

NEWS ROUND UP

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Ruwan W says President's move obstructs SLRC reforms

Non-Cabinet Minister of Mass Media Ruwan Wijewardene yesterday accused President Maithripala Sirisena of repeatedly obstructing his attempts to change the management of Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC), leading to the impasse which resulted in the Corporation being brought under the Defence Ministry's purview.

Media Minister Ruwan Wijewardene

President Maithripala Sirisena

"Since I took over the Ministry of Mass Media in February this year, I tried to appoint an efficient, talented, and suitable person as Chairman of the Corporation, but the President objected to all the nominees, giving various reasons," Wijewardene said in the letter sent to the President.

The President's shock move came on Monday, after months of wrangling over differences over appointments to the top management of the Corporation.

Wijewardene also said that the takeover of SLRC is a blow to media freedom in the country, and has been done in a contravention of all accepted norms.

"Your actions can be construed as a move against media freedom in the country. The step has been taken arbitrarily, with no consultation with the Minister in charge of the subject," Wijewardene said in the letter, hours after the President brought SLRC under the purview of the Defence Ministry.

"Even during the height of the war, SLRC was not placed under the Defence Ministry. The reasons that were given for the sudden move cannot be justified, as in the past four years, no interest was shown by you to use the station to achieve those objectives," the letter said.

The Gazette notification removing SLRC from the Mass Media purview said that the Corporation would be tasked with "implementation of programs for the promotion of peace, harmony, and reconciliation among people, whilst ensuring national security through the use of audio-visual media, enhancement of the entertainment quality of the people, and creation of a higher media culture using state-of-the-art technology."

He said that the current Chairperson of the SLRC has failed to improve the ratings of the station, while the Corporation has suffered massive financial losses running into Rs.40 million a month.

The Minister has sought to remove Inoka Satyangani, who was appointed as Chairman by the former Minister Mass Media Mangala Samaraweera to the post, and who has disregarded calls for her to step down.

The President's office did not comment on the sudden move, and is yet to name anyone to the SLRC management.

On Monday President Sirisena brought the influential SLRC under the purview of the Ministry of Defence by an Extraordinary Gazette notification.

Along with the takeover, the SLRC was also tasked with the "Implementation of programs for the promotion of peace, harmony and reconciliation among people whilst ensuring national security

through the use of audio visual media, enhancement of the entertainment quality of the people and creation of a higher media culture using state-of-the-art technology.”

The sudden takeover of SLRC by President Sirisena who is also the Minister of Defence came amidst moves to appoint Kalum Palitha Maheerathne as SLRC’s new Chairman by Media Non-Cabinet Minister Ruwan Wijewardene.

Sources said the appointment of a Chairman to SLRC has led to differences between the President and the Media Minister.

Taking over Rupavahini done in good faith: SLFP

The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) yesterday defended the decision of President Maithripala Sirisena to bring the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC) under the purview of the Defence Ministry, insisting it was a decision taken on good faith to resolve its leadership issues.

Speaking to media at the SLFP head office, General Secretary Dayasiri Jayasekara said the decisions taken by the Non-Cabinet Mass Media and State Minister of Defence Ruwan Wijewardene to appoint a SLRC Chairman was done without the approval of a special Committee set up at the Presidential Secretariat.

This Committee was tasked with reviewing heads of State institutions, according to Jayasekera.

“The previous SLRC Chairman Inoka Sathyangani was appointed with the approval of the Committee. However, Minister Wijewardene sent a letter requesting to appoint someone else as SLRC Chairman and that name was rejected by the Committee. As a result of that the previous Chairman continued to occupy the position,” Jayasekara said.

Jayasekara noted Wijewardene had appointed a new Chairman without the approval of the Committee set up at the Presidential Secretariat. He claimed that the appointment led to internal conflict at the SLRC.

“Minister Wijewardene appointed Local Government representatives as Board members. That also was a reason for the internal conflict at SLRC. There was an incident when two people claimed the position. Considering all these circumstances, the President decided to bring SLRC under the purview of the Defence Ministry.”

Wijewardene defended his involvement in the SLRC on Twitter, saying the SLRC has been operating at a loss. “Through Treasury, tax payers have been funding SLRC’s salary bill of Rs 40m per month. For months I’ve been trying to change the management but was obstructed by the president. Latest attempt resulted in the President gazetting SLRC under his purview,” he stated in a tweet.

PM kicks off \$ 702 m port access highway

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe yesterday argued that unlike previous governments, many projects had been implemented since 2015, but the Government had not spoken about their accomplishments as much as previous administrations, leading to the public being less aware of the work accomplished.

Prime Minister Wickremesinghe made these remarks at the foundation-laying ceremony of the proposed port access elevated highway, with construction to be done by the China Civil Engineering

company. The contract between CCEC and the Road Development Authority (RDA) was also signed in the presence of the Prime Minister and Chinese Ambassador Chang Xueyuan.

“We as a Government had to overcome a lot of economic struggles, such as debt, and low exports. We have been striving to create an economy with strong export strategies. All these projects are geared towards making Sri Lanka a central hub in the Indian Ocean. People say we have done nothing. This is not true. We are a Government that has done a lot of things but has chosen not to speak incessantly about it, which is what has created the impression that we have done nothing. The complaint we receive is that the work we do is not talked of,” he said.

The Premier further stated that Sri Lanka cannot keep living in an economy that was made for the 19th century, and that it is time for the country to move forward to a new economy.

He detailed the development projects that were undertaken by the Government, such as the new expressway systems, the multi-modal transport hub, and the development of connecting roads.

“We have also proposed new access roads to enter Colombo, which begins work today. This is the elevated highway that stretches from Kelani Bridge to the Port City. We are also planning to develop a Megapolis in the Western Province, which will eventually become a city that will be renowned as the most beautiful city in the Indian Ocean,” he stated.

This proposed project will finance the construction of about 5.3 kilometres of an elevated toll highway, with related facilities, between the New Kelani Bridge (NKB) and Galle Face in central Colombo.

It will provide a direct link to the city centre and the port from the Colombo-Katunayake Expressway via the NKB, and then extend the expressway network into the city. The project will help alleviate traffic congestion in Colombo’s densely populated areas, improve last-mile connectivity between the country’s expressway network and Colombo’s international port, provide better logistics services for freight operations, and facilitate regional trade.

With a total cost of \$ 702.93 million, the project is financed by the Asian Development Bank, The Government of Sri Lanka, and the Japan International Cooperation Agency with \$ 300 million, \$ 60.2 million, and \$ 342.73 million respectively.

Cyber Security Summit 2019 to shed insights into ‘prevention is better than investigation’

The 2019 edition of the Daily FT co-hosted Cyber Security Summit later this month will shed useful insights into ‘prevention is better than investigation’ by a host of international and local experts.

Organised in partnership with CICRA Consultancies, this year the thrust to create awareness on cyber security and mitigation measures will span three days, with four events.

Strategic partners of the 2019 Cyber Security events are Cisco and Visa.

On 23 September, the 3rd Annual National Youth Summit will be held at BMICH which will host students from around the island, where they will be taught to use social media, digital devices and financial tools safely. Most importantly, they will be educated on cyber bullying, its effects and how best to deal with it. A CSR event by CICRA, this massive congregation of students from all around the island – 100 schools have been invited to attend – will see a total of 500 children and will duly make an impact.

The next day, 24September, will see the 7th Annual Cyber Security Summit unfolding in sessions, each dedicated to different areas of cyber security.

This year the Summit will focus on Digital Intelligence for making the world a safer place, the IoT in Financial Services, Digital Forensic Investigations and Social Media Manipulation. Each session will be headed by prolific persons relevant to the field and industry experts from all around the globe that can enhance knowledge and provide insight and shape understanding about cybersecurity and its multiple facets.

The Night Hack will take place on 24September at the Cinnamon Grand Hotel – international experts are set to take the stage and showcase live demonstrations; the main session will be conducted by a Defcon (the world's largest hacker conference) veteran, and two companies from Israel will display their latest digital intelligence technology.

On 25September, the Summit will host a CEO's Forum, where the top brass of organisations and businesses will be edified as to the paramount importance of cybersecurity. This forum will prove why a company's cybersecurity measures must be discussed in the boardroom; why internet safety is necessary, and the dire consequences that would result in a cybersecurity breach. Risk factors that CEOs need to be aware of and take steps to combat will be the forum's focus – all in the ardent hope that no company has to face the catastrophe that ties in with a cyberhack or security breach.

The summit is a perfect platform for Government officials, corporate leaders and individuals to educate themselves as to how they should take on this ever-growing threat and wish to secure the future of their relevant organisations. It will, no doubt, prove invaluable to the future of organisations and individuals alike and will be a secure investment in the future of Sri Lanka.

Govt. reduces fuel prices

The Government has decided to reduce the price of fuel by Rs. 2, the Finance Ministry said yesterday.

Petrol (Octane 92) per litre will be decreased by Re. 1, the revised price will be Rs. 137; Petrol (Octane 95) will be sold at Rs. 161, decreased by Rs. 2 per litre. One litre of Super Diesel will be lowered by Rs. 2 and the new price will be Rs. 132.

There was no price revision on Auto Diesel which remains at Rs. 104.

However, the price of Lanka Kerosene and Auto Diesel will remain at Rs. 70 and Rs. 104 per litre.

Ravi Wijeratne to buy MTD Walkers

Business magnate Ravi Wijeratne is to take over the troubled MTD Walkers PLC for an undisclosed amount.

In a filing to the Colombo Stock Exchange, MTD Walkers informed that it has received a letter from Wijeratne stating he has agreed with MTD Capital Bhd to purchase the majority shareholding of MTD Walkers. The stake of 90.78% amounts to 152.18 million shares.

Ravi Wijeratne

Wijeratne is the Chairman of Rank Holdings which has diversified interests including Resorts, Hydro and Wind Power Generation, Infrastructure and Real Estate Development, Container Terminals, Waste Management Services, Plantations, Media, Insurance, Consultancy Services and gaming.

Following the acquisition which is expected later this week, Wijeratne will make a mandatory offer as per the SEC's Takeovers and Mergers Code.

Net asset per share of MTD Walkers is Rs. 8 as at 31 March, down from Rs. 27 a year earlier.

The company has faced a serious cash flow crisis due to non-payment of dues linked to Government contracts undertaken. In FY2019, MTD Walkers Revenue was Rs. 10.8 billion, down by 34% from the previous year. Pre-tax loss was Rs. 3.8 billion, marginally above Rs. 3.4 billion in FY18. Finance costs remains a major burden, up 52% to Rs 4.2 billion in FY19. Profit from operations was Rs. 130 million as against a loss of Rs 960 million in the previous year.

MTD Walkers is an engineering specialist engaged in civil, heavy and marine as well as trading, power generation, real estate among others.

It has retained losses of Rs. 2.6 billion as at 31 March. Current liabilities amount to Rs. 6 billion. Recently the company defaulted on debenture interest payment forcing Trustees Bank of Ceylon to seek Attorney General's Department intervention to take remedial action.

Analysts said that Wijeratne who had served on MTD Walkers Board previously may be seeing greater potential with the right capital infusion and management as well as success in securing payment on the part of the Government.

Sri Lanka all set to celebrate World Tourism Day 2019

Sri Lanka Tourism is all set to celebrate World Tourism Day 2019, with a two-day celebration on the UNWTO's theme 'Tourism and Jobs: A Better Future for All'.

Tourism Development Minister John Amaratunga

Recognising the importance of this year's theme, Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA), in association with Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau (SLTPB), Sri Lanka Convention Bureau (SLCB), and Sri Lanka Tourism Hotel and Management Institute (SLITHM), under the purview of the Tourism Development Ministry, has organised a two-day celebration in Colombo and Arugam Bay to draw public attention to the importance of this year's theme to mark the global event.

The inauguration ceremony will be kicked off on 27 September at the Independence Arcade in Colombo followed by an exhibition, a job fair, food street and entertainment. In addition, the Tourism Study Program Department of Economics of the University of Colombo will hold its annual Tourism Leaders' Summit (TLS) and International Tourism Research Conference (ITRC) themed 'A way forward for Sustainable Tourism Development' on 28 September at the BMICH to mark the global event, while an international surfing competition will also be held in Arugam Bay on the same day.

"Sri Lanka has recovered faster than expected post-Easter Sunday terror attacks and thanks to the global Bohra Convention, we have seen the dividends of it meaningfully reinforcing the tourism industry across the board. I believe this year's World Tourism Day theme will help promote an industry that creates

employment, promotes local culture and products, and nurtures sustainable production and consumption,” Tourism Development Minister John Amaratunga told Daily FT.

However, he emphasised that this endeavour required the support of all stakeholders, especially the private sector, where tourism had created opportunities for thousands of Small and Medium Entrepreneurs (SMEs).

Amaratunga said that they were expecting a few UNWTO representatives in Colombo to conduct a Crisis Management Workshop coinciding with World Tourism Day celebrations.

The Minister will be attending the 23rd session of the UNWTO General Assembly this week in St. Petersburg, Russia in his capacity as a Vice President of UNWTO for the South Asian region. “I will be meeting the officials of UNWTO and will try my best to convince them to be a part of our World Tourism Day celebrations in Colombo,” Amaratunga added.

In terms of the International Surfing Competition, the Minister said that they were expecting over 100 participants from around 40 countries. “We are hoping to have over 100 international surfers for the competition and with them their families and friends will also come. Thereby, it will exceed our arrival expectations. In addition, there will also be a lot of foreign media to cover the competition,” Amaratunga said.

Highlighting the importance of drawing up an agenda on the long-term sustainability of the industry, Amaratunga noted that it was critically important to promote sustainable, responsible and universally accessible tourism by raising awareness over the importance of tourism and its social, cultural, political and economic value.

Taking all this into consideration, the Minister said they were now supporting the industry to recover fast and be prepared for the upcoming winter season.

“Looking at the arrival projections for 2019, we hope to get around two million to 2.1 million tourist arrivals as opposed to 2.3 million in 2018. The overall earnings forecast for this year is around \$3.5 billion as against \$4.4 billion recorded in 2018. Right now, the financial recovery will take a little longer than the volume recovery that we are looking at,” Amaratunga pointed out.