

**Speech by Hon. Rohitha Bogollagama, MP, Minister of Foreign Affairs
in Parliament on 09 June 2009**

Hon. Deputy Speaker,

I am especially pleased to share my views on the occasion of the Debate on the extension of the State of Emergency for one more month, at a time when the country has been completely liberated from the scourge of terrorism.

Firstly, it is necessary for me to reply to the speech made by my Hon. friend, Lakshman Seneviratne. He is my friend. However, I regret that he has spoken without being aware of the facts. He said that Sri Lanka does not have diplomatic relations with Israel. He is unaware that we have been maintaining diplomatic relations with Israel for a long period of time. At this point of time, we have a Resident Diplomatic Mission in Tel Aviv. Mr. Seneviratne is presently our Ambassador there. Similarly, Israel's Embassy in New Delhi is concurrently accredited to Sri Lanka.

Secondly, in the recent past, Israel has not moved any proposal or resolution against Sri Lanka in any international forum. I must rectify this error on his part. Similarly, I have to point out another error on his part. The UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon arrived in Sri Lanka on the 22nd of May. He left Sri Lanka on the 23rd. There has been no Accord between him and President Mahinda Rajapaksa or with the Sri Lanka Government. I am quite surprised that he being a senior Parliamentarian has been making such statements.

I did not interrupt you. Now, if there is any question arising from my speech, you may raise it. Now, listen to me. I will provide replies during my speech. I will also give you an opportunity. There has been no Accord as such. Following UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon's meeting with President Mahinda Rajapaksa and the discussions which I also attended, a Joint Statement on 23rd May was issued. This is the only Statement that has been made. If you wish to see this, I can make available a copy of the Statement. There is no mention of any Accord in this Statement. I must also in reply state that Sri Lanka has entered the annals of history internationally as a first class nation in having defeated terrorism.

In recent days, I made a visit to the United Kingdom. Last Friday, I held bilateral talks with the British Foreign Secretary, David Miliband in London. He said that he was pleased that Sri Lanka had faced the challenge of terrorism and overcome it successfully.

It is in this background that President Mahinda Rajapaksa is preparing to put forward several agendas. Out of these, one that occupies the highest priority is to provide all the necessary facilities including shelter, food, medical assistance, getting ready the areas for permanent resettlement for the civilian population in the North numbering approximately 300,000, who have been freed from the clutches of the terrorists. This is what we are telling the international community, the United Nations, and other international fora. It is not impossible for Sri Lanka to accomplish this task.

Hon. Lakshman Seneviratne has himself acknowledged the steps taken by the Government in the aftermath of the tsunami. Then, in 2004 also, the Government in this country was the People's Alliance Administration. It was possible for our Government then to resettle all those displaced persons very quickly. Today, we are able to show to the world the progress we have achieved in resettling all the civilians who had been displaced due to fighting between the years 2006 and 2008. Therefore, the challenge that we faced today is not something that is insurmountable. The Government of President Mahinda Rajapaksa has the ability to fulfil this undertaking. (In Sinhala)

At this point, I propose to continue my speech in English.

At the beginning, Sir, I would like to quote what the President stated in his address to the nation. I quote:

“As a nation we have to go very far to make our independence complete. Terrorists were able to get the world to bring pressure on us, a free and sovereign State. That was possible because the terrorists had the capability to bring pressure on those governments.

Therefore, it is necessary to begin a new era in foreign relations to safeguard my motherland. Having won the freedom of our motherland, we must next establish our freedom and sovereignty internationally.

We are not a carbon copy of any other country. Our country that gave courage to Asia by defeating terrorism that could not be defeated elsewhere in the world should be made the ‘Pride of Asia’.”

President Mahinda Rajapaksa heralded a new era in Sri Lanka’s international relations, when he addressed the Nation at the Victory Day Parade on 3rd June at the Galle Face Green, where he stated the words I quoted.

I stand in this august House today to join our fellow members to pay our collective and humble tribute to our brave security forces who have laid down their lives for the defence of our motherland, in order to enable all of us to breathe the air of freedom once again, after living under the dark shadow of terrorism that has plagued our nation for almost three decades.

I take this opportunity to echo the sentiments of President Rajapaksa in his above “Address to the Nation” to gratefully acknowledge the support of the international community in protecting our freedom and sovereignty. I quote His Excellency the President’s words:

“We have also been able to build genuine good relations with the international community. These honest friends have carried out the greatest responsibility towards our freedom and sovereignty in this era. We value very much the assistance we received from all these countries at this moment. Our people who enjoy the satisfaction of freedom together with them must always have in their hearts the friendship extended by these friends.”

Even at the risk of repetition, I believe, it is incumbent upon me to recapitulate the action taken by members of the international community to curb the manifold activities of the LTTE abroad. India, the United States, the United Kingdom, the 27 member European Union and Canada have all proscribed the LTTE as a terrorist organization.

The ready support we have been consistently receiving from our friends in the international community, has enhanced the capacity of our nation’s heroes –the brave members of the armed forces, ably assisted by the Police and the Civil Defence Force to achieve this historic and comprehensive victory over LTTE terrorism.

Our quiet diplomacy triumphed in being able to secure an uninterrupted supply line to meet the procurement needs of our armed forces, the diplomatic clearances that were vital in obtaining over-flight rights to transport urgent supplies by air, the intelligence received from friendly countries that made it possible for our Navy to intercept and destroy the floating arsenals of the LTTE, which were a tangible manifestation of our highly successful and constructive engagement with the international community in eliminating the menace of terrorism from the shores of our island.

As I pointed out at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, a high profile defence and security diplomacy forum in Asia at the end of last month, Sri Lanka would undoubtedly enter the annals of history as a classic textbook example of a nation that successfully prevailed over the scourge of terrorism, while tenaciously upholding our time honored and cherished values of democracy and human rights, that have been so profoundly imbued in the life-blood of our nation.

Thus, we find it utterly despicable and quite frankly appalling to be confronted with wholly unsubstantiated and ludicrous allegations being bandied about on civilian casualties, and calls for a so-called “war crimes” investigation. For the record, let me boldly and quite categorically state that the conduct of our armed forces throughout the period of the latest and most decisive phase of engagement against the LTTE has been exemplary.

We, as Sri Lankans can be truly proud of our uniformed men and women, who are a role model for militaries around the world. Both in the prosecution of the hostilities against the LTTE, as well as in the post-conflict operations catering to the humanitarian needs of the IDPs, our security forces have exemplified the noble and sublime values of all the great religions and cultures that co-exist peacefully amidst our people. The hallmark of the military operations has been the humanitarian element that underpinned the successful outcome that we bear witness today and acknowledged by the Opposition.

If there is an iota of truth in these fanciful allegations against our security forces, how does one account for the thousands of civilians who literally braved the bullets of the LTTE and fled across the frontlines in Mullaitivu during the final weeks of the armed conflict?

The overwhelming support Sri Lanka registered at the 11th Special Session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva last month is a clear endorsement by the international community of the correctness of our Government’s approach in combating terrorism.

Thus, the attempts by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, to second-guess and call into question the majority vote for the Resolution co-sponsored by Sri Lanka and friendly countries is quite unbecoming of the neutrality and impartiality of the high office she occupies. Clearly, the High Commissioner has over-stepped her mandate and it is our sincere hope that her personal opinion and prejudices would not cloud her judgment of issues, that she may be less informed or familiar about.

The Government of Sri Lanka has reiterated its strongest commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights in keeping with international human rights standards and its own international obligations. In the Joint Statement issued by the Government and the UN (Hon. Lakshman Seneviratne, I am referring to the Joint Statement) at the conclusion of the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon’s visit to Sri Lanka last month, the Secretary-General underlined the importance of an accountability process for addressing violations of the international humanitarian and human rights law, while the Government stated its intention to take measures to address those grievances with the legal framework of Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka has a long and well established tradition of a robust, independent and activist judiciary. Thus, our legal system is endowed with full powers to adjudicate upon any complaints brought to its attention by aggrieved parties and dispense effective remedies.

The priority and the greatest challenge that confronts the Government right now is to address the humanitarian needs of the almost 300,000 IDPs who are being accommodated in the welfare villages and IDP centres and to expeditiously re-settle them in their places of origin. This process of reconciliation will culminate in their political empowerment, whereby they would be able to freely elect their own political representation, after being denied this democratic freedom for almost three decades, due to LTTE terrorism.

Let me also go into the issues that have now come up for us in the international arena. Still, the LTTE activists the world over are targetting our Buddhist temples; they are targetting some of our Missions. The LTTE, internationally well lubricated by enormous amounts of resources at their command, at their disposal is finding channels in order to highlight its terror character. This has been reflected in the attacks on our Buddhist temples and Buddhist centres in Canada, France, the United Kingdom and also on our Missions in the Hague, France and also in Canada, where we were able to get adequate protection at the time from the respective Governments, for which we are grateful.

We are also mindful of the need for us go after the ones who have been responsible for generating funds for the LTTE. It is now public knowledge of our efforts seeking the arrest of K. Pathmanathan, a fugitive, a person wanted and is in the red list of the Interpol and who has been responsible for the LTTE's international network. We have called for his arrest. I have personally handed over the arrest documents to my counterparts in some of the countries during the past two weeks. We are also seeking the other activists who are responsible for child recruitment, for decorating the youth of the LTTE, the cadres with cyanide capsules around their necks and also for giving a wider dimension to the terror activities both locally and internationally.

In answer to what the Hon. Member asked, how we are going to engage with the Tamil community both here and overseas, I must state, Hon. Deputy Speaker, at this point, we are completely engaged with the Tamil diaspora.

We want to encourage more and more Tamil people living overseas, who could not live in Sri Lanka due to the LTTE's presence in the Northern part, to come back and settle in pursuit of a better life in Sri Lanka. Our Government has gone on record, our President has gone on record to say that he calls the international Tamil community of Sri Lankan origin to come back to Sri Lanka and this appeal was made from the House when His Excellency the President addressed the House the other day.

This is the type of process we are currently engaged in. We do not want to be away from the needs of our people in the North and we cater to the needs of our people in the IDP camps. They will soon find permanent settlement in their respective villages. We also want to engage with the international community because we are transparent to the world at large. We want to have a wider engagement with the international community in terms of the national agenda that our President has laid down for the settlement of this issue and total integration of our country as one nation.

With these words, I conclude and thank the Hon. Deputy Speaker for the opportunity extended to me.

Thank you, Sir.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Colombo
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