

VOT imbroglio

It is quite unusual for a government, which bombards editorials with denials within hours of the publication of a news item, which it deems to be detrimental to its interests to take so long to issue a 'clarification' as regards the VOT controversy. Its 'clarification,' instead of allaying the serious doubts in the public mind has compounded them and got it deeper into the mire it finds itself in.

The thrust of the government's argument is that it did not want to waive taxes on the radio equipment as requested by the LTTE and therefore sought Norway's help to act as the consignee. The equipment, the government stresses, did not come as DPL cargo and claims that the LTTE had obtained a license for its radio station.

Confusion worst confounded! If it was not DPL cargo, how could it be exempted from duty?

The LTTE according to the government wrote to Minister of Mass Communication seeking a license for the radio station on October 18 and by that time the cargo had arrived in Colombo (on October 17). How can anyone import equipment without first obtaining a license for the project for which it is intended? The government must explain this serious discrepancy.

The government also says the LTTE purchased the equipment in Singapore and shipped it to Colombo. Then Ambassador Jon Westborg has blundered by being the consignee of a cargo purchased and shipped by a terror outfit. For the diplomatic privilege of duty exemption applies only to articles for the official use of the mission or the personal use of a diplomatic agent or members of his family forming part of his household or articles intended for his establishment.

The radio equipment does not come under any of these categories. Those who authorised the duty waiver must also be questioned why it was done. A thorough investigation is called for immediately.

Mr. Westborg has obviously acted in a manner that has seriously dented his credentials both as a diplomat and facilitator. This is a very serious matter on which the President has to order an immediate probe with Mr. Westborg being questioned.

That the government involved Mr. Westborg to overcome the problem of duty free concession is difficult to believe given the concessions it has already given the LTTE. For example it gave the LTTE parity of status at the recent Oslo meeting despite widespread protests. It has used VIP helicopters to transport LTTE leaders. Balasingham was allowed a seaplane ride into the Wannu immediately after the MoU was signed. Several weeks ago it got two LTTE cadres who had been caught with their weapons in a government controlled area

released on bail in compliance with a demand of the LTTE, which abducted six soldiers in retaliation. Most of the present day UNP leaders were members of the Premadasa government that even gave the LTTE arms, ammunition, money, shelter, and cement for bunkers in 1988/98. President Kumaratunga, too, by her own admission has offered the north to the LTTE for the latter's rule for ten years though the offer was turned down. Therefore, why a duty waiver, which would have amounted to only a few thousand US dollars worried the government so much is the question.

The supreme irony of the VOT mire is that the government has got into it by trying to waive taxes on cargo of an outfit, which is extorting money from civilians by way of 'taxes.' It was reported in the Divaina last week that even a relic casket taken by a Buddhist monk for exposition in Jaffna was taxed (Rs. 1,900) by the LTTE. Ven. Kadawatha Vijitha has told the Sunday Divaina (Dec. 22) that on previous occasions too the LTTE had imposed 'taxes' at Omanthai even on saffron robes taken to Naga Vihara. Now that the government has given the LTTE a duty exemption, we hope that it will also ask the LTTE to reciprocate by exempting the civilians from its 'taxes.'

As for the Satellite equipment imported by the LTTE duty free, the excuse of the government is that approval has also been granted to several others (engaged in lawful business for the same facility.) If one were to go by this kind skewed logic, then an underworld figure has a right to brandish a knife as knives are also used by civilians - in their kitchens!

Citing reasons for the need for a radio station, the LTTE has said in its letter to the Minister of Mass Communication that in certain parts of the North Eastern province, broadcasting reception is virtually non-existent. How could this be? We have been told that Edmund Hillary heard Radio Ceylon from the Mount Everest as early as 1953. If what the LTTE says of Sri Lanka's broadcasting is true, then the SLBC has deteriorated very badly since its Radio Ceylon days. If so, the government before helping the LTTE with FM stations must take prompt action to improve its own radio station so that it will have an islandwide coverage.

In the meantime, the Diyawadane Nilame of the Dalada Maligawa is on the warpath saying that while the government has granted permission for the LTTE to run a radio station, the Maligawa has been denied a license to start a radio station. One may question the wisdom of those who want a separate radio station for the Dalada Maligawa. But as the Diyawadane Nilame has pointed out sauce for the goose must be the sauce for gander as well. Worse, the government has denied the Maligawa that which it has granted to a terror outfit, which tried to destroy the Dalada by bombing it in 1998. The government claiming that the license for the LTTE radio station is essential because of the peace process while denying it to the Maligawa, a wag may ask whether the government considers the peace process holier than Dalada.