

Editorial

Go tell that to the Marines!

Once upon a time, there lived a village bum who had the bad habit of feasting on stolen toddy. One day, having clambered up a *kitul* palm at dawn, he was about to taste the pot that cheers, when he was challenged by the owner cum tapper who demanded to know what he was doing up there. Caught *in flagrante delicto* as he was, our bum started climbing down calmly with the cool reply: "I was looking for some grass." "Where on earth does grass grow on *kitul* palms?" roared the other menacingly. Pat came the quip: "You are right; there was no grass up there. That's why I am coming down!" Moral of the story: Excuses are never in short supply.

What should we do with such cunning bums? Should they be pilloried like in the olden days or thrown behind bars? No! They, we reckon, shouldn't be punished at all. Instead, they must be rewarded with diplomatic postings so that they could 'lie' abroad for the sake of their country.

High Commissioner (HC) for Canada in Colombo Angela J. Bogdan has, in a letter to us (published on the opposite page today), faulted us for our editorial on Monday, titled, '*A slap that needs to be returned very diplomatically*', where we commented on Environment Minister Champika Ranawaka's failure to attend the Meeting of the State Parties to the Montreal Protocol in Canada to receive an award for Sri Lanka's contribution towards the protection of the ozone layer, as he hadn't got the Canadian visa.

The HC tries to dispute our position that the minister couldn't attend the meeting as his visa had been 'blocked'. The reason given by the HC for the delay in the issuance of visa to the minister is that he had 'submitted his application with less than two working days for the visa process, despite having known about the conference for some time'. The HC insists that visa was 'issued at short notice but the Minister chose not to proceed to Canada' and 'regrets his decision not to travel to Canada as he had been issued a valid visa for this trip'.

At the very outset, let it be made very clear that we hold no brief for the JHU or any other political party, lest our intention should be misconstrued. We only used Minister Ranawaka's humiliating experience as a peg to hang our discussion on a wider issue, to wit, a sinister move to isolate Sri Lanka internationally in support of the separatists who have got into a politico-military mire of their own making.

Hiding behind a smokescreen of bureaucratic procedure, the HC has resorted to obfuscation to pull the wool over the eyes of the reading public. Let her argument be countered point by point.

The HC is trying to pass the blame on to Minister Ranawaka, when she says he didn't send in his application in time and chose not to travel to Canada despite a visa issued at short notice. The Minister, we reliably learn, submitted his application on Sept. 11 after his return from Japan on Sept. 10, as his passport had been on him during his stay abroad. The HC may be right in insisting that at least ten days should be given for processing the visa. But, Minister Ranawaka was to go to Canada on the invitation of his Canadian counterpart to attend an important meeting to discuss an issue threatening the future of humankind—destruction man has been wreaking on environment. He was carrying a diplomatic passport and there was no question of his overstaying visa. The High Commission had time from Sept. 11 to 14 to process his visa, contrary to the HC's claim that there were only two days left for that purpose. Even Foreign Secretary Dr. Palitha Kohona evinced a keen interest in the matter as Sri Lanka had to be represented at that key meeting by a minister.

The visa was not ready even by 5.00 p.m. on Friday (14) and Minister Ranawaka, out of frustration, finally decided to ask for his passport. A Canadian official, who was stuck in a traffic jam somewhere in Colombo at that time, had to come grumbling all the way to the High Commission to return the passport sans visa to a ministerial aide.

The Minister had no way of travelling to Canada without a visa the following morning. His flight was at 6.00 a.m. on Sept. 15. Around 10.30 a.m. that day the Minister's Private Secretary Daya Perera got a call from a Canadian official who used a mobile phone (0777-670—the last three digits withheld) to inform him that the minister's visa was ready. When Mr. Perera politely told him that the Minister had had to cancel the trip because of the delay in the issuance of visa, the High Commission functionary had the audacity to tell him the Minister would be able to attend the second part of the meeting, if he left at once. Mr. Perera reminded him courteously that his Minister's travel plan was not to be determined by the Canadian High Commission.

Now we have a few questions for the HC. How can any earthly being who is told his visa is ready at 10.00 a.m. collect it and travel at 6.00 a.m. on the same day? Minister Ranawaka may be capable of many feats, as he claims, but not time travel, as far as we are aware!

Had Minister Ranawaka been able to stop on or drift along the Time-Dimension back and forth, as H. G. Wells argues, he could have got up around 4.00 a.m. on Saturday travelled into future, collected the Canadian visa at 10.00 a. m., returned to 'the present' to make a beeline to the airport and catch the 6.00 O'clock flight!

We know we have strayed into a subject that is mind-boggling but that we believe is much more comprehensible than the obfuscating diplomatic sophistry replete with *non sequitur*.

The HC says the visa delay occurred as there hadn't been adequate time for processing it. If so, how could the High Commission issue it within two hours later on, as the HC claims? Mind you his visa was issued without a passport! Curiouser and Curiouser! Why had the High Commission waited until the Minister's flight left to issue visa or to inform his secretary that it was ready? Why couldn't it have been done earlier? What happened between 5.30 p. m. on Friday and 10.00 a.m. on Saturday for the High Commission to change its stand and issue the visa? If we erred in saying that the Minister's visa had been 'blocked', how would the HC explain why it had not been issued between Sept. 11 and 14?

The HC says, "Both Canada and Sri Lanka continue to celebrate our deep connections and history of good relations." If the ties between the two countries are so strong, the question is why a Sri Lankan minister who sought to travel to Canada on the invitation of the Canadian government could not be considered a special case and issued with visa within four days?

Minister Ranawaka, the HC needs to be told, applied for his US visa as well on Sept. 11 and got it on that day itself within six hours! Does this mean the Sri Lanka-Canada relations are not as strong and cordial as those between Sri Lanka and the US? A friend in need, they say, is a friend indeed!

The HC says we have made some 'unfounded accusations against *Sri Lankans* who work for diplomatic missions'. (Emphasis added) We say: "Imagination that is your creation!" We made no specific reference to Sri Lankans. We only said there were moles of separatists in diplomatic missions. Those moles don't necessarily have to be Sri Lankans! We hope the HC can see the point we are making.

As for the flawed argument in the HC's letter, we humbly request her with due respect to go tell that to the Marines.

The following letter was sent by High Commissioner for Canada in Colombo Angela J. Bogdan to The Island.

Minister Champika Ranawaka's Canadian visa: Canadian HC faults The Island editor

I am writing to clarify certain facts regarding an editorial appearing respectively in your paper on September 24, 2007 concerning the alleged blocking of a visa for the Minister of the Environment.

Your paper states that the Minister cancelled his trip to Canada to participate in the 19th Meeting of the States Parties to the Montreal Protocol as Canadian authorities "blocked" the Minister's visa application. This is not correct.

The Minister submitted his application with less than two working days for the visa process, despite having known about the conference for some time. When the visa was issued at short notice, the Minister chose not to proceed to Canada, although he might well have done so. The High Commission very much regrets the Minister's decision not to travel to Canada as he had been issued a valid visa for this trip.

In short, offence to the Minister was never at issue and Canadian officials made significant efforts to address the matter satisfactorily on short notice. The Canadian Government requires a minimum processing time of 10 days for such requests, as does the Sri Lankan Government for Canadian officials travelling to Sri Lanka.

I would further add that language and comments such as that contained in your editorial making unfounded accusations against Sri Lankans who work for diplomatic missions are not helpful and undervalue the important work that these individuals perform in the service of furthering Sri Lanka's relation with key partners such as Canada. Further, the insinuation that the incident was a part of a larger plan to isolate Sri Lanka internationally is totally groundless and an offence to the long standing friendship that has characterised Canada-Sri Lankan relations.

The Sri Lanka National Ozone Unit (SLNOU) received an Implementer's Award from the United Nations Environment Programme on September 17 in recognition of the good work SLNOU has done in the implementation of the Montreal Protocol.

Both Canada and Sri Lanka continue to celebrate our deep connections and history of good relations. Canada looks forward to continued cooperation with Sri Lanka and advancing our respective human rights and humanitarian obligations in both bilateral and multilateral fora, especially at the Human Rights Council.

Angela J. Bogdan,
High Commissioner for Canada.