

No visas for UN war crimes panel

Colombo also rejects EU trade conditions

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Colombo: Sri Lanka yesterday ruled out giving visas to members of a UN panel looking into possible war crimes and said it would not accept European Union conditions for extending trade concessions.

Sri Lanka for more than a year has defied Western pressure over accountability for potential war crimes and human rights violations in the last stages of its quarter-century war with the separatist Tamil Tigers, which it won in May 2009.

Foreign Minister G.L. Peiris said the government would not issue visas to the UN panel, which the world body says is merely there to advise Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon on methods of accountability, and is not an investigative body. "We will not issue visas to the panel. We don't think we need them," Peiris said.

Ineffectual investigations

Sri Lanka has its own commission looking into the last seven years of the war, and insists that despite a three-decade history of ineffectual local investigations into rights violations, this one will uncover any wrongdoing. Rights groups took advantage of the victory anniversary to renew a push for a war crimes probe, saying there was evidence -- which they did not make public -- that both the government and Tigers were responsible for thousands of civilian deaths.

They hope that the UN panel will provide a roadmap to a full international inquiry. Sri Lanka denies it ever targeted civilians and says the accusations have been maliciously manipulated or fabricated by Tiger supporters.

Peiris also said the cabinet had reviewed the EU's offer to extend access to the Generalised System of Preferences Plus trade scheme, due to be withdrawn on August 15 unless the Indian Ocean nation made a written pledge to certain rights reforms.

"We were not prepared to obtain these concessions at any cost. That's not the attitude of a self-respecting government," Peiris said.

That will cost Sri Lanka about 100 million euros (Dh450 million) annually, with its biggest trade partner for garments and other products.

Among the EU demands were lifting of wartime emergency laws that grant the government wide arrest powers and implementation of a constitutional amendment that would make the police and judiciary independent from presidential influence.

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