

You have better story than is getting out today – Pascoe to President

Sri Lanka has a better story than is getting out to the world on matters of concern to the United Nations such as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), Human rights and Post Conflict Development was the view of B. Lynn Pascoe, United Nations Under Secretary General for Political Affairs, following his meeting with President Mahinda Rajapaksa earlier today.

Mr. Pascoe met the President after visiting Vavuniya and other areas of the North to get a first hand view ongoing de-mining, resettlement of IDPs and the IDP relief villages of Menik Farm.

He expressed satisfaction at the progress being made on de-mining especially with the use of new imported equipments to speed up the process and assured of more UN assistance in this regard.

He said that while the many assurances given by the President regarding the resettlement of the IDPs were very helpful, there was concern about the uncertainty of the government's plans and the need to make sure the genuine assurances of the President would be implemented.

President Rajapaksa said that it's necessary to understand the both Sri Lanka and the UN were eager the get thing done. "I understand the pressure and constraints on the Secretary General. However you must also understand the problems we face", he said.

The President said that more than two hundred thousand people had come to the government side in just 24 hours and the government is now feeding, clothing, providing health care and looking after them properly, while proceeding with plans for their resettlement.

Responding to Mr. Pascoe's observation that International Community has concerns when it hears that resettlement will be done after de-mining is completed, President said resettlement did depend on the de-mining process. He mentioned that sixteen years after its war, Croatia had still not finished de-mining. "We do not intend taking so much time. I have laid down an initial target of 180 days to resettle at least 70% of the IDPs". With the new equipment in use, and hopefully more to come, he expected the entire resettlement to be completed by the end of next January. We have identified areas for resettlement and the people will be sent back no sooner they are cleared, he said.

On the question of IDPs moving to live with relations outside, the President explained that the government had already published advertisements in the media, calling for applications from persons seeking such resettlement. However, only 2000 applications

had been received. These notices would be published again and also displayed prominently at the welfare villages.

With regard to the freedom of movement outside the relief centers the President said that arrangements are already being made to issue day passes for IDPs who wish to go and work outside each day.

Mr. Basil Rajapaksa, Senior Advisor to the President said that with the experience of 2000 applicants for re-union with relations, and the limited numbers of jobs in the area, it is likely that there will be only few takers for these day passes.

Recalling President Rajapaksa's earlier commendable record on Human Rights, Mr. Pascoe said he would appreciate the need to bring about necessary changes to the role of the security forces especially after a very long war. President Rajapaksa said the UN must be aware of the changes that had already been initiated at a very early stage after the war.

On concerns about a journalist being given a 20 year prison sentence, the President said neither he nor the government could interfere or be involved with the judiciary. The sentence, was imposed by a court of law. The problem was with the defense, not seeking a reduced sentence. The Attorney General had not asked for a maximum sentence. He said he did not expect the Attorney General to oppose a shorter sentence when the case came in appeal.

President Rajapaksa however stressed that the journalist concerned was not sentenced for what he wrote, but for obtaining funds from the LTTE and being an agent of the LTTE, a known terrorist organization. There was very little publicity given to this aspect of the case, he said. He suggested that the UN personnel study the court report of this case for better understanding.

With regard to Sri Lankans employed by the UN found in LTTE held areas, against whom charges had not been filed; the President said that charges against these drivers would be filed next week. He stressed that although steps such as deportation could be taken about foreigners involved in LTTE activities, legal action was required against Sri Lankans identified with actions that violated the law.

Considering the understanding that existed between the UN and Sri Lanka, President Rajapaksa said he did not expect the UN to pacify any members, big or small, about the situation in Sri Lanka. "Whether it is the US, China, Britain or any country we are all members of the UN. When the UN says anything about us we take it seriously. Similarly if big countries, try to bully us we will come to the UN about such matters." Mr. Pascoe concluded telling President Rajapaksa "You have a better story than is getting out today."