

GOTABAYA THANKS INDIA FOR ASSISTANCE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Sri Lanka

Helping hand:S. Jaishankar at a fuel station run by the Indian Oil Corporation subsidiary Lanka IOC.Special Arrangement

Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa on Monday thanked visiting External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar for India's "invaluable assistance" to the island nation, which is grappling with one of its worst economic crises.

Since January, India has extended \$2.4 billion in assistance by way of a currency swap, loan deferment and credit lines for essential imports to help Sri Lanka cope with a stifling dollar crisis and shortages.

Following Mr. Jaishankar's meetings with President Gotabaya, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa and Finance Minister Basil Rajapaksa on Monday, *Reuters*, citing "two sources" in Colombo, reported that Sri Lanka had sought a further \$1 billion line of credit.

However, when *The Hindu* sought confirmation of the development, a top Sri Lankan official — familiar with the ongoing negotiations — denied that Colombo has made such a request. The countries had earlier agreed to be in close touch on broader cooperation going forward, the official said.

"Met with Indian Foreign Minister @DrSJaishankar today, and I expressed my gratitude to the Government of #India for the invaluable assistance provided recently via the line of credit, on behalf of the people of #lka," President Gotabaya said in a tweet.

In his tweet on the meeting, Mr. Jaishankar said he "assured" the President "of India's continued cooperation and understanding".

Mr. Jaishankar, who is in Colombo for the BIMSTEC summit that Sri Lanka is hosting this year, held a series of bilateral meetings, ahead of his engagement at the regional forum.

Jaffna Cultural Centre

Along with Prime Minister Mahinda, he launched the Indian-built Jaffna Cultural Centre virtually. Built with an Indian grant of \$11 million, the building with 11 floors and facilities including a 600-capacity auditorium, a conference hall, an amphitheatre and a digital library was completed in early 2020 to serve as a public space for sharing art and culture in the war-affected area and was awaiting inauguration for two years.

Tamil specific concerns

Mr. Jaishankar met several other members in the government and the Opposition including delegations of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), representing Tamils in the north and east, led by its leader R. Sampanthan, and the Tamil Progressive Alliance (TNA), a group of legislators representing the *Malaiyaha* Tamils led by Mano Ganesan.

TNA spokesman M.A. Sumanthiran said: "The Indian External Affairs Minister encouraged us to continue engaging with the President, as we recently did in a meeting, and ensure that the government's promises on addressing Tamils' specific concerns are implemented."

On the TPA's discussions, Mr. Mano Ganesan said he laid out their recent proposal for a "Non-Territorial Community Council" for hill country Tamils, to represent the interests and aspirations of the community that is geographically scattered across the island.

Mr. Jaishankar, in his tweets on the meetings, said he discussed the "realisation of the aspirations of the Tamils of Sri Lanka for equality, justice, peace and dignity," with the TNA, and "socio-economic issues of the [*Malaiyaha* Tamil] Indian origin Tamil community" with the TPA, reiterating India's commitment to development partnership with the community.

Earlier, Mr. Jaishankar visited a fuel station run by the Indian Oil Corporation subsidiary Lanka IOC to view the situation of supply in Sri Lanka amid frequent shortages. "Indian LoC of \$500 million is helping Sri Lankan people in their everyday life," he said, referring to the credit line extended in February for emergency fuel imports.

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