
More supportive Approach to Sri Lanka needed says MEP

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More supportive Approach to Sri Lanka needed says MEP Mr Geoffrey Van Orden MBE MEP Chairman of the Friends of Sri Lanka Group in the European Parliament Following a recent visit to Sri Lanka, the Chairman of the European Parliament's informal 'Friends of Sri Lanka' Group has called for supportive engagement with Sri Lanka as it recovers from 30 years of conflict. Conservative MEP and Defence Spokesman Geoffrey Van Orden has just returned from Sri Lanka where he met the President and senior Ministers, as well as MPs from a range of government and opposition political parties including the Tamil National Alliance. He met the Northern and Eastern Regional Governors, and on his visit to the former conflict areas in the North and East of the country, the Bishop of Jaffna, military commanders and many local people. He also visited the Detention Camp at Boosa and a post-Tsunami village at Weligama.

Mr Van Orden commented:

"Wherever I went I received a clear message - relief that the conflict is over; optimism that the country is now making economic progress; and recognition that reconciliation and political consensus are essential if a repeat of the circumstances that incubated terrorism 30 years ago are to be avoided". "I was encouraged by indications that the 'Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission', which has just reported, has come up with robust conclusions that will address many international concerns. The report will be presented to Parliament shortly. I am clear that Sri Lankans must deal with these matters in their own way and require our constructive support and encouragement in this. Undoubtedly there have been allegations of human rights abuses which need to be properly addressed by government in coming to terms with the past. The most serious and consistent abusers, particularly of the Tamil population and Moslems, have been the LTTE terrorists." "Even the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which represents a significant element of the Tamil vote, is no longer pursuing a separatist agenda. They stated directly to me their willingness 'to be absorbed into the Sri Lankan mosaic' and to 'cooperate responsibly for a long-term solution'. The TNA must ensure that it conveys a similarly positive message when its spokesmen travel abroad. " "Undoubtedly, there are still those with a vested interest in prolonging discord. I feel sure that the great majority of people of Sri Lankan Tamil origin living in the UK and elsewhere would wish to help improve the lot of their former countrymen, if the agitators would leave them alone. They should travel to Sri Lanka, see the situation for themselves, and invest in business start-ups and development projects. At the moment there is little evidence of funds raised overseas being channelled into such constructive projects." "For some the glass is always half empty - I see it as more than half full. Demining, construction of housing, and reclamation of agricultural land has enabled over 290,000 persons displaced by the conflict to return to their villages in the North without fear. Sri Lanka's GDP is growing at over 8% a year and accelerating. Infrastructure - including a first motorway - is being dramatically improved." "To embed freedom and progress there should be a new political settlement, respectful of the concerns and interests of all the law-abiding peoples of Sri Lanka, and demilitarisation of the North and East as soon as practicable, with clear timelines. Work on this is in hand. " "To help the process, there needs to be positive, generous and warm-hearted support from the international community for Sri Lanka - a friendly, democratic, Commonwealth country with very strong historic links with the UK and other European nations. " "In recent years, the democracies have provided generous development and post-Tsunami humanitarian assistance. Now that terrorism has been overcome it is the time for fresh engagement and opening of new and transparent trade and business initiatives that will be of benefit all round." Geoffrey Van Orden MEP can be contacted on geoffrey.vanorden@europarl.europa.eu or 0032 2 2847332. www.geoffreyvanorden.com Ministry of External Affairs Colombo December 12, 2011