

**Moving Sri Lanka's Peace Process Forward;
Sri Lanka Government Policy
and the role of the International Community**

I consider it particularly fitting that today we are engaging in this dialogue as to how Sri Lanka's peace process could be moved forward and how the international community could help to achieve that objective. For, we are on the threshold of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), which constitutes the major partner of the ruling coalition, presenting the government's proposals aimed at granting maximum devolution of power, while maintaining the unity of Sri Lanka. These proposals will be placed before the All Party Representative Committee (APRC), which has been the vehicle through which Sri Lanka, under the leadership of President Mahinda Rajapaksa, has sought to move the peace process forward. This Committee consists of representatives of the political parties represented in parliament, including the main opposition United National Party, and a number of Tamil and Muslim parties.

Over the past 13 months the APRC has gone through a painstaking process with the aim of evolving a 'southern consensus' to devolve power. As a result, very soon, after considering the views of all stakeholders, Sri Lanka will place before the people a comprehensive political proposal, for their approval. What is most important to note is that any consensus the APRC eventually reaches would possibly be the broadest ever reached in the Sri Lanka's history of power sharing.

Reflection of government commitment

The presentation of these proposals will effectively debunk theories expressed in some quarters that the Sri Lankan Government was seeking a military solution to the conflict in Sri Lanka. It reconfirms the government's firm belief, that the conflict in Sri Lanka cannot be solved through military means, and that while the security forces must not shy away when the basic needs of the people are interrupted or the territorial integrity of the country is threatened, it is the responsibility of a representative government to meet such challenges.

It is in similar vein that the current administration in Sri Lanka has sought to overcome the temporary hardships being caused to sections of the population currently displaced from those areas liberated from the LTTE. The Government has been careful to ensure that civilians would not get caught in the cross fire. This was evident in its recent operation to liberate Vaharai, where approximately 34, 000 civilians voted with their feet, by moving to the areas controlled by Sri Lankan forces, before the LTTE were dislodged from Vaharai.

Together with the international community, through the Consultative Committee on Humanitarian Assistance (CCHA), the government is making every effort to restore normalcy in the conflict affected areas in the shortest possible time frame. Ironically, it is apparent that redressing the needs of the civilians in these areas has become a problem to the LTTE, which as most of you know well, led to their decision to target a group of Western Ambassadors accredited to Sri Lanka, including the US Ambassador, who were visiting Batticaloa on a humanitarian mission, as partners of the CCHA process. In fact, the main purpose of that visit was to assess the humanitarian relief requirements

in Vaharai, in the Eastern Province, which followed a successful similar needs assessment undertaken by the CCHA in the Jaffna Peninsula.

In a meeting with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon at the UN Headquarters in New York earlier this week, I called on the international community including the UN, to join in complementing the Sri Lanka Government's efforts in uplifting the economic standards of the people of the Eastern Province. As I noted, the re-development of the Eastern province could serve as a model for post-conflict peace building and development.

In addition to ensuring that humanitarian assistance is provided to the civilians, who have been displaced, the government has also taken concrete measures to address concerns of alleged human rights violations, showing its firm commitment to address human rights issues as a parallel process.

The Commission of Inquiry constituted by President Rajapaksa to investigate into alleged human rights violations and the eleven member International Independent Group of Eminent Persons (IIGEP) appointed to observe the functions of this Commission of Inquiry, which held its first meeting in Colombo last month, are reflective of this commitment.

The appointment of the IIGEP is a unique arrangement by a country faced with alleged violations of human rights and the Government has taken this bold initiative, because it has nothing to hide and it is firmly committed to ensure that such violations should not go unpunished. I would like to emphasise that while it is making all efforts to address concerns of alleged human rights

violations, the government will take preventive measures and will remain responsible and accountable.

Pre-requisites

In moving towards a negotiated political settlement to the conflict, the government's approach is guided by four broad principles. First, the proposals are firmly rooted in democracy, justice, and equality. Second, they are also responsive to the constitutional realities that any democracy must respect, and therefore is framed in a manner that could meet possible legal challenges that could arise. Third, they seek to empower people, uphold pluralism and recognize the fact that there are many voices within the Tamil community that are rational, devoid of parochial interest and vested agendas. Fourth, above all, in contrast with previous constitutional processes aimed at solving the conflict, whatever consensus reached would not be intended to appease the LTTE or to treat symptoms of a malaise, but to get at the root of the disease.

This is a healthy development, because we are well aware that the history of political negotiations with the LTTE is replete with bitter memories. I have personally experienced this having participated in the last two rounds of negotiations with the LTTE in February and October 2006. The LTTE stands guilty of having single-handedly wrecked five attempts of peace negotiations in 1985, 1987, 1989/90, 1994/95 and in 2002/03. One could reasonably come to the conclusion that the organisation has neither the will nor the capacity to negotiate a political settlement to the conflict and merely engages in political rhetoric as a means of achieving their objectives of a separate mono-ethnic state by resorting to force of arms.

Why should we expect to succeed this time?

Given the history of Sri Lanka's conflict resolution, the question could be asked why the current exercise in constitution crafting is likely to succeed this time, when so many similar previous exercises failed. I would suggest that the present 'moment' constitutes a rare confluence of favourable elements.

First, unlike on previous occasions when the LTTE could have claimed that engaging in negotiations with southern leaders was futile, as they were incapable of evolving a southern consensus, today it is hard to deny the fact that President Rajapaksa has been able to muster the broadest possible political coalition in recent Sri Lankan political history and is well poised for achieving the Southern consensus to offer maximum possible devolution without adversely affecting the unity and territorial integrity of the country.

Second, the main opposition party, the United National Party led by former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, during whose period the ceasefire with the LTTE came in to being, is on record as having assured support of his party for a meaningful political settlement.

Third, the recent military operations in the East have shattered the aura of invincibility of the LTTE and have demonstrated to the LTTE very clearly that a military victory is not possible and that if there is any genuineness about their desire to serve the Tamils, the only way it could be done is through negotiation.

Fourth, never before has the LTTE been so internationally isolated as it stands today - proscribed in India, the U.S., the UK, the EU and Canada; its leader

Prabhakaran and a number of top leaders being sentenced to death for the assassination of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, and its agents arrested and taken to court by several countries including the U.S., for engaging or seeking to perpetuate acts of international terrorism. Unlike in some periods in history when the perpetration of terrorism to meet political goals was condoned, today, there is zero tolerance for its use under any circumstances.

What role could the international community play?

As the Sri Lankan polity moves towards bringing to a conclusion the process of evolving a political settlement to the conflict in Sri Lanka, a special responsibility is cast upon the international community to play its role.

This is an opportunity Sri Lankans hope that the international community would not miss, debating semantics and ignoring the reality. The mistake made by some members of the international community in taking too long to recognise that the Tigers were no ‘freedom fighters’ but a group of ruthless terrorists, must not be repeated.

What then must the international community do?

In the first instance, the international community should once again seek to prevail upon the LTTE to return to the negotiations and to negotiate in good faith. It should be made clear to the LTTE that they should respond in a time bound fashion with specific targets and not seek to use such an opportunity to merely buy time or to score tactical advantages. Above all they must join the

democratic political mainstream. After all there are several militant groups that have successfully made this transition.

Whether the international community would succeed in convincing the LTTE is hard to tell. The often stated concern is that the LTTE knows no other means of conduct but arms struggle and its leader Velupillai Prabhakaran would not dare seek to come out and live in the open. An additional question gaining currency today is whether sustaining war is more lucrative for the LTTE given their vast network of ships and communications, illicit commercial pursuits such as arms and human smuggling and money laundering, has taken precedence over their stated political goal of achieving Eelam. The international community must push the LTTE to make this choice, and make it now.

If it is clear that the LTTE is unable or unwilling to make this transition, the onus falls on the international community, including numerous non-governmental organizations that have championed their political cause, to agree that the Tigers cannot be de-clawed, and expect to commit themselves to work with those Tamil democratic parties to further the interests of the Tamil community, both within and outside Sri Lanka.

In this context, a fact that has been ignored is that 54% of the Tamil population in Sri Lanka lives in areas outside the Northern and the Eastern provinces among Sinhalese and Muslim communities. It is also forgotten that besides the LTTE, who have refused to change its ways, there are both longstanding Tamil democrats such as V. Anandasangari as well as former militants, who have embraced the democratic fold since 1987, such as Douglas Devananda and D. Sidharthan. No longer should these alternate Tamil voices, who have entered

the democratic mainstream two decades ago and are willing to reach an honorable and durable settlement, be sidelined within Sri Lanka or by the international community.

It is unfortunate that up to now the misguided faith of both some Sri Lankan political leaders as well as sections of the international community of the transformational capacity of the LTTE, has cost Sri Lanka dearly not only in loss of assets and lives of civilians, but also at least two generations of Tamil politicians and academics. It is a long list possibly starting with Alfred Duraiappah, which includes to name a few- A. Amirthalingam, V. Yogeswaran, Sam Thambimuttu, A. Thangathurai, Sarojini Yogeswaran, Neelan Thiruchelvam, Lakshman Kadirgamar, and Keetheswaran Loganathan. Many or at least some of these persons, whom I am sure you know and some you might even count among your friends, were honourable Tamil leaders, who were genuinely conscious of the problems faced by the Tamils, and whose only fault was their refusal to abandon the democratic path and yield to dictates of the LTTE.

Similarly, outside Sri Lanka too there is a growing resistance developing within the Tamil Diaspora, that questions the futility of the destructive path down which the LTTE has led the Tamil people for over three decades in a struggle for an elusive Eelam. In many western capitals today, which host sizeable Tamil populations, there is a growing resistance developing, which has manifested itself not only in refusing to pay LTTE taxes and ransoms, but also who have also taken to the streets to demonstrate against the LTTE and demand an alternate means of redressing Tamil grievances.

Conclusion

Thus, when the world assesses whatever political settlement that emanates from Sri Lanka in the coming weeks and months, they should bear in mind that it is not only the demands of the LTTE that have to be met, but those of the totality of the Tamil population, among which there is a tremendous yearning for peace, as among the rest of the Sri Lankan polity.

In this context a special effort should be made by the international community to persuade the Tamil Diaspora, whose funding is the primary source of sustenance of the LTTE, to support efforts being made by the Sri Lankan government to find a lasting solution to the conflict rather than contributing to fuel the separatist war that has been the bane of Sri Lanka for over 30 years and has caused misery and deaths for tens of thousands in Sri Lanka.

My earnest wish is that all of you in this room, who love Sri Lanka, understand the issues and want to see peace restored, rise to this challenge.

Sri Lanka is on the threshold of a new dawn – your support will help make it even more possible.