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## 'Sri Lanka firmly committed to full provincial autonomy'

Addressing the widely publicized UN world conference against racism and racial discrimination under the theme 'United against Racism, Unity and Justice for all', currently under way in Geneva, Sri Lanka's most senior ethnic Tamil Cabinet Minister said that Sri Lanka's President Rajapaksa was firmly committed to the full implementation of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution which gives substantive autonomy to the provinces. He also called upon the international community to put pressure on the LTTE to allow the civilians in its captivity to leave unconditionally



Social Welfare Minister Douglas Devananda meeting UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon

*Below is the full text of the address by Social Welfare Minister Douglas Devananda at UN Anti-Racism Conference in Geneva*

I am a Sri Lankan who is also ethnically Tamil, representing the North, a province populated overwhelmingly by ethnic Tamils. It also had many Tamil speaking Muslims, such as my colleague Minister Rishad Bathiudeen who is with us today, after being internally displaced himself by LTTE terrorism.

Sri Lanka has four major religions Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam, and three distinct major communities, Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims, and three languages Sinhala, Tamil and English. This diversity has made for coexistence as well as conflict.

### Colonialism

The sources of conflict lie in factors related to our deliberations here. They are also related, as in many places, to colonialism. Though post-colonial Sri Lanka saw legislative changes which made Tamils feel they were being treated unequally and discriminated against, the majority Sinhalese felt Tamils got disproportionate advantages during colonial rule. Redress was thought necessary but the Tamils felt those actions were discriminatory.

Tamils started agitating against the discrimination and demanded equality and power sharing in areas where they lived in substantial numbers. In the early period these agitations were democratic and non-violent. However, the next generation reacted to the state machinery crushing the non-violent acts of the Tamils. They took up arms against the State through many militant organizations. I was the leader of one such organization.

The flames of conflict should have been doused by the Indo-Lanka accord of 1987, brokered by the Prime Minister of India at the time, Shri Rajiv Gandhi, who was later murdered by the LTTE.

It paved the way for a power sharing arrangement. The agreement also required the militants to lay down arms and join the democratic main stream, and almost all of us did so at the time.

Due to the fanaticism of the LTTE, which rejected the Indo-Lanka Accord, the full implementation of the provincial council system has been blocked. The LTTE has

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been waging war with the ultimate aim of creating a separate State, Tamil Eelam. They are not only waging a war against the State, they also annihilate any democratic Tamil forces that would not be subservient to them.



Minister Devananda addressing the Durban Review Conference.

As a young man in my twenties, I was a survivor of the massacre of Tamil political prisoners in the Welikada jail, in July 1983 by a majority racists mob.

However, I had not foreseen the evil of the racism and terrorism of the minority. When I gave up armed struggle and entered the democratic mainstream in 1987, I was regarded as a traitor by the Tigers.

The US State Department reports I have survived eleven assassination attempts by the Tigers.

My sight is impaired in one eye due to a spike driven into my skull by Tiger detainees when I visited them in prison to improve their conditions of detention. But my perspective is clear.

Our President took action to curb LTTE terrorism after his attempts at negotiation were rejected. Now the Sri Lankan security forces have almost crushed the Tigers. However the Tigers use innocent civilians as human shields.

These are my people, Mr President, from the island's North; people to whom I belong; people to whom I am tied by common ancestry and place. Though over 70,000 of those held initially succeeded in getting away, despite being shot at by the LTTE as they escaped, there are still a large number held in captivity. Yet even as I speak today, thousands managed to get away to refuge with the government.

#### **Surrender**

If the international community can pressurize the LTTE to surrender or at least to release the rest of these civilians unconditionally, that will go a long way in ending the suffering of the Tamil minority.

President Rajapaksa is committed to full implementation of the 13th Amendment to the Sri Lankan constitution which ensures substantive provincial autonomy.

The political process has already started.

Elections were conducted for the Eastern provincial council in May 2008.

A Task Force for the development of the North under my Chairmanship was established to oversee activities until normalcy is established in the province and elections are held. In the meantime, an All Party Representative Committee is finalizing proposals, including necessary constitutional amendments, to address grievances of the Tamils.

We refer to this as '13th amendment Plus', that is, deeper provincial autonomy than currently in the Constitution.

This will include a Second Chamber based on Provinces.

Mr. President, this being the current situation in my country, we entered wholeheartedly into commitments at the conference in Durban. This was a landmark event in the struggle against racial discrimination and intolerance.

#### **Racial discrimination**

Sri Lanka is party to major international human rights instruments and has acceded to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. Since language rights are perhaps the most important issue of contention in Sri Lanka, we have taken measures to enforce bilingualism in administration while improving training in this field.

We have also taken steps to ensure recruitment of Tamil speaking persons into our defence forces.

Mr President, I call on all member states to cooperate in achieving the objectives of the World Conference and implementing the DDPA.

My experience with racism, racial discrimination and xenophobia is real. In the struggle against these, I have been imprisoned, lost close family and friends, shed my blood, risked my life and had my sight damaged.

But I have learned through struggle and sacrifice, that it is Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance that are our enemies, not one another.

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