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## **OPEN LETTER FROM BENITA FERRERO-WALDNER**

I was dismayed to see several articles in the Sri Lankan press criticizing the European Commission and in particular personal attacks against the Commission's former Head of Delegation in Colombo, Ambassador Julian Wilson. These articles have revealed some fundamental misunderstandings about the relations between Sri Lanka and the European Union (EU) and European Commission and I feel the need to put the record straight.

Let us look at the facts. We have long been a partner of Sri Lanka with our cooperation dating back to 1975 when external trade and development cooperation of the then nine-country European Economic Community (EC) was in its early days. Now the EU has 27 Member States, a population of close to 500 million people, and is a political community of values based on peace and freedom, democracy and the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities. It is the world's largest economic zone, it also spends around 10 billion Euros a year in development assistance projects in all five continents, and has extensive relations with countries throughout the world, based firmly on partnership. With Sri Lanka, we have a "Co-operation and Partnership Agreement" from 1995 signed by the Government of Sri Lanka and the European Community. The first article states that "cooperation ties between the Community and Sri Lanka and this Agreement in its entirety are based on respect for democratic principles and human rights which inspire the domestic and external policies of both the Community and Sri Lanka".

The EU has been accused of having an anti-Sri Lanka agenda. This is nonsense. If the EU has an agenda for Sri Lanka, which is shared by the Co-Chairs of the Sri Lanka peace process, it is that it wishes to see the country reach a peaceful settlement which benefits all the people of Sri Lanka and sets the basis for peaceful and prosperous development for its people. It is in that spirit that we have on several occasions sincerely urged all parties to put an end to violence and to return to the negotiation table, and urged the finalisation of a politically sustainable devolution plan. We are not trying to impose anything on Sri Lanka, not least because we believe for a peaceful settlement to work it has to be home-grown and owned by all Sri Lankans.

The European Commission is not a supporter of the LTTE and condemns all forms of terrorism. In 2006, as is well known in Sri Lanka, the European Union listed the LTTE as a terrorist organisation. The decision was based on the actions of that organisation, and came after several warnings to the LTTE which were systematically ignored. It was also made clear that the decision was directed against the LTTE but not against the Tamil people. Since then, there have been a number of criminal prosecutions in EU member states against LTTE fund raising in Europe. I would thus ask those who seek to accuse any officials of the European Commission of sympathy with the LTTE or any other terrorist organisation to think carefully

before making any allegations in future. Such unfounded allegations are not acceptable. They are an insult not only to those named but to all Commission staff, men and women who have chosen to work to spread the values which have created today's European Union. Julian Wilson is one of those people. If we are vocal, as he was, in expressing our concern at the situation in the country and about human rights and humanitarian issues, it is because these values have always been at the heart of the European Union and indeed our partnership with Sri Lanka. Since 2004, the Commission has provided over € 150 million (over 20 billion LKR) of humanitarian and reconstruction assistance. We provided support after the Tsunami, which came not only from the EU and its member countries, but also from thousands of ordinary European citizens who sympathised with the plight of those affected by the Tsunami. The primary focus of the Commission's humanitarian assistance is to help innocent civilians according to need. We are concerned about the situation today in Sri Lanka. This led my colleague Commissioner Louis Michel, in charge of humanitarian aid, to issue a statement on 15 September expressing concern and calling on all sides to fully respect international humanitarian law.

Let me turn to the subject of GSP+ (the special incentive arrangement for sustainable development and good governance, known as "GSP+" which provides additional benefits for countries implementing certain international standards in human and labour rights, environmental protection, and good governance) on which there has been much speculation in Sri Lanka recently. We do not want Sri Lanka to lose GSP+, which has achieved its objectives in Sri Lanka and now benefits the country massively, with expanded trade with the EU and thousands of jobs. This is exactly why it was created. Which other partners offer Sri Lanka such generous market access? GSP+ is based on clear criteria set out in an EU law, developed to meet the legal requirements foreseen by the WTO. Beneficiary countries made a commitment to respect the principal requirement which is the ratification, incorporation and effective implementation of 27 international conventions specified in the GSP Regulation. If a country which benefits from GSP+ does not ensure compliance with these UN Conventions, it is perfectly normal that the eligibility be called into question. But with Sri Lanka, unfortunately, we have seen many reports and statements from United Nations sources as well as other publicly available information which we cannot ignore. I sincerely hope that Sri Lanka can maintain this important market access preference.

In conclusion, we already have a long relationship behind us and I hope a long and fruitful one ahead. Part of any long-term relationship is the need to be frank and open and I believe it is only through such dialogue that we can move forward. I hope my comments will be taken as they are offered; in the spirit of partnership and friendship with Sri Lanka.

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