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Lasting peace and security for all Sri Lankans

Address by President Mahinda Rajapaksa to the Diplomatic Corps in Colombo on the current developments in Sri Lanka at the Presidential Secretariat on May 7.

I am pleased to address you this morning at a time when humanitarian operations in the North are coming to an end and the country is about to be salvaged from the scourge of terrorism. The war with the LTTE is rapidly nearing its conclusion and it is my hope that this will create the space for democracy to flourish in the North again.

As you are very well aware, the people of Sri Lanka have suffered for nearly three decades. We have suffered too long and our people have witnessed the trauma and agony unleashed by terrorist acts. At long last we are on a threshold of defeating terrorism and facing a new era of lasting peace and security for all Sri Lankans.

Negotiations

You are also very well aware that my Government was compelled to take military action against the LTTE only as a last resort. This was after all attempts to engage them in meaningful negotiations failed. From the day I was elected, we gave priority to peace negotiations.



President Mahinda Rajapaksa addressing members of the Diplomatic Corps at a special meeting at the Presidential Secretariat on May 7. Picture by Sudath Silva

Geneva, we went to Oslo. In all these places, the LTTE made a mockery of the negotiations and left the negotiating table.

Undoubtedly, we have to be indebted to our brave Security Forces who have fought valiantly to defeat the LTTE who were thought to be an invincible force.

Comments and suggestions to : Web Editor
Civilian casualties

The military has now confined LTTE to an area less than 6 sq kms. in the safe zone created for the civilians. On my instructions, due to the priority given to the policy of zero civilian casualties the Security Forces are limiting themselves to rescue operations of the entrapped civilians held hostage as a human shield by the LTTE.

My primary and only concern is the well-being and safety of the civilian population presently in the No Fire Zone and those displaced persons in the cleared areas.

My Government unilaterally declared two humanitarian pauses in January and April. We too shared the expectations with the international community that the LTTE would use these opportunities to release the civilians being held hostage in the No Fire Zone.

We went to

Safe zone

However, on both occasions the LTTE cynically exploited the opportunities to strengthen its defences for its own security and actively prevented the civilians leaving. On the other hand, we have witnessed mass movements of people from the safe zone more so during other times.

I am sure you will agree with me that ceasefires are redundant. As we all are aware, the LTTE has always misused periods of ceasefires, to rearm them and resort to military action. These are bitter lessons we have learnt from the past experiences and therefore will not be deceived anymore.

Nearly 180,000 fleeing from the clutches of the LTTE to the cleared areas clearly serve to demonstrate a feeling of security and confidence in our Security Forces.

The LTTE has progressively proved that they have never been interested in negotiating for the aspirations of the Tamil community whom they have claimed to be their sole representatives. The LTTE only believe in the language of terror which needs to be met by military force.

We also need to acknowledge the role of the Armed Forces who were engaged in a heroic task to rescue more than 200,000 innocent civilians kept hostage by the LTTE. The manner of rescuing the hostages would indeed be an example to others engaged in military operations. It may also be one of the greatest rescue operations in the world.

I am glad that over 200,000 persons have been able to escape from the LTTE, due to the meticulous operations of the Armed Forces. In my view, the urgent need of the hour is the sensitivity and understanding of the international community on ground realities.

As you are aware, the LTTE has an extensive international network spread among many of your countries. As members of the international community, friends of Sri Lanka need to bring pressure to bear on the LTTE to lay down arms and surrender.

Human shields

Punitive action could be taken on its front organizations spread globally. Your Governments also need to bring pressure on the leadership of the LTTE to free the civilians who are being held against their will as human shields. In fact, these civilians could be relatives of those Sri Lankans who are in your countries.

I am fully aware that in-depth reports submitted by you contribute no little to building international opinions.

There is no doubt that these reports are much important in the building of arguments and positions in your Capitals. As you are well aware the Government of Sri Lanka is now facing the daunting task of providing security and needs of displaced persons who are now in the welfare villages.

The Government has mobilized all the relevant Government Agencies and stakeholders who are working together to provide the basic needs of these innocent civilians.

I wish to take this opportunity to thank your Governments, the United Nations and its Agencies as well as the ICRC for the humanitarian assistance extended in our hour of need. The Government of Sri Lanka is fully engaged in delivering all the basic needs to the people in the welfare centres.

The international humanitarian organizations have been given maximum access that is possible at present. We are in the process of assessing the ground situation and will work towards providing enhanced access in the future.

I wish to bring your notice that at present there are 52 NGOs working in the IDP welfare villages. The media has also been given unhindered access.

The next step is to focus our collective attention and energies on the long term post conflict development agenda for Sri Lanka.

In this regard, one of the primary tasks is to rebuild the shattered lives of our people who have been traumatized by living for long periods under LTTE domination.

We have to focus our efforts on the development of infrastructure of the liberated areas. This could be achieved through the provision of necessities and facilities for the displaced persons to be resettled. as early as possible. In fact, 122 families have already been re-settled in Mannar and another 2,500 are to be settled by the end of this month.

Much of the resettlement will be dependent on the ability to de-mine the affected areas.

The North has not seen any development for the past 30 years due to the subjugation and autocratic dominance of the LTTE. The Government is giving top priority developing these areas.

LTTE cadres

The implementation of long-term development programs for the North and the welfare programs for the displaced persons and their resettlement will be considered our duty and responsibility. This will specially relate to: De-mining activities, Infrastructure development which includes building of roads, houses, schools, hospitals, electrification etc.

Livelihood support for the resettled persons, and Psycho social programs for the rehabilitation of former LTTE cadres and in particular child soldiers. We have already initiated action in this regard.

Towards this end, my Government is in the process of completing a Master Plan for a long term reconstruction of the war ravaged region.

The international community could join the Government of Sri Lanka in these challenging tasks ahead. Already a Presidential Task Force has been named for resettlement, development and security of the Northern Province.

We are also very keen to ensure the rehabilitation of the surrendered LTTE cadres and bring them into the society. We are also giving emphasis to vocational training to provide life skills to these surrendered cadres.

While eliminating terrorism militarily and freeing the remaining hostages from the LTTE, a sustainable political solution based on a Sri Lankan agenda is in the process of being worked out.

The All Party Representative Committee is formulating a set of political proposals which would be submitted once the environment is free of terrorism.

Recently we had discussions with all representatives of the Tamil people in the North and the East to resolve this problem. Regrettably a certain party in Parliament did not participate in these discussions.

IDPs

On the first occasion they declined to come. On the next occasion they agreed to come but did not turn up. Therefore, we discussed with all the parties present and appointed a committee to solve the problems of the IDPs in the North and to coordinate activities in this regard.

I believe we have the strength to arrive at a political solution through discussion. We cannot allow terrorism to raise its head in this country again. Whether they are problems of the Tamil people or the Muslim people, we have not forgotten that all of these are Sri Lankans. They all belong to Sri Lanka. I have a responsibility to

ensure that they can live in freedom, without fear or mistrust, in a unitary and democratic Sri Lanka.

International community

I will not forget that this is the mandate given to me by the people. I state most humbly on this occasion that I accept this responsibility that has been placed upon me more than any other.

We expect to conduct Local Government Elections in the Jaffna and Vavuniya areas very soon. Steps are being taken to call for nominations early this month. Our final appeal to the international community represented by you is to fully understand the current realities about Sri Lanka and in resolving the problems that may arise in your own countries, not to subjugate the aspirations and aims of the Sri Lankan people.

And by this, to assist in solving the problems of the Sri Lankan people and extend all assistance and cooperation for the building of this country, so that we can together see the end of terrorism in this country and worldwide, too.

I also extend my gratitude for all the cooperation extended to us so far. As a Buddhist, in this Vesak season I wish you all a very Happy Vesak! May you all be blessed by the Noble Triple Gem!

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