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HELP US STOP TERRORISM, SRI LANKA APPEALS TO FOREIGN GOVTS

By: Azman Ujang

COLOMBO, April 1 (Bernama) -- Sri Lanka has appealed to foreign governments to help stop acts of terrorism in the country which it says are funded by money sent by Tamil expatriates in many countries.

Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar said there were large numbers of Tamil expatriates in North America, Europe, Scandinavia and Australia who run "front organisations" for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the military organisation which has been waging a war for a separate homeland for the minority Tamil population since the 1980's.

"It is well known that they are sending very large amounts of money to the LTTE. Some of the money goes to their families in Sri Lanka but we know that the families are compelled to pay something to the LTTE while some of the money is directly collected for the LTTE," he told Bernama in an exclusive interview at his heavily-guarded residence here recently.

The tight security cordon at the minister's house in the outskirts of the city -- complete with sandbagged bunkers and sentry towers -- comes as the nation still smarts from the Jan 31 bombing of the Central Bank building here where some 80 people were killed and more than 1,000 others seriously injured.

Sri Lanka is facing an apparent escalation in terrorist activities lately, especially in the urban areas, including in this capital city.

Kadirgamar, himself a Tamil and one of the country's most prominent lawyers before joining the Cabinet in 1994, said LTTE's front organisations in some countries were now even using the Internet -- the global information network -- to make open appeals for funds to buy missiles.

"We saw some advertisements of that kind recently and also for money to be sent for rehabilitation of victims of the fighting in the north-east of the country. If the money is to be sent for rehabilitation, then it should be sent to the International Committee for the Red Cross and not to the LTTE... this is a device for sending money to the LTTE," he said.

He also said funds were being collected for the LTTE in Malaysia but the Sri Lankan government "deeply appreciated" efforts by the Malaysian government to check the problem.

"The Malaysian government took a very decisive and courageous step which we deeply appreciate by not allowing pro-LTTE demonstrations in Malaysia," he said, referring to a recent statement by Deputy Home Minister Datuk Megat Junid Megat Ayob that action would be taken against those responsible for such demonstrations which were outlawed in Malaysia.

Kadirgamar said Sri Lankan President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga recently sent a letter thanking Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for Malaysia's stand.

He sent a similar letter to his Malaysian counterpart Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Sri Lanka Foreign Ministry officials said Malaysia is the only country after India which has openly outlawed LTTE activities.

Kadirgamar also spoke about the government's peace package -- now before Parliament which includes far-reaching constitutional amendments -- to end the bloody ethnic conflict which has claimed an estimated 50,000 lives.

The peace package, popularly dubbed in Sri Lanka as "devolution" or sharing of power with the Tamil minority in the war-torn regions, centres on the creation of several autonomous regions with exclusive legislative

and executive powers, including over land and police matters.

The peace offer, made by President Kumaratunga when she came to power in 1994, has been described as the first genuine and sincere attempt by the Sri Lankan government to bring about a negotiated settlement of the conflict.

The president had often said that it could not be resolved by military means alone.

Kadirgamar said Colombo was trying to resolve the conflict on the political and military fronts but with the LTTE spurning all efforts so far, Sri Lanka was no nearer to achieving peace.

But, ethnic conflicts were very complex in nature and could not be solved in a few years, he added, citing as examples the situation in Northern Ireland ("which has gone on for 40 to 50 years") and in the Middle East.

He said there were now signs of a military defeat of the LTTE with government forces recently recapturing the city of Jaffna in the north and daily operations being intensified in the north and east.

"The LTTE claims that they represent the Tamil people, but they do so only with guns... they have never been tested by way of a vote there," he added.

Kadirgamar also said that in resolving the ethnic conflict, Sri Lanka had much to learn from Malaysia, a model for Sri Lanka.

Explaining his "Look Malaysia" policy, he said Malaysia and Sri Lanka shared many similarities like population, geography and climate, apart from their warm ties for long decades.

He added: "Sri Lankans are very proud of Malaysia's economic achievements. Malaysia is a developing country which in 1960's was even behind Sri Lanka but look at how far you have gone now.

"We feel that the Malaysian experience is something very relevant to us because of these similarities. Malaysia also used to have racial problems in the 1960's and see how well you have solved the problem and Malaysia has got over that now."

Kadirgamar, who has met Dr Mahathir several times both in Kuala Lumpur and overseas, also admitted to being a great admirer of the Malaysian Prime Minister, whom he described as a "very decisive and interesting" leader. --
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