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HOME  
Sunday, 3 May 2009

- NEWS
- EDITORIAL
- BUSINESS
- FEATURES
- POLITICAL
- SECURITY
- SPECTRUM
- IMPACT
- SPORTS
- WORLD
- PANORAMA
- JUNIOR
- LETTERS
- OBITUARIES

OTHER PUBLICATIONS

OTHER LINKS

Marriage Proposals

Classifieds

GOVERNMENT GAZETTE

News | Editorial | Business | Features | Political | Security | Spectrum | Impact | Sports | World | Panorama | Junior | Letters | Obituaries |

## No third party mediation - Defence Secretary

Dhaneshi Yatawara

"What matters most is what the average citizen of this country wants and hopes for," Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa said during an interview with the Sunday Observer.

Following are the excerpts:



**Q:** At this juncture, when the Security Forces are on the verge of victory in their war against terrorism we see the Government is under pressure over many issues especially from the international community. How would you explain this situation?

**A:** Considering the developments took place during the last few weeks we see that the international concerns on the present situation are much more serious than before; especially from the Western countries. There are varieties of concerns from these parties. The Government is pressured, especially from certain Western

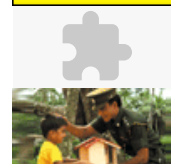
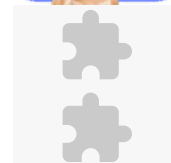
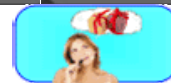
countries, to go for a ceasefire and provide access for a third party to the `No Fire Zone' to negotiate with the LTTE for a settlement. Still, the Government's main concern is the betterment of its citizens. If any of the suggestions can bring benefit to the people, it will be welcome. The Government, which is elected by the people themselves, is bound to look after their interests.

During the 30 year old battle against terrorism it is the Sri Lankans alone who suffered most and no one else! People want to see an end to the terrorist menace. This they have reiterate repeatedly by voting the ruling party to power during elections.

**Q:** There was considerable speculation on the visit of the Indian Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon and National Security Advisor M. K. Narayanan. Could you explain the actual situation and the objectives underlying their visit.

**A:** The visit of the Indian Foreign Secretary and the National Security Advisor imposed no pressure on the ongoing operations either on the basis of a Ceasefire or stopping the current operations. They were only concerned about the plight of the civilians trapped under the LTTE hold. That is understandable. Indian Government does need to take into consideration the concerns over Sri Lanka raised by the Tamil Nadu State. They are facing a tough election where the displaced civilian from Sri Lanka have formed a considerable percentage of votes. The two delegates were concerned over the number of casualties among the civilians. Their interest was on how the Indian Government can assist us in the humanitarian work. During discussions with the President Mahinda Rajapaksa, the two delegates were extensively briefed on how the Government is providing humanitarian assistance for the displaced people. It was stressed during the discussions that Government's main concern is the safety of the civilians. They were very satisfied with the Government's efforts in the present situation as well as the future plans to resettle and rehabilitate these people. In fact, the Indian Government provided a two billion Indian rupee monetary assistance for our humanitarian programme.

**Q:** The media last week reported that the both the British, French Foreign Secretaries during their discussions with President Mahinda Rajapaksa requested a ceasefire or resumption of negotiation with the LTTE. **Q:** What was their basis for a ceasefire?



**A:** They were talking about a ceasefire. The reason they adduced was for the safety of the civilians trapped inside the 'No Fire Zone'. Our point of view was how a Ceasefire can bring benefit to those displaced people. It is very well clear to us a Ceasefire will not assure the safety of the people. Even if we assume, the Government will agree for a Ceasefire what would be the next step? How could it solve the problem? How could it assure the rescue of the trapped civilians? There was no plan or at least an idea on post-ceasefire complications.

**Q:** What is the Government stand on a Ceasefire?

**A:** A Ceasefire would only benefit the LTTE. We as a country have firsthand experience on that. Even with under a Ceasefire the people affected by LTTE atrocities will continue to suffer. During the current operations the Government extended a Ceasefire for 48 hours but the LTTE did not let the innocent civilians move out for safety.

With no ceasefire large exodus of civilians started moving out of the trapped area. With our rescue operations up to now approximately 150,000 civilians escaped from LTTE clutches. We have proved that only through a rescue operation we can save those civilians trapped inside the 'No Fire Zone'.

**Q:** How does the Government plan to continue the humanitarian assistance for the displaced people?

**A:** As is already known by all, there are numbers of welfare centres for the displaced people with all basic facilities including education, health, sanitation, water, food etc. In addition, they have been relocated in temporary villages to enable them to restart their lives until their original properties are made safe for habitation. Hence, the demining process was initiated immediately after those areas were liberated by the Security Forces. The Government has given access to UN agencies as well as recognized International Non Governmental Organizations to assist the Government efforts in rebuilding the lives of these displaced people. The Humanitarian agencies are given access to places where the displaced people are registered and screened soon after they reach the liberated areas. All these activities are conducted strictly adhering to the International standards and norms to which Sri Lanka is a signatory. And the entire process is transparent.

**Q:** How does the Government, assures the safety of the displaced civilians trapped in the LTTE clutches during the military operations?

**A:** Declaring a 'No Fire Zone' and restricting the use of heavy weapons are issues we have imposed. No foreign party ever suggested them. The Government took these decisions to ensure the safety of the civilians. Well it's a further step taken by the leader of the country. President Rajapaksa gave a directive to the Security Forces not to fire using heavy weapons or undertake air strikes. This is to protect the civilians from getting injured or dead in crossfire. This is a significant step in the direction of the International Humanitarian law. We risk the lives of our own soldiers. The Government took this decision as a precaution to assure the safety of the civilians. We are concerned more than anybody else about the safety of the civilians. We have commissioned a passenger ship under the ICRC to enter the 'No Fire Zone' and evacuate the sick and the injured.

**Q:** What about the request for a third party to discuss with the LTTE for a negotiation?

**A:** That We cannot accept. The LTTE will never agree to a discussion with a third party. With the experience we gathered over the several rounds of peace talks with the LTTE, we are familiar with their modus operandi. Even recently, the UN advised the LTTE to release the civilians.

The LTTE did not adhere to. Then the UN told the LTTE to lay down arms and surrender, which the LTTE did not comply with at all. In this context, what can a third party do? This would not benefit the country or the people other than assist the LTTE to drag on this situation for some more time. To allow a third party to enter into the 'No Fire Zone' the military has to pause their operations and it will certainly cause more harm to the civilians.

**Q:** In the Government's point of view is why should the international community except such pressure on it?

**A:** Many Western Governments, like UK,USA, Canada, France etc are imposing such pressure on us, mainly because in the present global situation they face variety of internal problems.

A considerable percentage of Tamil diaspora is living in these countries. We saw that they were acting very violently against the Sri Lankan Government and our representatives there as well.

These governments depend largely on their votes. And their political campaigns also depend on the funding by these communities. If not for any other hidden agenda, this is the reason why these countries, including of course the Tamil Diaspora want to save the LTTE leadership. The Tamil Diaspora's main aim is to save Prabhakaran and his leadership. They put pressure on Western Governments to push the Sri Lankan Government to stop the fight against terrorism and rescue these people.



**Q:** Will the Government continue to send the essential items to the `No Fire Zone`?

**A:** Definitely the Government will be sending food and medical items to the civilians trapped in the `No Fire Zone` though we are well aware that major part of it is being used by the LTTE! We know that there are very limited numbers of civilians living inside.

**Q:** It is a known fact that many LTTE cadres are trying to escape disguised as civilians. Some surrender while others are identified during the screening process. What happens to them thereafter?

**A:** Many LTTE cadres reach the cleared areas in this manner. The Government and the security forces are well informed on this aspect. Among them some are either supporters or cadres who received light training and some are found to be hardcore LTTEers.

We have started rehabilitation camps for these people under the Commissioner General for Rehabilitation. They will be given vocational training and rehabilitated cutting them off from their previous terror activities. For the hardcore cadres, we get detention orders and the country's legal procedure will be applied.

Most of these people will be rehabilitated, given a vocational training and sent back to their families. During the process they are provided with basic facilities, including medical care.

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- \* *Govt bound to look after civilian interests.*
  - \* *People wants an end to terrorist menace.*
  - \* *Govt's main concern - safety of civilians.*
  - \* *Ceasefire will not assure safety of people.*
  - \* *Ceasefire would only benefit LTTE.*
  - \* *Temporary villages to enable IDPs to restart their lives until their original properties are safe for habitation.*
  - \* *We are concerned more than anybody else about the safety of civilians.*
  - \* *UN exhorted LTTE to lay down arms and surrender.*
  - \* *The Tamil Diaspora's main aim is to save Prabhakaran and his cohorts.*