

Sri Lankan forces protected civilian lives during counter-terrorism operations



In conducting military operations to eliminate terrorism, the Government's primary concern was to safeguard the innocent civilians, many of whom had experienced multiple displacements over the years, and had their children forcibly conscripted by the LTTE to be used as cannon fodder. Many of them had lost one or more of their family members. Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama made these observations, while addressing the final day session of the 8th Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore today (31 May 2009).

The Shangri-La Dialogue, since its inaugural meeting in 2002, has become an integral part of the architecture of Asian defence diplomacy and is recognized as the region's premier and most inclusive security institution. This is the 3rd occasion that Sri Lanka has been invited to participate in this high profile defence and security diplomacy forum, attended by 18 other nations in the Asian region, as well as the US, Russia, UK, France, Germany, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

In a wide ranging speech on the theme, "Winning Counter Insurgency Campaigns- A Sri Lankan Perspective", the Minister dealt with three broad aspects, namely, the LTTE reign of terror, rescuing civilians by launching a humanitarian mission and lastly the way forward- reconciliation and the political process. He announced to the distinguished audience, the end of LTTE terror in Sri Lanka, barely a week ago. The Foreign Minister attributed the astonishing success of the campaign to eradicate terrorism to President Rajapaksa, who has provided effective and decisive leadership to the military establishment in his capacity as the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. His acumen in sustaining broad-based popular support for the military campaign, and his engagement with the polity for wider consensus was evident from the very outset.

The Minister noted that Sri Lanka will no doubt enter the annals of history as a classic textbook example of a nation that successfully prevailed over the scourge of terrorism, while tenaciously upholding the cherished values of democracy and human rights that have been deeply ingrained in the psyche of her people. Armchair critics and skeptics who doubted the firm resolve and strength of our brave armed forces to defeat the so-called "invincible" might of the LTTE have been effectively silenced today, just as much as the guns.

Speaking on the second element of the theme of his speech, the Minister highlighted the importance that the Government attached to addressing the immediate challenge of rehabilitation and resettlement of nearly 280,000 persons who have been displaced by the conflict. Civilians accommodated in the welfare villages lack family reunification. The influx of a large number of civilians within a short span of time scattered families. The Government is endeavouring to address the issue of family reunification. Children who were denied of their childhood are able to lead a more secure life today since there is no more the threat of being forcibly conscripted by the LTTE.

Dealing with the final aspect of the theme, Minister Bogollagama reiterated the firm commitment of the Government of President Rajapaksa to reaching a political settlement acceptable to all. He quoted the President's address to Parliament last week on 19th of May, wherein he had stated, "the defeat of the LTTE and the breakdown of their armed strength will never be the defeat of the Tamil people of this country..... 'we do not accept a military solution as the final solution. It is necessary that the political solution they need should be brought closer to them faster than any country in the world would bring"

The Minister pointed out that the post-conflict phase is crucial in restoring confidence in people whose lives have been torn apart by this terrible conflict and stressed the need for the international community to help in this endeavour. He noted that the post-conflict reconciliation would also involve reintegration of former combatants into the political and economic process as well. For this purpose, a Presidential Task Force for resettlement, development and security in the Northern Province has been established to oversee these programmes.

Foreign Minister Bogollagama concluded his address with these parting words, “Victory can never be complete unless we win the hearts and minds and give the people affected by years of suffering a peace dividend.”

Ministry of Foreign Affairs
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Speech of the Hon Foreign Minister

Winning Counter Insurgency Campaigns: A Sri Lankan Perspective’ Address by Hon. Rohitha Bogollagama, M.P. Minister of Foreign Affairs of Sri Lanka at the Shangri-La Dialogue 29-31 May 2009

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. I am pleased to be back here at the Shangri-La Dialogue for the 3rd successive year. On the previous two occasions I came before you to share our engagement with the LTTE and how we were hoping to counter its terror tactics effectively.

At the outset, let me delineate for purpose of clarity the structure of my address this morning. It would comprise the following elements:

- a) The LTTE reign of terror
- b) The rescuing of civilians by launching humanitarian mission
- c) The way forward; reconciliation and the political process

2. When I addressed this august forum last year, Sri Lanka’s security forces were in the midst of a major operation to clear over 15,000 sq. km of territory in the Northern and Eastern provinces that had come under the sway of the LTTE, universally acknowledged as one of the most ruthless and deadliest terrorist groups in the world. Over the last 25 years, the LTTE had engaged in a blood-soaked campaign of unmitigated terror and violence leaving in its wake a trail of death, destruction and immense human suffering. The opportunity cost for Sri Lanka in terms of its potential socio-economic development is immense and the loss suffered by two generations of our society cannot be replaced. This is not all. They pursued a violent campaign beginning in the mid 1970s by assassinating Tamil politicians who were moderate voices with a view to suppressing dissent and claimed the status of the “sole representative” of the Tamil people.

3. They ethnically cleansed the North by driving out the Muslims and Sinhalese. They then targeted civilians in the South by carrying out massive suicide strikes. The suicide bombing of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka on January 31st 1996 alone killed 91 and wounded 1,400 innocent civilians. This was Sri Lanka’s equivalent of 09/11 and took place 9 months after the Oklahoma bombing. The LTTE tried to cripple our economy, bombing the World Trade Centre in Colombo and destroyed nearly half of our national carrier’s fleet. They indulged in countless assassinations of our political leadership, including the then President R. Premadasa in 1993. Two years earlier, an LTTE female suicide bomber extinguished the life of a distinguished former Prime Minister of India, Shri Rajiv Gandhi. The assassinations, destruction of human lives and misery brought upon by the LTTE will

run into several pages.

4. Today, I am pleased to announce the end of the LTTE terror in Sri Lanka by the efforts of the Government of H.E. the President Mahinda Rajapaksa, just a few days ago. Sri Lanka will no doubt enter the annals of history as a classic textbook example of a nation that successfully prevailed over the scourge of terrorism, while tenaciously upholding the cherished values of democracy and human rights that have been deeply ingrained in the psyche of our people. Armchair critics and sceptics who doubted the firm resolve and strength of our brave armed forces to defeat the so-called “invincible” might of the LTTE have been effectively silenced today, just as much as the guns. The astonishing success of this campaign redounds to the credit of President Rajapaksa, who has provided effective and decisive leadership to the military establishment in his capacity as the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. His acumen in sustaining broad-based popular support for the military campaign, and his engagement with the polity for wider consensus was evident from the very outset.

5. May I now recall the initial engagement with the LTTE starting in July 2006 due to the closure of the Mavil Aru sluice gates depriving water for 35,000 people. This occurred when the Government was engaged with the LTTE in the peace talks in Geneva. Let me now take you back to some of the key elements of the LTTE developments.

6. Permit me, Ladies & Gentlemen to briefly recapitulate what Sri Lanka was confronted with during the last two decades and a half. The LTTE emerged as a terrorist group claiming to be fighting for an independent state exclusively for Tamils to be carved out of the Northern and Eastern provinces of the island comprising 1/3 of the country's land mass 3/5 of its coastline.

7. During these years, successive Governments invited the LTTE to negotiations. Starting in 1985 with the Thimpu talks, which were facilitated by the Indian Government, several rounds of talks were held at intervals but the LTTE never engaged seriously at these talks having used such opportunities to re-arm, regroup and wage war again. They were never serious in negotiating a political solution. I myself was a member of the Delegation of the Government on two occasions for the talks held in Geneva in 2006. These were the last rounds of talks the Government held with the LTTE.

8. The longest ceasefire brokered by the facilitator of the peace process, Norway, in February 2002, only helped to transform the LTTE from a guerrilla group into a semi-conventional army and become the first terrorist group in the world to acquire air power in the shape of a rudimentary air force, as well as a lethal naval force, known as the Sea Tigers. The cost during this period from February 2002 – November 2005, over 740 civilians were killed including that of the former Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka, Lakshman Kadirgamar, in August 2005. According to the UNICEF, the conscription of the child soldiers by the LTTE numbered over 7,400 during this period.

9. Despite these developments, the Government of the day ensured an uninterrupted supply of food, medicine and other essential items to the areas under the control of the terrorists, well aware that the LTTE was siphoning off a significant part of these supplies for their own use. But successive Governments never used such supplies as a weapon of war against the Tamil community, whom we regard as an integral part of the community of Sri Lankans.

10. This violence unleashed by the LTTE would never have grown into the dimensions that it eventually did if not for a number of factors. The availability of millions of dollars through LTTE networks generated by a illicit arms trade and drug trafficking in international waters, commercial operations carried out by sections of the diaspora including illegal money transfers through hawala banking, international financial fraud and credit card scams as well as extortion from the Tamil community itself.

11. The LTTE's ability to brazenly flaunt its symbols and flags even in countries where it is proscribed. Its ability to hold propaganda and fund raising events and other functions glorified the terrorist movement, without being restrained under the law, have made these proscriptions ineffective.

12. In conducting military operations to eliminate terrorism, our Government's primary concern was to safeguard the innocent civilians, many of whom had experienced multiple displacements over the years, and had their children forcibly conscripted by the LTTE to be used as cannon fodder. Many of them had lost one or more of their family members. Even young girls were not spared.

13. In the last stages of the operation the situation became more complex and dangerous. The LTTE finding itself cornered used civilians as human shields. This was in a small strip of land about 6 sq. km. in the final stage, thus denying and placing the people in a most inhuman condition, without proper food, shelter, sanitation, water, electricity and exposed to all the elements of nature. I vividly recall the images of the footage obtained by the (Unmanned Aerial Vehicle) UAV, which were most perturbing. All men and women with children were fleeing the LTTE, while LTTE cadres were shooting at them to prevent them from fleeing. It was in this backdrop that we witnessed the exodus of these people fleeing into the safety of the area controlled by the Government. Now they are temporarily accommodated in welfare villages. Providing them with basic facilities remains as one of the highest priorities of the Government. Today, even the parents of the tyrant Prabhakaran are now being cared by the Government.

14. Since July 2006, over 5,200 armed forces personnel have paid the supreme sacrifice in the defence of their beloved motherland while nearly 30,000 security force personnel were injured and maimed.

15. It may be noted that all these were achieved in an unhelpful and hostile background. The LTTE propaganda unleashed footage of alleged carnage and recorded telephone interviews, under duress, with civilians who were held hostage by the LTTE, thus making statements. Those transmitted unsubstantiated allegations against the military, claimed heavy weapons in civilian areas, in order to buttress the propaganda of "genocide against the Tamil people". This was both fictional and well fabricated with ulterior and sinister motive in order to discredit the armed forces as well as the Government.

16. During this phase, there were attempts to pressurise the Government to declare a ceasefire or a pause by the certain sections of the international community. This would have, no doubt, prolonged the conflict and provided the lifeline to the terrorists. Had we succumbed to such pressures, the Tamil civilians who were held as human shields by the LTTE would have had to pay with their lives. Fortunately, for them, we did not yield to any such pressure tactics, and stayed the course to liberate these long suffering people and was able to bring the conflict to an end. We could have completed this mission very much earlier. But being a responsible and democratically elected Government we had to move very cautiously taking into consideration the safety of these civilians.

17. Although the LTTE has been militarily defeated, we are left with its international network largely intact. Many of the operatives have clearly cultivated powerful political lobbies in certain capitals with a view to resurrecting the LTTE. It is important for the international community to take all measures to assist the Government of Sri Lanka to crack down the global network of the LTTE.

18. May I now move to the 2nd phase of the address which are the immediate challenges: The rehabilitation and resettlement of nearly 280,000 persons who are displaced by the conflict is one of our foremost priorities. Civilians accommodated in the welfare villages lack family reunification. The influx of a large number of civilians within a short span of time scattered families. The Government is endeavouring to address the issue of family reunification. Children who were denied of their childhood are able to lead a more secure life today since there is no child conscription by the LTTE. Facilities for education are available for the children perhaps for the first time in their lives. The youth that were destined to be suicide cadres, today, have thrown the deadly cyanide capsule and are awaiting to be rehabilitated. The training camps of the LTTE and factories that produced suicide devices and armaments are no longer in existence. Even some of the LTTE combatants have found the IDP camps a safe haven. The next step would be for the resettlement of the IDPs in their original places of residence. Demining will precede this exercise as well as the reconstruction of infrastructure facilities.

19. The Government is firmly committed to reaching a political settlement acceptable to all. In his address to Parliament last week on 19th of May, President Mahinda Rajapaksa said and I quote

“the defeat of the LTTE and the breakdown of their armed strength will never be the defeat of the Tamil people of this country..... ‘we do not accept a military solution as the final solution. It is necessary that the political solution they need should be brought closer to them faster than any country in the world would bring” (unquote).

20. Already, our Tamil brethren have responded magnificently to the President’s call for unity. Even before the conflict was brought to an end, my Government brought together a significant group of the Tamil Diaspora, residing in many counties, on 28th – 29th March this year to explain our plans and objectives for developing the Northern Province and they pledged their unstinted support and cooperation.

21. This post-conflict phase is crucial in restoring confidence in people whose lives have been torn apart by this terrible conflict. The international community has a role to play in this endeavour.

22. The post-conflict reconciliation would also involve reintegration of former combatants into the political and economic process as well. For this purpose, a Presidential Task Force for resettlement, development and security in the Northern Province has been established to oversee these programmes.

23. Reconciliation Process: As identified we have already unfolded the roadmap to achieve this objective through the devolution of power to regions as provided for in the Constitution within the framework of the 13th amendment. This provision never found its full implementation for the last 22 years since the Indo-Lanka Accord.

24. Our people are weary of war, yet they are resilient and want to get on with their lives. Therefore, the post conflict period will focus on rehabilitation, resettlement, economic empowerment, holding of free and fair elections. We may replicate our success in the Eastern Province in this regard. Victory can never be complete unless we win the hearts and minds and give the people affected by years of suffering a peace dividend.

25. Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, we have overcome terrorism and Sri Lanka is poised for an economic take off. In conclusion may I now mention the overall dimensions of our success both to our people in Sri Lanka and to the region and to the world at large.

i. Sri Lanka has come out as a free country today, free from the scourge of terrorism;

ii. The LTTE as a terrorist organisation is eliminated. The elimination of the LTTE from Sri Lanka as a terror organisation would prevent other facets of terrorism such as money laundering, narcotics trafficking, human smuggling, arms smuggling etc from being manifested world over ;

iii. Dealing with the terror organisation, the way the Government of Sri Lanka had done, will send a strong signal to the international community that the terror can be defeated and eliminated.

Thank you