

Miffed at envoy's remarks, Sri Lanka to complain to London

Sri Lanka will soon convey to the British Foreign Office its 'strong displeasure' about certain remarks of British High Commissioner Dominic Chilcott which seemed to legitimise the Tamil Tigers' struggle for an independent 'Eelam' in the north and east of the island.

Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama announced this in parliament Friday after a government minister and a leading member of the opposition condemned the envoy for 'interfering' in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka.

'We would tell the British high commissioner not to interfere in the internal affairs of our country,' Cabinet Minister and Chief Government Whip Jeyaraj Fernandopulle said Thursday.

Giving a hint of what might happen if Chilcott continued to do what he had done, Fernandopulle said that in the late 1980s, Sri Lanka had expelled British High Commissioner David Gladstone for overstepping his brief.

Playing a vigilante role, Gladstone had entered a polling station at Dikwella and publicly complained about the malpractices taking place there.

In his Dudley Senanayake Memorial Lecture here Monday, Chilcott said: 'Let me be clear, I am not saying that the political aspiration for Eelam is illegitimate, any more than I would argue that the Scottish National Party's goal for an independent Scotland is illegitimate.'

'Similarly, I see nothing illegitimate in some crackpot demanding that Yorkshire or some other English county should become an independent state.'

'What is crucial is what methods are used by the SNP or the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) to achieve their goals. And the LTTE's methods are simply unacceptable.'

Chilcott also said that the Sri Lankan government should stop branding all support for human rights and a peaceful solution to the ethnic conflict in the island as 'unpatriotic'.

He demanded that the government stop demonising international organizations like the Unicef. He went on to say that in Sri Lanka, ministerial posts were being created not to do better work but to secure political support.

This touched off a storm in parliament. 'Chilcott still thinks that Sri Lanka is a colony of Britain,' said Fernandopulle.

Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona summoned the envoy and told him that his remark on the legitimacy of the Eelam demand was 'unacceptable' to the Sri Lankan government, given the British government's categorical rejection of a separate state in Sri Lanka.

Kohona further said that it was 'disappointing' that the high commissioner should make the kind of remark he did when the country was passing through a 'politically sensitive' time, alluding to the possibility of the government being defeated in the vote on the national budget and a snap poll being held.

Kohona said the remark legitimising Eelam would send 'confusing signals' and have a 'negative impact' on moves to find a negotiated settlement of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka.

However, despite the chiding, the British high commission Friday issued a press release in its capacity as the local representative of the European Union, condemning the abduction of some relations of opposition MPs, ahead of the critical vote on the annual budget in parliament.

The EU release said it was 'deeply concerned' about the abductions and urged those who had any influence over the kidnappers to work towards their release unharmed.

It is alleged that some people closely connected with MPs belonging to the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance from eastern Sri Lanka were kidnapped by the pro-government Pillaiyan group with the intention of forcing the MPs to vote in favour of the budget and save the government.

Kohona told Chilcott that preliminary investigations had found that the allegations against the Pillaiyan group were baseless.

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