Minister Bogollagama briefs British Parliamentarians on the developments in Sri Lanka

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Hon. Rohitha Bogollagama, MP, Minister of Foreign Affairs met with a group of British Parliamentarians today at the House of Commons in an interactive session. The group of members of parliament comprised Labour Party MPs Mr. Virendra Sharma, MP for Ealing & Southall, Mr. Keith Vaz, MP for Leicester East, Ms. Siobhain McDonagh, MP for Mitcham & Morden and Liberal Democrat MPs Mr. Edward Davey, MP for Kingston & Surbiton and Mr. Simon Hughes, MP for Southwark & Bermondsey.

Commencing the session, Hon. Minister of Foreign Affairs briefed the members of parliament the extensive progress being made in the resettlement of internally displaced Sri Lankans, demining process and political developments in Sri Lanka. Hon. Minister stated that the government of Sri Lanka has been able to resettle more than 60% of the displaced people. He emphasised that Sri Lanka needs the support of the international community in the restoration of the infrastructure facilities, housing, agriculture etc. in the conflict affected areas. Referring to the forthcoming Presidential and Parliamentary elections, Hon. Minister added that a strong and wider mandate is sought for the implementation of political solutions for sustainable peace. Mr. Simon Hughes inquired whether the displaced persons would be allowed to return to their own homes, whether the UN Agencies, INGOs and other voluntary organizations have been granted access and the media have also been granted unfettered access to Sri Lanka. In his response, Hon. Minister stated that all the internally displaced people will be returning to their own homes, over 66 agencies including UN specialized agencies have been functioning in the welfare villages as well as in the other parts of the entire Northern Province and media have been able to visit Sri Lanka without any hindrance. He further added that the post conflict role of the ICRC in Sri Lanka will be redefined and cleared in the near future. In response to Ms. McDonagh that her constituents have been complaining that they are unable to trace whereabouts of the relatives living in the North and East of Sri Lanka and in the welfare villages. Hon. Minister said that all of the displaced people have been registered and therefore the Diaspora should be able to contact their relatives through relevant Sri Lankan authorities and overseas Missions of Sri Lanka. He requested the Hon. Members to inform the Diaspora that they should contact Sri Lanka Missions first instead of complaining to their MPs. Ms. McDonagh commented on the disappearances and killings of journalists in Sri Lanka. Hon. Minister responded that there have not been such cases and requested the Hon. Members to cite any instances of such disappearances, if any. Mr. Edward Davey inquired whether the forthcoming elections will be monitored by the independent international elections monitors and whether the displaced people and those who are being resettled would be able to vote at the elections. Hon. Minister responded that the elections will be monitored by the international observers as done in the past and all Sri Lankans who are eligible to vote will be able to exercise their franchise at the elections including the IDPs those who have been registered. Hon. Minister referred to the recent visits to Sri Lanka by the Tamil Nadu Parliamentary group, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Australia and South Africa and UN Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs who had the opportunity of having firsthand experience on the situation in Sri Lanka. He also elaborated on his continuing engagement with the UK political leaders including Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs as well as the opposition political leaders. Hon. Minister extended an invitation for the members of parliament to visit Sri Lanka. Though most of these members of parliament have been critical of Sri Lanka, the interactive session has been extremely constructive and cordial and members of parliament appreciated the point of view of Sri Lanka given by the Hon. Minister on the situation in Sri Lanka. Even though a section of the media and pro-LTTE elements have sought to classify welfare villages as “Internment Camps”, the Hon. Members did not refer to the camps as such during the meeting. The Hon. Minister was accompanied by H.E. Justice Nihal Jayasinghe, High Commissioner, H.E. Mrs. Kshenuka Senewiratne, Permanent Representative of Sri Lanka in Geneva and Mr. Prasanna Gamage, Counsellor. Sri Lanka High Commission United Kingdom 1 December 2009