

## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **PM NOT TO ATTEND CHOGM MEETING IN SRI LANKA**

The Prime Minister, Dr Navinchandra Ramgoolam, will not attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) to be held in Sri Lanka from 15 to 17 November 2013.

The Prime Minister made this statement this morning, in the National Assembly, following a Private Notice Question put by the leader of the Opposition, Mr. Paul Bérenger.

The Prime minister said that he was closely monitoring the evolution of the human rights situation in Sri Lanka and expressed his grave concerns about human rights violation in the country. In his own deliberate judgment, he had decided not to attend the Summit.

Mauritius will be represented at the Summit by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Regional Integration and International Trade, Dr. Arvind Boolell.

**November 12, 2013**

**Office of the Director of Communication**

**Prime Minister's Office**

*Follow the question of the Leader of Opposition and the answer of the Prime Minister:*

**Private Notice Question**

*To ask Dr the Honourable Prime Minister, Minister of Defence, Home Affairs and External Communications, Minister for Rodrigues -*

**Whether, in regard to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting to be held in Sri Lanka, from 15 to 17 November and the human rights issue thereat, he will state if –**

- (a) he has had discussions with Dr the Honourable Minister of Foreign Affairs, Regional Integration and International Trade following his participation in the recent annual Commonwealth Foreign Ministers' Meeting and his meeting with the Foreign Affairs Minister of Sri Lanka;**
- (b) he will attend the said Meeting following the recent developments in regard thereto, in particular the decision of the Prime Minister of the Republic of India not to attend thereto; and**
- (c) the President of Sri Lanka will be invited to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting to be held in Mauritius in 2015?**

REPLY

Mr Speaker, Sir,

I wish to thank the hon. Leader of the Opposition for asking the question because I intended to make a statement in the House in the afternoon regarding the situation in Sri Lanka

and my participation in the 2013 CHOGM Summit. Therefore, there will be no need for a statement, I can say what I have to say.

Mr Speaker, Sir, Mauritius has never been and will never be indifferent to the Human Rights violation anywhere in the world including Sri Lanka.

The House will recall my unwavering commitment to uphold the values of Human Rights and my consistent condemnation of human rights abuses in several countries, in several forums. I could give a list; on Palestine and Syria recently; on Iran. As a matter of fact, I have never missed a single opportunity in international fora to talk about human rights violation. Mauritius has rightly been acclaimed for our human rights credentials. At a Special session of the human rights in May 2009, Mauritius was one of the 17 countries which attempted to get the 11<sup>th</sup> Session of the Human Rights Council to investigate war crimes in Sri Lanka.

At the last meeting of the United Nations General Assembly, as I said, I talked about Egypt, Syria and Palestine and also the issue of the dismemberment of part of our territory, the Chagos Archipelago prior to independence by the then colonial power, the United Kingdom, in clear breach of international law and yet they are not engaging in the process that could lead to a settlement to this shameful past of its colonial history.

Mauritius, Mr Speaker, Sir, as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, places social harmony as one of its highest priorities, and to this end, the Government of Mauritius is committed to upholding the highest standards in the respect for fundamental human rights. Therefore, Mauritius has a principled position on the issue of human rights, according to which, Mauritius cannot condone human rights violations taking place anywhere in the world. However, we have examined the situation on a case to case basis. It is the feeling that instead of taking confrontational stands and naming-and-shaming approaches, Mauritius always calls for a

meaningful engagement with the country concerned through a process of genuine political dialogue and confidence-building. Mauritius, I must say, Mr Speaker, Sir - and I condemn it and I have made it a point of saying it to whoever, big country or small country - we are against double standards on human rights, so characteristic of certain countries. I remember the recent case – the Summit European Union in Africa – where the issue of Zimbabwe was being debated; lots of comments. My stand was yes, if there has been abuse, certainly, but what about Pinochet? Jack Straw was representing the Prime Minister. He was Home Secretary. I said: “What about Pinochet? Why the double standard? Why Pinochet was not arrested in the U.K. Why did you allow him to go?” His answer was: “Well, he was not well, Prime Minister.” I said: “Well, then, Mr Home Secretary, it seems you do not know what is happening because if you have looked at the News on television you would have seen that Pinochet when he reached Chilli, he got out of his wheelchair and went and kissed everyone. Double standards! And we condemn these double standards. Chagos, it is the same thing.

Mr Speaker, Sir,

In regard to part (a) of the Question, as Prime Minister, I have regular consultations with my Minister of Foreign Affairs on a number of international issues, one of which is precisely the human rights situation in Sri Lanka.

I am informed by Minister Arvin Boolell that he met a number of Ministers during the Commonwealth Foreign Ministers’ Meeting held in the margins of the 68<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations General Assembly last September, including the Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka, Mr G. L Peiris. He also met Minister Peiris during the IOR-ARC Meeting in Perth earlier this month and impressed upon him – and I made it a point that he must impress upon him - the need for Sri Lanka to address the concerns raised by the Human Rights High Commissioner Ms Navi Pillay and emphasised the need and urgency to set up – I thought that was one solution - a Truth and Reconciliation Commission with a view to submitting recommendations.

Mr Speaker, Sir

In regard to part (b) of the Question, let me remind the House that Mauritius is a Sovereign Democratic State and its foreign policy is not guided or dictated by any other interests than our national interests and having regard to its international commitments and '*appurtenance*' to regional and international organisations. Irrespective of the stand taken by any Government, the decision to participate or not in any international event rests solely with the Government of Mauritius.

Mr Speaker, Sir,

At each Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), the Heads of Government choose the venues for the next two CHOGMs. That is the tradition. Thus at the CHOGM held in Kampala, Uganda in 2007, the decision was then taken that the two next CHOGMs would be the one in 2009 to be held in Trinidad and Tobago and the one in 2011 to be held in Sri Lanka. I must say and point out that at the time the civil war and all these things were going on. It was not as if it has just started. However, at the CHOGM held in Trinidad and Tobago – I think I mentioned this to hon. Members, they well know it - in November 2009, the decision for CHOGM 2011 came back on the table. It was meant to be Sri Lanka. The question was whether it should be held in Sri Lanka or not. This was questioned by many members. This led to an impasse as to the venue of CHOGM 2011. It led to an impasse because Sri Lanka, which I indicated, was willing to withdraw. There, he changed his position, he said he never said it would withdraw. I would not want to go into the detail, it was an informal meeting, as Members know, and perhaps it would not be right for me to go into the details. But there were lots of people who were upset including the Commonwealth Secretary General, the British Prime Minister, the Prime Minister of Australia, but he would not budge. I intervened with other Commonwealth leaders and then I went and spoke to the Head of the Sri Lankan delegation

diplomatically. But I managed to persuade him to ring the President – he was not there - and tell him what I am saying and it would be in the best interest of everybody for Sri Lanka to withdraw from the 2011 Summit. Eventually, a deal was brokered whereby Australia would host the CHOGM of 2011, followed by Sri Lanka in 2013. It is then that I said Mauritius has intervened, Mauritius has found a solution to the impasse. Now, Mauritius cannot just not be considered for a CHOGM Summit and the idea was that then we should also choose three destinations instead of two as usually is the convention and that is why Mauritius was placed on the 2015 list with the possibility that things might go wrong in 2013 and that we might have to fall back on the position of Mauritius. That was done informally. I would rather not go into the detail. Therefore, the decision was taken to give Sri Lanka additional time to implement its national reconciliation policies and to comply with international human rights obligations.

Mr Speaker, Sir,

In fact - debates in many countries, not just here in Mauritius - what is the best strategy to bring pressure to bear on the Sri Lankan Government with regard to its obligation to investigate and remedy alleged war crimes and human rights abuses to the prejudice to a section of its population?

Some have called for a total boycott as the most effective means of bringing about change in Sri Lanka. Others say no, we should engage and try to bring about the change from this engagement. I think engagement up to a certain point to meet the Sri Lankan leaders and NGOs, have frank discussions with them together with leaders of other nations who will be attending the Summit, and bring home in a forceful manner what they must do to implement the expectations of the international community and better the lives of the Sri Lankan citizens, especially those of the thousands of tamils of that country.

Mr Speaker, Sir

Regarding part (c) of the Question, I think it is premature and speculative at this stage to decide who will be invited to attend CHOGM 2015. At any rate, invitations to attend CHOGM Meetings are issued not by the host country, but by the Commonwealth Secretariat after consultation with the host country.

Mr Speaker, Sir,

I mentioned that there were two questions asked by hon. Nagalingum on the issue and I said that I met the Commonwealth Secretary General on purpose because I wanted to know what is the progress that is being achieved. Can we justify? And we had this meeting with Mr Kamlesh Sharma in June this year, I made it clear that we intend to monitor the evolution of the human rights situation in Sri Lanka and then take the appropriate action if we think we should take. He made it clear to me that things are being done, that I made one of the conditions that he must hold the local elections in the North that has been withheld since the civil war because there is a tamil majority there. If there are no elections, there is no question of participating in that Summit. In no uncertain terms I expressed my grave concerns about human rights violations in Sri Lanka.

The Commonwealth Secretary General told me that they are putting pressure for them to have the elections in the North of Sri Lanka. I answered the question to hon. Nagalingum. I said this is the situation. We are going to wait. We will participate provided things get done. I must say, Mr Speaker, Sir, with the principled stand that I have taken, that is why I wanted to make a statement to the House this afternoon. My information that I have tried to get from different quarters is that the Sri Lankan Government is not doing enough. That is the indication that I got. For example, I hear that after the tamils won in the North of Sri Lanka in spite of the fact that

then – I must say from what I hear, I cannot say that I have been there and I have seen - lot of money was spent by the Government the tamils won the majority in the North.

Now, I have indications – I cannot say I know for sure because I am not there; I have asked Minister Boolell to try to find out – that the Government is trying to reverse that process of devolution by different means, by putting up a second House or whatever and that is the indication that I get.

In other words, he wants to reverse what they have achieved. There are people who have disappeared in Sri Lanka - still we see on the News. There is not much being done to find out what has happened to them. I have been reading a lot about this. People who say they go to Sri Lanka to try to have a look. They will get free access. Everything will be free. But they report back that there has been pressure on people who meet them; people who meet them then they are being called by people who asked them what they did say, what they did not say and all these things. This is not what democracy is about. As I said, there is also the international independent report. It has said they must do so many things. From what I see, from the information that I get, not much has been done. There is the report of the United Nations Human Rights Commissioner. Very specific things are said in that report. My impression is not much is being done.

I must say, Mr Speaker, Sir, Commonwealth is very important to us. Mr Sharma, the Commonwealth Secretary General, had told me: “if Mauritius wants to host the Summit, you have to be present.” There is a *passation* of the whole system, that it would be unprecedented. I said I would watch very carefully and I would take a final decision.

I wish, Mr Speaker, Sir, with a grave heart, but in no uncertain terms, to again express my grave concerns about human rights violation in Sri Lanka, and I have thought carefully, that is

why I wanted to make a statement, that in spite of the fact that we are meant to be there for CHOGM 2015, I have decided in my own deliberate judgment, no pressure from anywhere, that I cannot with the principle that I have taken all this time I am in politics attend the Summit.

*(Interruptions)*