

SÉNAT

## FRANCE–SRI LANKA: SUPPORTING A COUNTRY IN TRANSITION

### Report on the visit of the France–Sri Lanka Interparliamentary Friendship Group to Colombo and Kandy

20 to 26 April 2026

From 20 to 26 April 2026, a delegation from the Senate's France–Sri Lanka Friendship Group, led by its Chair, Ms Vanina Paoli-Gagin, and comprising Mr Didier Marie, Vice-Chair, and Ms Laurence Muller-Bronn, a member of the group, visited the country's capital, Colombo, and the city of Kandy. A major centre of Buddhism and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Kandy lies in the centre of the country and was the last capital of the Sinhalese kings (Ceylon).

In a country that has endured numerous crises, France enjoys a positive image as a trusted partner, with a long-standing commitment to supporting Sri Lanka's development. The delegation's various meetings and field visits provided an opportunity to gauge the scale of the challenges facing the new administration that emerged from the presidential and parliamentary elections in autumn 2024, bringing a new generation of political leaders to power.



From left to right: Ms Laurence Muller-Bronn, Ms Vanina Paoli-Gagin, Ms Harini Amarasuriya, Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, and Mr Didier Marie

### I. The challenge of recovering from the crisis

#### A – An economy severely affected by multiple shocks

With a population of 22 million spread across a territory of 65,000 km<sup>2</sup>, Sri Lanka boasts numerous strengths, including a strategic location at the heart of the Indian Ocean and on the 'New Silk Roads' (the country was one of the first to join the Chinese initiative). Its extensive maritime area also offers opportunities in the fishing sector while presenting a challenge in terms of maritime security.

However, the country has faced a succession of shocks that have severely affected its economy, even though, at the time of its independence in 1948, it enjoyed very strong development indicators, surpassing those of its neighbour, India.

The long civil war, which paralysed the country from 1983 to 2009, had a lasting impact on economic growth and left deep scars, with national cohesion remaining a challenge to this day. In 2022, following large-scale peaceful protests calling for an end to the grip on power exercised by a handful of families, Sri Lanka suffered a deep economic crisis and defaulted on its debt. France then played a decisive role in bringing the main international creditors to the negotiating table and securing a comprehensive restructuring of the country's debt.

More recently, external shocks have severely affected the island's economy. In November

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2025, Cyclone Ditwah claimed more than 800 lives and caused widespread destruction. The start of 2026 was then marked by the war in the Middle East, which has had a particularly severe impact on Sri Lanka, both on trade – with difficulties in securing hydrocarbon supplies and a decline in tea exports to the Gulf states – and on tourism, which has lost its main air link via the United Arab Emirates.

### **B – A government working to put the economy back on track**

Following the general election in autumn 2024, the government led by Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya took office with an ambitious programme. Its priorities include promoting good governance and fighting corruption, strengthening the rule of law, enhancing the country's economic appeal, and advancing national reconciliation to turn the page on years of civil war.

Accompanied by the French Ambassador to Sri Lanka, Mr Rémi Lambert, the Senate delegation held talks with the Prime Minister and several ministers in her government: Mr Vijitha Herath, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Employment & Tourism, Ms Saroja Paulraj, Minister for Women and Children; and Ms Kaushalya Ariyaratne, Minister of State for the Media.



*Working meeting between the delegation (left), Mr Vijitha Herath (centre) and his teams (right)*

These meetings confirmed the strong momentum of bilateral relations, highlighted in particular by the meeting between the French and Sri Lankan presidents on the fringes of the Artificial Intelligence (AI) summit in New Delhi in February 2026. The officials unanimously praised France's support during the debt crisis in 2022 and, more recently, following Cyclone Ditwah, as well as its long-term support through the funding of numerous development projects.

Although severely affected by the consequences of the conflict in the Middle East, Sri Lanka has nevertheless managed to stabilise its economy and secure its energy supply to avoid power cuts and fuel shortages. At the same time, the government is seeking to reduce the country's dependence on fossil fuels and attract foreign investment to support this transition. Such investment remains very limited, largely due to an unfavourable business environment and an economy that is only just beginning to recover. Gross domestic product (GDP) growth of 5 per cent in 2024 and the government's efforts to improve governance and administrative efficiency should help to attract new investors.

Discussions also focused on trade relations with the European Union (EU), which accounts for 17 per cent of the country's exports, largely thanks to the 'GSP+' scheme. This scheme gives developing countries preferential access to the European market, free from customs duties and quotas, provided they ratify a number of international conventions relating to the protection of human rights and comply with social and environmental standards. Sri Lanka will therefore need to review its anti-terrorism legislation in order to continue benefiting from GSP+ after 2027.

### **C – A fruitful inter-parliamentary dialogue**

The Senate delegation was received by Parliament, a unicameral body, and met with its president, Mr Jagath Wickramaratne. It also held a working meeting with members of the Sri Lanka–France Friendship Group, chaired by Ms Saroja Paulraj.

The Sri Lankan MPs expressed keen interest in sharing experiences with the French Parliament, particularly on legislation governing the tourism sector, with a view to avoiding the pitfalls of overtourism. They also called for stronger, decentralised cooperation projects between French and Sri Lankan local authorities.



*Meetings with the Speaker of Parliament (left) and a working meeting with MPs (right)*

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The delegation also met Ms Vraie Balthazar, Mayor of Colombo, in office since June 2025. She emphasised the commitment of local authorities, working alongside the government and parliament, to improving public services and contributing to the country's development, while also addressing new challenges such as water resource conservation and the fight against pollution.

### II. France: a trusted partner for Sri Lanka

#### A – The crucial role of the French Development Agency (AFD)

As the main driving force behind the country's development efforts, AFD has been active in Sri Lanka for 20 years and is involved in a number of transformative projects aligned with its regional priorities: decarbonisation and adaptation to climate change, the promotion of sustainable land and ecosystem management, and support for inclusive and sustainable growth.



*Visit to the Ambatale water treatment plant*

The delegation visited the Ambatale plant, the country's largest water treatment facility with a capacity of 560,000 m<sup>3</sup> per day. It has received funding from the AFD for its pumping system, which will help to improve the water supply for residents of Colombo and the surrounding area, while ensuring more sustainable management of the resource.

#### B – A source of French pride: the Regional Centre for Maritime Studies (CREM)

Launched in December 2024, the CREM is a Franco-Sri Lankan project designed to enhance the capacity of Sri Lanka and neighbouring countries to address the shared challenges facing Indian Ocean states: combating illegal fishing, illegal immigration and illicit trafficking, responding to climate-related disasters, and protecting the marine environment.

To strengthen maritime safety and security, the CREM offers ambitious capacity-building programmes for public administrations,

promotes the sharing of best practices and actively fosters regional cooperation and inter-agency coordination. Led by senior French and Sri Lankan staff, the centre offers short training courses, ranging from a few days to three weeks, aimed primarily at military personnel from countries in the region seeking to deepen their understanding of these issues.

The centre has already proved a success and is helping to strengthen France's maritime presence in Sri Lanka, alongside another flagship project led by a French company. Orange Marine has entrusted the Colombo shipyards with the construction of several vessels for the repair and maintenance of submarine fibre-optic cables.

#### C – Promoting French-language learning: an ongoing priority

As the only French-language school in Sri Lanka, the École française internationale de Colombo (EFIC) has seen its pupil numbers rise from 40 to 100 over the past ten years. Particular efforts have been made to attract non-French-speaking families. The number of Sri Lankan children attending the EFIC has thus risen from one to fifteen over the last three years. The delegation visited the school's newly acquired premises, which will enable it to improve its facilities.

Another pillar of French-language education in Sri Lanka, the network of Alliances Françaises has a long-standing presence in the country, with the first Alliance Française in Ceylon dating back to 1956. In both Colombo and Kandy, the senators were able to observe the diversification of the courses available. The centres now offer courses for secondary school pupils and students seeking to improve their French. In addition, 'French for specific purposes' modules provide training tailored to sectors such as tourism. The Alliance Française in Colombo has also scheduled French language training for Sri Lankan police officers due to join the UN-backed force combating gangs in Haiti.

Finally, the Alliances Françaises play a central role in promoting French culture in Sri Lanka. They regularly host exhibitions, including one on the restoration of Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris, on display at the time of the delegation's visit, as well as film screenings, discussion evenings and lectures.



### III. Identifying promising sectors for the country's development

#### A – The textile sector: choosing to compete on quality

Like several other countries in South-East Asia, Sri Lanka has developed a strong textile sector, which is one of its key export industries. It accounts for 44 per cent of exports, contributes 7 per cent to the country's GDP and employs 350,000 people, 85 per cent of whom are women.

Unlike its neighbours, Sri Lanka has chosen to specialise in high value-added garments, such as lingerie, sportswear and technical textiles. In a market dominated by low-cost Chinese products, this strategy enables the country to meet higher social and environmental standards while offering the local workforce better wages.

The delegation therefore visited the MAS Holdings factory near Kandy, which produces a wide range of high-value-added textiles, particularly for the sportswear sector. With more than 100,000 employees, the group is one of the country's leading industrial groups and a major player in the global textile and clothing sector.

#### B – The tourism sector: growing while conserving resources

Despite its exceptional heritage, wide variety of landscapes and rich cultural traditions, Sri Lanka attracts only a limited number of tourists – around 2 million a year. By comparison, 20 million visitors travel to Vietnam each year and 40 million to Thailand.

Attracting more tourists is therefore a key challenge for Sri Lanka. This will require not only expanding hotel capacity and improving training for workers in the sector, but also creating a more favourable business environment by simplifying procedures and streamlining administrative processes to promote foreign investment.

#### C – Training and education: essential for the country's future development

Sri Lankan universities offer a wide range of high-quality courses, but the country faces the challenge of a growing number of its graduates leaving the country. At the University of Peradeniya in Kandy – the country's oldest university, founded in 1942 and home to over 16,000 students – the delegation spoke with young people enrolled on specialist courses in artificial intelligence. Many are considering completing their studies at a university in the United States or Australia.

This trend highlights the importance for the country's leaders of creating new opportunities for young people while fostering economic growth. To achieve this, they can draw on a population that is particularly resilient and confident in Sri Lanka's strengths and development potential.

### Delegation Members



**Vanina PAOLI-GAGIN**

Chair of the Friendship Group  
Senator for Aube  
The Independents–Republic and Territories group



**Didier MARIE**

Vice-Chair of the Friendship Group  
Senator for Seine-Maritime  
Socialist, Ecologist and Republican group



**Laurence MULLER-BRONN**

Member of the Friendship Group  
Senator for Bas-Rhin  
Republican group