

NEWS

British MPs lobbied for Sri Lanka after junkets

TWO British MPs, Mr. Andy Love of the ruling Labour party, and Dr. Liam Fox of the main opposition Conservative party, made visits to Sri Lanka paid for by the government there, and while not declaring their trips, spoke in support of Sri Lanka in parliament, a BBC investigation has revealed. Both MPs were hosted by Mahinda Rajapakse regime in the past three years amid Sri Lanka's onslaught in which tens of thousands of Tamil civilians were killed.

Mr. Fox, some of whose trips coincided with international outrage over the ongoing slaughter, told the BBC his visits were to "promote peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka." Following his second visit in 2008, Mr. Love urged British ministers to send more aid to Sri Lanka.

Dr. Fox and Mr. Love are two of twenty MPs in the 640 plus seat British parliament who have breached rules related to registering and declaring overseas trips paid for by foreign governments, the BBC reported this week.

Dr. Fox, who is shadow defence minister and MP for Woodspring, visited Sri Lanka three times in 2009 - in March, August and November. He also visited in March 2008.

He also visited in November 2007, but this trip was belatedly registered (in February 2008, well outside the four-week period stipulated by the MPs' code of conduct).

Notably, Dr. Fox's visit in March 2009 came amid the mass killings of Tamil civilians in Vanni, as documented by Human Rights Watch (HRW) and others, and just weeks after British Foreign Minister David Miliband and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, condemned Sri Lanka's systematic shelling of civilian safe zones and medical facilities in Vanni.

Meanwhile, a British press report in February this year said Mr. Fox, during his November 2009, visit, had attended the party convention of Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom party (SLFP).

Speaking in Parliament, following this visit, Mr. Fox urged the Rajapakse government, saying in Parliament: "as members of the European Union, we have to be careful not to lecture too much or give too few incentives in a country that is beginning to move very much in the right direction."



Liam Fox, paid for by Colombo

In response to the BBC investigation, Dr Fox told the broadcaster this week: "I have been involved in attempts to promote peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka, involving all sides of the ethnic divide, since I was a foreign minister in 1997."

During his March 2008 visit, Dr. Fox told local reporters in Colombo: "Ultimately, it is for the people of Sri Lanka to determine their own destiny, but sixty years on from Independence, there are still many friends [in Britain] who would go to great lengths to help in any way possible."

Mr. Andrew Love, the Labour MP for Edmonton, was also named in the BBC investigation this week, having visited Sri Lanka in April 2006 and March 2008, courtesy of the Rajapakse government.

His first visit came as Sri Lanka was preparing to unleash its all out war against the LTTE. In the first two days of the war that month, over 40,000 Tamil civilians in were displaced as Sri Lankan artillery leveled all villages and townships in Sampoor, Trincomalee district.

Following Mr Love's second visit to Sri Lanka in March 2008, he asked four questions that related to Sri Lanka, without declaring an interest (the numbers are 221769, 227582, 227583 and 255792), according to the BBC.

On 24 May 2006, Mr Love tabled a debate about Sri Lanka. Records of the Summary Agenda, the Weekly Information Bulletin and the Order of Business indicate that he did not declare an interest, although he did mention a recent visit.

During the debate, Mr Love said: "I note that the [UK] Department for International



Italian Eelam Tamils conduct referendum, form country council

TamilNet

EELAM Tamils in Italy successfully conducted a referendum on independent and sovereign Tamil Eelam and simultaneously elected a 20-member country council Sunday. 98.8 percent of those who voted said 'yes' to Tamil Eelam in a turnout of around 75 percent of eligible Eelam Tamil voters in Italy, the organisers of the polls said.

Youth figured prominently among those elected to the Council, Ms. Sinthuja Nagendram in her twenties getting the largest number of votes in the national list. The polls organised by an independent election commission of Eelam Tamils in Italy were nationally supervised and monitored by an Italian federation of NGOs, COCIS (Co-ordination of Non-governmental Organisations for International Development Co-operation). In Italy, Sinhalese expatriates are large in numbers compared to Tamils who make only less than a tenth of them.

"I think this is an extraordinary result. The majority of the community took part in the polls. I am surprised and pleased," said

Development has been involved in innovative programmes on internally displaced persons. ... In former programmes, it has tried to assist people to return to their original homes."

He went on to suggest: "[Dfid] could construct a similar programme so that people can rehabilitate themselves within the district of Puttalam and establish employment opportunities."

The BBC put it to Mr. Love that his urging British ministers to send further aid for a project in Sri Lanka might be perceived as lobbying on behalf of an overseas government from whom hospital-

Marco Sansoè, a member of an organisation called La città di sotto that supervised the polls in the constituency of Piemonte.

"The elections were conducted fairly. There were no problems," he further said, adding that democracy has become meaningful to Tamils.

According to the estimation by the organisers, more than 100,000 Sinhalese live in Italy and Tamils number around 8,000.

Out of around 4,500 eligible Eelam Tamil voters, 3,680 participated in the polls. 3,596 of them said 'yes' to the formation of independent and sovereign Tamil Eelam based on the Vaddukkoaddai Resolution of 1976 while 44 voted 'no' and 40 votes were cancelled.

The participants of the polls simultaneously elected members to the country council, Italian Council of Eelam Tamils (ICET), which in Tamil and Italian named, Iththaaliya Eezhath Thamizhar Makka'lavai / Consiglio italiano dei Eelam Tamil.

20 members were elected to the council, out of whom 5 from the national list and 15 from the regional lists of 7 constituencies: A) Piemonte (1 representative), B) Lombardia and Veneto (2), C)

Emilia-romagna and Toscana (3), D) Liguria (2), E) Campania and Lazio (2), F) Puglia (1) and G) Sicilia (4).

The polls took place in 16 centres across the country, where Tamils live in significant numbers. The voting took place between 9:30 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. Sunday.

Each voter was provided with three sheets, one for the referendum on Tamil Eelam and the other two for electing members under the national list and under the concerned regional list, said COCIS, the body that supervised and monitored the polls in its official news release.

COCIS with member organisations in 12 Italian regions and operating in 90 countries worldwide, promoting peace and justice among peoples, viewed positively in its website the fact that the Tamil diaspora has initiated a democratic, unified and non-violent process to assert to the rights of Tamils.

Italy is the 9th country to conduct the Tamil referendum after Norway, France, Canada, Germany, Switzerland, Holland, UK and Denmark, and is the second to form an elected country council after Norway.

ity had recently been received.

However, Mr. Love dismissed the notion, saying: "I reject out of hand and in the strongest terms any [such] inference."

On 18 December 2008, Mr Love spoke in a debate on Sri Lanka, without declaring an interest. and on 24 March 2009, Mr Love participated in a debate on Sri Lanka, again without declaring an interest.

Mr. Love heads the All Party Parliamentary Group on Sri Lanka.

Interestingly, ahead of Britain's upcoming general election, the Sri Lanka High

Commission in London has been canvassing in support of Mr. Love's re-election.

This month the mission circulated amongst some Sinhala expatriates a letter written by the High Commissioner, Mr. Nihal Jayasinha, to Mr. Love's Conservative party rival, Mr. Andrew Charalambous, condemning the latter for speaking out against Sri Lanka's abuses.

The letter, dated 8 March, accused the Conservative candidate of being misinformed by and pandering to Tamil voters and warned him: "the Sinhalese people [in UK] also vote."