was particularly encouraging that 22 political parties, including the Tamil National Alliance, participated in the initial meeting of the committee on July 2", the high commissioner said. Mr N Ram, editor of The Hindu who interviewed Mr Rajapaksa recently, said the Tamils, particularly the TNA, which until recently was seen as a proxy of the LTTE, must forget the past and come to terms with the present reality. He told them: "Forget about merger (of the north and east). Forget about (semantics like) unitary and federal solutions. What is important is substance". He said the Tamil parties should fight for more powers for the provincial councils. In this connection, he said it was proof of the President's earnest that he had promised to set up a second chamber, like the Senate in the US or the Upper House of Parliament in India. The second chamber would have representation from the provincial councils and they could resist moves by the Centre which encroached on their autonomy or rights. Mr Ram said that since the assassination of Mr Rajiv Gandhi in May 1991, through which the LTTE permanently antagonized India, successive regimes in Delhi had followed a consistent policy of "hands off approach" coupled with persuasive diplomacy. This, he said, was the right approach. Lauding India's decision to grant an assistance of Rs 500 crore to Sri Lanka for rehabilitation and reconstruction in the war-ravaged north, he said this was the most daunting task facing the President and "I would be happy if India gives Rs 1,000 crore". Referring to the President's promise to resettle the close to three lakh internally displaced people in their original habitat within 180 days after the military defeat of the LTTE on May 19, Mr Ram said 80 per cent of the work was expected to be completed by the year-end once the major task of demining the war zone, on which Indian companies and the Sri Lankan army were doing a commendable job, was completed. LT Gen(Retd) V R Raghavan of the Centre for Security Analysis, Chennai, said that in the post-LTTE scenario, the Sri Lankan armed forces planned to deploy 10 to 12 divisions in the north alone, compared to three divisions the IPKF had for the entire north and east. This would lead to several garrison towns coming up. This would not be bad in itself if it led to jobs for the locals. But if Sinhalese were brought in, it would lead to racial tension. He also said the increasing role for the army might lead to its emergence as a rival power centre which was not good for Sri Lanka, known for its vibrant democratic traditions. - Asian Tribune -Courtesy: asiantribune.com