

High Commission of India  
Colombo  
Press Release

Statement by Hon'ble Sushma Swaraj, Leader of Opposition, Lok Sabha, India and Leader of All-Party Parliamentary Delegation to Sri Lanka at a media interaction on 21 April 2012

Distinguished representatives of the media,

I am happy to lead the All-Party delegation of Parliamentarians from India on this important visit to Sri Lanka. We are happy to meet you and share our impressions from this visit. I would like to start by introducing my colleagues from the delegation.

2. The purpose of our visit was to see for ourselves the progress made in Sri Lanka since the end of the armed conflict in May 2009. We wanted to interact with a wide cross-section of political parties, members of civil society and the public at large, and get a sense of the situation, especially with regard to rehabilitation, resettlement and the way forward to achieving a lasting and broad-based peace in Sri Lanka.

3. As you are aware, India has been unstinting in its assistance in supporting efforts to resettle and rehabilitate internally displaced persons in Sri Lanka and to reconstruct the infrastructure and facilities of northern Sri Lanka. In this context, we also wanted to get a first-hand glimpse of the status of the development projects being implemented with India's assistance in different parts of Sri Lanka, and the impact they were having on the ground.

4. My delegation and I had the opportunity to call on His Excellency President Mahinda Rajapaksa this morning. We had extensive discussions with several Ministers, the Leader of the Opposition, key leaders of major political parties, Members of Parliament and representatives of civil society. We travelled to different parts of Sri Lanka, a fact that testifies to the pan-Island footprint of our engagement with this country. Our immediate focus, however, was on the North and the East, as they recover from the trauma of nearly three decades of armed conflict.

5. We have noted the improved situation regarding the resettlement of IDPs. However, a significant number of them continue to be in transit situations or with host families. Our task will not be complete until they return to their original homes. Similarly, while there has been substantial progress in the area of rehabilitation and reconstruction, a lot remains to be done. We are prepared to assist in whatever way possible, in a spirit of partnership and cooperation.

6. The end of the armed conflict has provided a historic opportunity for moving towards national reconciliation and political settlement. The report of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) has underlined this and has made a number of constructive recommendations for addressing issues related to healing the wounds of the conflict and fostering a process of lasting peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka. It is important that these are pursued with a sense of

urgency. This is the message we have conveyed to our Sri Lankan friends during the course of this visit.

7. Our discussions over the last four days have brought out clearly the need for expeditious implementation of the measures proposed by the LLRC with regard to information on missing persons and detainees, investigation of cases of disappearances and abductions, promotion of a trilingual policy, reduction of high security zones, return of private lands by the military and demilitarization, including phasing out of the involvement of the security forces in civilian activities and restoration of civilian administration in the Northern Province. We have noted the assurance given by the Government of Sri Lanka in Parliament that it will ensure the withdrawal of security forces from community life and confine their role to security matters.

8. Above all, it is our sincere hope that the Government of Sri Lanka will seize this window of opportunity and follow an enlightened approach to reach a genuine political reconciliation, based on a meaningful devolution of powers, which takes into account the legitimate needs of the Tamil people for equality, dignity, justice and self-respect. We have been assured in the past that this will be done within the framework of "Thirteenth Amendment - Plus". We would urge the Government of Sri Lanka and other stakeholders, including the Tamil National Alliance, to resume dialogue and move towards an early political settlement. We would earnestly suggest urgent consultations to create conditions for launching of the Parliamentary Select Committee.

9. During our stay in Sri Lanka, we were able to visit several of sites of Indian-aided projects, including railway projects in the North and the South, the housing project, Kankesanthurai Harbour, and some of the schools, hospitals and vocational training centres being revived with our assistance. We were happy to witness the handover of some of the completed projects. Several others are on track to be completed in the coming months. These projects gave us some satisfaction that India's assistance, especially in the areas of humanitarian assistance, temporary shelter, housing, de-mining, education and vocational training, public health, connectivity, and revival of agriculture and other livelihood activities, has been able to make a difference to the lives of the people.

10. These projects serve to underline India's commitment, as a stakeholder in peace, stability and harmony in Sri Lanka, to addressing the pressing needs of the war-affected people and the restoration of normalcy to their lives.

11. We are happy to note that our relations are moving ahead in a comprehensive manner. It is a relationship based on deep civilizational and cultural bonds and shared interests. As a close and friendly neighbour, we have strong stakes in the unity and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka and in the preservation of peace, harmony and prosperity of this country. We are committed to taking the relationship forward.

12. As India and Sri Lanka are immediate neighbours with an extensive interface, there are naturally some bilateral issues that need to be addressed, for example, the issue of fishermen. I would like to emphasize that this is an emotive issue which must be handled with care on both sides. As we explore possible solutions, both

sides must ensure that there is no use of force against the fishermen and that they are treated in a humane manner. We were happy to learn that the Joint Working Group on Fisheries which met in January this year was able to look at various options to address this issue in a larger framework. We hope the fishermen on both sides can meet again and talk directly to each other.

13. India and Sri Lanka are bound by ties of history, geography and culture. Our partnership must therefore progress in the spirit of being the closest of neighbours and friends whose destinies are intertwined. As democracies, we understand that we may occasionally have differences but these will be dealt with through dialogue and on the basis of mutual respect. I am confident that our shared heritage and common interests will take us forward together

Thank you