



## **Comments by Hon. Rohitha Bogollagama, Minister of Foreign Affairs, to International and other media on the Presidential Election**

"I appreciate this opportunity to meet with all of you, most of whom are covering for the international media our forthcoming Presidential Election. I thought it useful to share some background concerning the national preparations for the poll tomorrow, especially for the benefit of those who are reporting on Sri Lanka while stationed outside the island.

The world has come to recognize Sri Lanka as a nation with a longstanding tradition of democratic governance. Our people have been exercising without a break now for 79 years since 1931, the right to elect their administrations on the basis of universal adult franchise. The Department of Elections, which has the exclusive responsibility for enabling this process, has developed its own time tested and sound systems. The key to this is the electoral roll, which is updated annually by enumerators, who personally visit each and every household within the island. Accordingly, there is no possibility for anyone entitled to vote being excluded from the electoral roll, unless he or she has been out of the country for a prolonged period of time, or has not responded to the opportunity afforded by the visit of the enumerator, to become registered as a voter. Moreover, appeals are made through the print and other media for those who have missed registering themselves when the enumerator came to their house, to make the effort of going to their local Branch Office of the Election Department to have themselves included in the electoral roll.

The applicable electoral roll, which will be used is that which was finalized in 2008 and which contains the names and addresses of 14,088,500 voters. Let me explain that this particular roll has to be used since for practical reasons with 2010 having barely started, the necessary time required for the Commissioner to apply the 2009 roll, has simply not been available to him. Using the 2008 roll, polling cards have been dispatched by post well before the election. In each polling booth, the candidates are entitled to station their agents, who can then help to ensure that there is no impersonation or other malpractice. The possession of a polling card establishes easily that the person producing it is entitled to cast his or her vote from that booth. Along with the polling card, the Identity Card too must be produced, as a double insurance against impersonation. In the event that the polling card has not reached the voter through the postal services, nevertheless, the production of a legally authenticated identification, still enables the concerned person to cast his or her ballot, once the name is located on the electoral roll.

I understand through sources from the Election Department that for the forthcoming poll, the Commissioner has deployed 68,000 Police personnel plus 25 Army battalions. Each polling station is therefore well secured by both the military as well as the Police. 250,000 Public Servants have been deployed for election duty, either in the polling stations or for purposes of counting. Moreover, senior and well-trained Public Servants have been stationed to monitor and ensure the due conduct of the process in each Province of our country. It must be noted in this regard that the senior Public Servants, including those at staff level are all obliged prior to their beginning their election duty, to take an oath that they will conduct their responsibilities impartially and faithfully.

This election comes in the wake of our country having been freed from a conflict situation that lasted in some areas for around 2 ½ decades. While the ground conditions are therefore far more conducive for the conduct of a peaceful poll than ever before in the recent past, nevertheless there do remain significant constraints that due to their very nature, would not be eased automatically. Chief among them is the certain availability of unlicensed and unauthorized firearms, plus of persons, who have been trained in their use. Unscrupulous elements can exploit this

situation to cause violence, in a manner that is alien to our traditions of tolerance and unknown in Sri Lanka, before the conflict situation erupted.

I am told that there have been 859 reported incidents of election related violence. 600 of these have their genesis in clashes between supporters of contending candidates that erupted at the time of putting up or removing banners and posters. However, a most positive development which I wish to flag for your attention in the strongest possible terms is the meeting that took place on 21st January 2010 between the Commissioner of Elections and the General Secretaries of the Alliances to which the two principal contenders belong, namely Mr. Susil Premajayantha of the UPFA and Mr. Tissa Attanayake of the UNF. At the end of their discussion, Mr. Premajayantha and Mr. Attanayake made a joint appeal addressed to their party supporters in particular as well as to the general public, that there should be no violation of election laws and to cast their votes in a free and fair manner.

In addition, President Mahinda Rajapaksa has made it a point to emphasize that those engaging in undemocratic activities during the Election would be severely dealt with according to the law. The specific words the President used were in fact "I will not allow such unscrupulous elements to breach democracy nor disrupt the peace and co-existence among the people under any circumstances". He also added that "the people should not be in fear as all measures have been taken by the Government to ensure peace and security in society during the election".

I understand that the Elections Department is confident that the poll tomorrow and the counting ending with the announcement of the results, will go forward with absolute integrity. As Minister of Foreign Affairs, I want to send out a message through you to the international community that the Government of Sri Lanka will do everything necessary to facilitate the Election Commissioner, to successfully execute his responsibility of conducting a free and fair poll".

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