

Sri Lanka: From Ancient Past to Dynamic Future

An address given to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council
on 28 September, 2007 by His Excellency Mahinda Rajapaksa, President of Sri Lanka

I am very happy to be in the presence of such a distinguished audience this afternoon. I am glad to be here with you in California, a state which is home to a large Sri Lankan population, and in particular, in your lovely City of Angles.

We are inspired by California, being the seventh largest economy in the world, the home of the IT revolution and the birthplace of the film industry.

I wish to express my own and my people's most sincere thanks to the people in the state of California who came to our assistance in our hour of need when the Tsunami of 2004 devastated our land. We will always remember your generosity with gratitude.

Earlier this week, I addressed the UN General Assembly on a few key issues, among them, Sri Lanka's position on global terrorism. Dr. Martin Luther King often said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere;" likewise, we firmly believe that terrorism anywhere is terrorism everywhere.

Terrorism in Sri Lanka is nurtured by funds from overseas. We urge all our friends around the world, to help us to cut off funds to the terrorists in Sri Lanka.

Our goal remains a negotiated and honorable end to this unfortunate conflict in Sri Lanka. Our goal is to restore democracy and the rule of law to all the people of our country. Fifty-four percent of Sri Lanka's Tamil population now lives in areas other than the north and the east of the country, among the Sinhalese and other communities. There is no ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka as some media mistakenly highlight. Sri Lanka's security forces are fighting a terrorist group, not a particular community.

I see no military solution to the conflict. The current military operations are only intended to exert pressure on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to convince them that terrorism cannot bring them victory. Sri Lanka's armed forces have successfully cleared the country's Eastern Province of Tiger terrorism. Despite the scale of the operation, we ensured that civilian casualties were kept to a minimum.

We are mindful of various groups that have been screaming about massive numbers of displaced civilians in the east. However, only about 145,000 people were displaced, and, that too, for a very short period of time. Approximately 110,000 of the displaced have already returned home. Others will follow once land mines have been fully cleared. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the International Committee of the Red Cross both

acknowledge that Sri Lanka's program of returning displaced persons to their homes has been consistent with international standards.

These returnees now have to move on with their lives. We are in the process of ensuring that they have access to schools, health facilities, and basic amenities. They also need to be provided with livelihood opportunities. A massive program of rehabilitation and reconstruction has been launched, with the objective of making the Eastern Province a model for post-conflict reconstruction and development. We hope to accomplish the major part of this program with our own effort, but also with the assistance of the international community. My government has deployed approximately 20 billion rupees (\$176.3 million) for the reconstruction of the East.

It gives us great strength to know that the international community is with us in our efforts at rehabilitation and reconstruction. During the time the Tigers controlled the east, they devastated the economy of the area. Thus, there are plenty of opportunities for civic groups to join in the reconstruction of schools, community institutions, and hospitals, and in rehabilitating the livelihood of the people of the East. There is tremendous potential for developing fisheries, tourism and animal husbandry. A consortium of donors including France, Spain and Japan are assisting in constructing a major coastal highway. The EU is building another. We have also begun a mono-rail project in Colombo. However, there are other key infrastructure projects being implemented.

We believe that the current conflict has its roots in poverty and underdevelopment. The way to wean the youth away from violence is to create economic opportunities for them. And there is tremendous potential for investment projects in the east. Tourism, modern agriculture, aqua culture and the fisheries industry are some of the lucrative areas for foreign investment.

Despite the ongoing conflict, Sri Lanka has not neglected economic development in other parts of the country. We are in the process of expanding the capacity of the Colombo port. In a few years, Colombo port will be a modern commercial hub with significantly enhanced capacity to handle container vessels. Another port is being developed in the country's south, also an international airport. Several major irrigation projects have been started. A national budget airline operates to seven international destinations giving a boost to the tourism industry. Sri Lanka has still not exploited its full potential to meet the demands of the IT world. I invite you to consider Sri Lanka as a destination, when you make your own investment decisions in the future.

Our per capita income is around US \$ 1350 now, one of the highest in South Asia. The economy grew by 7.2 percent last year. Unemployment is at a record low level. We are also on the way to achieving or surpassing many of the Millennium Development Goals. For instance, less than 5 percent of our population is below the poverty line. The net primary school enrolment in 2004 was 97 percent. Almost every child in Sri Lanka goes to school. Very few countries in the world can make this claim. Our infant mortality rate in 2004 was one of the lowest in the world.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Sri Lanka has been misunderstood and her actions misinterpreted in many ways. Over the decades, we have developed our democratic institutions with great care and pride. We have enjoyed universal adult franchise since 1931. Democracy is deeply rooted in our country, and we hope to restore democracy in the Eastern Province without delay by holding elections. The pluralism and democracy taken for granted elsewhere in Sri Lanka need to be re-established in the Eastern Province and in the North. We hope that before long, we will also be able to take this message to the areas still controlled by the Tigers.

My government will exert every effort to search for a political solution that is honorable and sustainable. For this purpose, I have convened an All Party Representatives Committee comprising elected members of parliament, which has made substantial progress.

I believe that the direction we are heading will result in an outcome, which will ensure justice to all our people. The solution we seek must necessarily be just, honorable and acceptable to all, and above all, it must be a democratic solution, a solution that preserves the democratic institutions that we have developed over 75 years.

Thank you for your interest in Sri Lanka. May the Triple Gem bless you.

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