



SRI LANKA

Address by

His Excellency Mahinda Rajapaksa

President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka

at

the Sixty First Session

of the

United Nations General Assembly

New York

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(Please check against delivery)

Madam President,
Mr. Secretary-General,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Government and people of Sri Lanka, I congratulate you, Madam President, as you assume the high office of President of the 61st Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations. I am happy to note that a lady from a sister Asian country will guide us through the current session.

Sri Lanka, being the country that elected the first woman Head of Government in the modern world – Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike – your assumption of this high office is of special significance to us.

To His Excellency Jan Eliasson, let me convey our gratitude for the leadership he provided to the work of the 60th session of the General Assembly.

In 1970, when I was first elected to the Parliament of Sri Lanka, a paragraph in the Preamble of the Charter of the United Nations gave substance and direction to my future political life.

(I quote)

.... to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the *human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small*"

(Unquote)

Having been a human rights campaigner at the grass roots level throughout my political life, it was natural that my new government should be committed to carrying the message of democracy to all corners of our multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious country. Democracy, equity and prosperity is our clarion call.

In addition, my country has been influenced by the core Buddhist values of non-violence, loving kindness, compassion, equanimity and mindfulness.

With this sense of direction, our Government committed itself "Towards a New Sri Lanka" – guided by a vision of peace; where every Sri Lankan citizen may live with dignity and self-respect; in freedom and without fear; free of want; and where every child may enjoy childhood and grow up with hope and expectation.

Madam President, however, Sri Lanka's dream is threatened by the terrible affliction which impedes development, undermines democracy and challenges fundamental freedoms. I refer to the bane of terrorism which confronts my country and many other countries of the world. I wish to reaffirm my government's firm commitment to supporting all global efforts to combat terrorism whenever and wherever it raises its ugly head.

Terrorism has become closely intertwined with organized crime. It is now directly linked with people smuggling, the trade in illicit drugs, the illegal trade in small arms and money laundering. Terrorism is

a major impediment to development and poses a terrible challenge to civilized society. We support all measures undertaken in the UN to meet this challenge. We have ratified all UN Conventions in this regard.

In our capacity as Chair of the Ad-hoc Committee on Measures to Eliminate International Terrorism, we shall spare no effort to realize the international legal framework to facilitate our common struggle against terrorism. It is our fervent hope that the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism will soon become a reality.

The illicit trade and trafficking of small arms and light weapons, has contributed to the escalation of many local conflicts, due to the easy availability of arms for non-State actors. Sri Lanka is concerned that despite the commitment of the international community to wipe out this menace, the impact at ground level throughout the world, is limited. We hope that the UN Plan of Action on this matter will be fully implemented, and its scope further expanded in the future.

With regard to terrorism, I speak with personal experience in my own country. Exploiting minority concerns, which we are addressing politically, a ruthless terrorist outfit in Sri Lanka, the LTTE, has been terrorizing our people for over two decades. In an age when the world seeks dialogue and peace, the LTTE devotes its full force to violence, suicide bombings, massacre of civilians, indiscriminate armed assaults, and conscription of young children for war.

Assurances given to the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative on 'Children and Armed Conflict', on the conscription of children for armed combat, have been blatantly violated.

At the Presidential election in November last year, people in certain parts of Sri Lanka were cruelly deprived of their freedom to vote. Furthermore, in an act of 'ethnic cleansing', more than 60,000 Muslims were forcibly expelled from their homes in the North.

Madam President, our government believes that some of the concerns of minorities in my country have deep roots. In this connection, I recall the words contained in the Constitution of the UNESCO to the following effect:

(I quote)

"Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed"

(Unquote)

Soon after my election, despite the violence unleashed by the LTTE, I therefore expressed the conviction that we need to address the causes of the conflict through a fresh perspective, and a new approach to develop a sustainable solution. We examined this issue with an open mind, and looked at all options available with a view to evolving a national consensus to achieve an honourable peace in an undivided country.

A consultative process is currently underway to prepare constitutional proposals to address the concerns of the minorities. I have invited the LTTE to participate in the process of seeking a solution to the conflict through dialogue.

As one of the oldest democracies in Asia, it is our firm conviction that the restoration of democracy, the creation of space for dissent, and the promotion of human rights in the conflict affected areas, are the essential elements of a successful and sustainable process of Peace. I hope that the international community will continue to extend to us its fullest support towards the transformation of the LTTE into a democratic civilian organisation.

Our government firmly believes that terrorism cannot be eliminated through military means alone. We remain fully committed to talking with the LTTE either directly or through a facilitator. It is our hope that the LTTE will transform itself from a terrorist outfit to one that is committed to dialogue and democracy. Our government stands ready to respond to any display of goodwill and a move towards a non-violent approach.

We continue to take unilateral humanitarian measures which extend even to LTTE cadres. As a responsible government, we will continue to provide unhindered access to conflict affected areas to the ICRC, to UN Agencies and to other recognized humanitarian agencies.

Over 53,000 Muslims were evicted from their homes by the LTTE, following the recent violence. They are the innocent victims of the LTTE's ruthless policies. Following government counter measures, almost all of these have now returned to their homes. The government has assumed responsibility to provide medical supplies, food and other essential items to the Internally Displaced Persons living in the affected areas.

Madam President, I am pleased to state that despite the conflict in our country, the economy of Sri Lanka continues to grow at a commendable rate. In the first quarter of this year, we recorded a growth of 8.1%, - the highest in 28 years. With our determination to further enhance growth with equity, we have adopted an economic strategy that will provide opportunities for all citizens, while at the same time giving the private sector adequate space, as the engine of growth.

We continue to maintain highest rating on the Human Development Index in South Asia. We have already achieved some of the Millennium Development Goal targets in primary school enrolment, gender equality and maternal and infant mortality rates. We hope that the increased economic opportunities in the country will further encourage the LTTE to opt for a negotiated peace.

We follow a pro-poor development strategy with a focus on regionally balanced growth. Our objective is to achieve overall development, while raising the income levels of the poor through the empowerment of communities living at grassroots level. In this connection Sri Lanka hopes that debt forgiveness will continue to be expanded to encourage the development of developing countries. It is only right that those who reached the heights of development should pause to lend a helping hand to those who have fallen behind due to circumstances.

I also wish to acknowledge the role of President Clinton, the UN Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery, and the Secretary General, Mr. Kofi Annan, for their assistance with tsunami related assistance. I am pleased to state that despite being a developing country, we are now well on the way to recovery from this massive disaster, in many instances as a result of the efforts of our own people. We urge our development partners to stay involved with us in this long term effort.

Madam President, we in Sri Lanka see the United Nations as an organization that is indispensable to create a just and secure world order.

We, the 192 members of the United Nations, must continue to have faith in our collective capacity for reforming the United Nations, so that it is made more effective and more relevant to the needs of its members in facing the challenges of the 21st century.

We are pleased with several important measures that have been adopted since the 60th Session.

Given my personal commitment to the promotion of human rights at both local and international level, the establishment of the Human Rights Council with enhanced status and capacity to promote and protect human rights worldwide, is a cause for delight. I am happy that Sri Lanka was elected to the Council in May this year. In honouring a pledge made at the Presidential election last year, we have already started work on crafting a Human Rights Charter in Sri Lanka. Consistent with our goal of safeguarding human rights, my government will establish an international panel to observe investigations into certain alleged human rights violations which my Government has already condemned.

The establishment of the Peace-Building Commission is another important landmark achievement of the United Nations this year. We are also pleased that Sri Lanka has been elected to the Organizing Committee of the Peace Building Commission as a founder member of this important body. The needs and concerns of those affected, the specific theatres of conflict, and the ground realities of each specific situation must necessarily be taken into account in the work of the Commission.

We are also encouraged by the general agreement that the Security Council has to be strengthened, as it does not reflect current geo-political realities. We therefore look forward to the continuation of work towards Security Council reform: towards making its composition more representative and its decision making more democratic. It is essential that the Security Council reflects the current geo-political realities in Asia, Africa and the Latin America.

Madam President, for long years now, on the basis of our commitment to human rights and dignity, we have had a lasting interest in seeing the emergence of peace in the Middle East. The recognition of the rights of the Palestinian people is a concern to me, as well as to my country. A large number of Sri Lankans have, in recent years, made the Middle East their temporary home. We are pained by the recent escalation of violence in that region, and the devastation in Lebanon. It is our sincere hope that the Security Council Resolution SC 1701 of 2006 will pave the way for peace and security for Lebanon, as well as for the region.

The Preamble of the UN Charter requires that we "unite our strength to maintain international peace and security".

Let us all, members of the United Nations, focus sharply on this commitment. Let us dedicate ourselves to its realization. And let us mobilise our collective energies towards the achievement of peace and security world wide.

Let us make Peace the goal of the present decade. Let us all unite for peace.

May all living beings be free of suffering, be healthy and be prosperous.

May the blessings of the Noble Triple Gem be with you all.

Thank You.