

NEWS

GTF launch well attended by British politicians



The Global Tamil Forum launch was held in the Gladstone Room at the UK House of Commons

Sri Lanka voices anger as UK MPs address GTF

BRITISH Foreign Secretary David Miliband, Conservative Shadow Foreign Secretary William Hague and Liberal Democrats Shadow Foreign Secretary Ed Davey all addressed the Global Tamil Forum's inaugural meeting in London on Wednesday, 24 February.

The Global Tamil Forum (GTF) launch saw delegates from 14 countries gather in the UK House of Commons to be addressed by speakers from across the political spectrum, including parliamentarians, councillors and prospective parliamentary candidates.

The delegates were also able to hold a private meeting with Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

Organisers described the event as "a momentous show of support for the Tamil Diaspora congregation" and expressed quiet satisfaction at the success of the launch.

The meeting, in the Gladstone Room of the House of Commons, began at 10am and concluded at 4pm, followed by a reception between 4pm and 6pm at the Terrace Cafeteria.

Among the guests were a Buddhist monk and an Islamic theologian, both of whom had travelled from Sri Lanka for the event.

An African National Congress parliamentarian from South Africa, Sisa Njikelana, had flown to Britain especially for the event and was in the country for only 6 hours.

Messages had been sent to the organizers from Gordon Brown, British Prime Minister, David Miliband, British Foreign Secretary, David Cameron, Leader of the British Conservative Party, William Hague, Shadow Foreign Secretary and Robert O. Blake, US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs.

The event started with an introduction by Father S J Emmanuel, the president of GTF,

who mentioned that it was appropriate that the launch was being held in the British parliament as the need for the GTF is a result of the decision by the British to give Sri Lanka independence 62 years ago.

The opening address was delivered by British Foreign Secretary David Miliband who hoped that GTF would contribute to a newfound peace that would serve the rights and hopes of the people of Sri Lanka.

The Liberal Democrats Shadow Foreign Secretary Ed Davey stressed that he would be raising the issue of land rights with the Sri Lankan High Commission as it was not appropriate for the state to grab the land of the displaced.

The closing address was delivered by William Hague MP, Conservatives Shadow Foreign Secretary who called for the reconciliation and political process to begin in earnest soon.

Rev Ven. Madampagama Assaji Manayake Thero, a Sinhala Buddhist monk, and Mr Abdul Majeed Mohammed Casim, a Muslim theologian from Sri Lanka also attended the event and addressed the audience.

Among the dignitaries who addressed the event were Keith Vaz MP, Gareth Thomas MP, Simon Hughes MP, Andrew Dismore MP, Andrew Pelling MP, Susan Kramer MP, former MEP Robert Evans, Virendra Sharma MP, Joan Ryan MP, Dawn Butler MP, Siobhain McDonagh MP, David Burrows MP, Lee Scott MP, Stephen Pound MP and Andrew Pelling MP. A number of prospective parliamentary candidates also addressed the delegates.

Mr Andrew Thillainathan introduced the audience to a GTF project sponsoring 1000 children and 450 families in Sri Lanka who were suffering as a result of the war, while Dr Sampavi Parimalanathan spoke of the launch of the Global Tamil Women's Forum (GTWF).

THE diplomatic rift between London and Colombo widened after Prime Minister Gordon Brown and British Foreign Secretary David Miliband met delegates from a new worldwide Tamil union despite "strong protests" from the Sri Lankan government, British newspapers reported.

The British government's decision to engage with the GTF has provoked "deep concerns" in Sri Lanka, which claims the organisation is a front for the Tamil Tigers (LTTE), reported The Guardian.

The British acting high commissioner in Colombo, Mark Gooding, was summoned before the island's foreign minister and urged to tell Miliband to cancel his address.

"The Foreign Minister in this context emphasised that Foreign Secretary Miliband, by participating at today's GTF Meeting in London, would unfortunately lend credibility to an organisation which is propagating the separatist agenda of the LTTE, and would be acting in a manner inimical to the national interest of Sri Lanka and its legitimate government," the Foreign Ministry later said of Bogollagama's meeting with the British diplomat.

However, not only did Miliband go ahead with the address but Brown also held a private meeting with a group of delegates

in the Commons.

A Foreign Office spokesman told The Guardian Miliband's participation was part of the government's ongoing efforts to bring about peace in Sri Lanka.

"The GTF publicly states that they are committed to the principles of democracy and non-violence," he said.

"The UK will continue to engage with all Sri Lankan communities focused on achieving a lasting and equitable peace through non-violent means."

A spokesman for the GTF said Colombo's reaction to its meetings with the British government was typical of the Sri Lankan state's attitude.

"It obviously shows that they are not serious about finding a peaceful solution," he added.

Meanwhile, hundreds of Sri Lankan ruling party activists demonstrated outside the British High Commission in Colombo on Monday March 1, denouncing what they called London's support for Tamil separatists abroad.

Demonstrators carried posters showing Miliband and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown with devil's horns grafted onto their heads. They were led by former member of parliament Wimal Weeravamsa, a key supporter of Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa.

"What the British government

is trying to do (by its support to the GTF) is to revive Tiger terrorism, and by extension, it is supporting the division of this nation," Weeravamsa told the protesters.

The protestors handed in a petition protesting against Miliband's attendance at the meeting.

After the protest, the demonstrators pasted large placards of Brown and Miliband, dressed in Tamil Tiger outfits, across the walls.

Miliband used his address to the inaugural conference of the Global Tamil Forum at the Commons to urge the Sri Lankan government to embark on a "genuinely inclusive political process".

He also repeated calls for an investigation into allegations that both the Sri Lankan state and the Tamil Tigers violated international humanitarian law during last year's fighting.

The already-strained relations between the two countries deteriorated further last November after the UK and Australia blocked Sri Lanka from hosting the next biennial commonwealth heads of government meeting in 2011 in protest at Colombo's military repression against the Tamil population.

Earlier this month the EU suspended preferential trade benefits to Sri Lanka over concerns about its human rights record.

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