

Sri Lanka's Challenges ahead: Post LTTE scenario and ensuring sustainable peace

It is my pleasure to address the Asia Society today.

Sri Lanka, my island home, is heir to a more than 2500 year old civilization and a rich language.

My motherland suffered from almost 3 decades of destruction from terrorism.

But now we have shown the world that it can be defeated.

The US FBI has stated that the LTTE is the world's most dangerous and most ruthless terrorist organization. We were able to defeat this organization which falsely built for itself an image that it could never be defeated.

In order to do that our government had the support of our people, peace-loving leaders of other States and their citizens, and they helped in different ways to enable us to achieve our goal. For that I am deeply thankful.

However, to defeat terrorism was not simple or easy.

There were those who supported terrorism openly as well as secretly.

We invited the armed terrorists many a time to give up arms and enter the democratic path.

The terrorists ignored our calls.

They killed innocent unarmed people.

They destroyed the nation's resources and created a blood bath upon our motherland.

We were responsible for stopping this. A majority in my country requested the government to take on this responsibility.

We lost a lot of young lives in this war. We had to bear a huge cost.

Despite the cost, being a welfare State, our government never cut down any welfare services of our citizens.

It is during this period that the world suffered from an economic crisis. However, that did not affect us deeply because of our far sighted financial and economic policies.

When the international community was embroiled in this economic crisis, our problem was, more than that, this scourge of terrorism.

We are rid of that menace now. But the residual effects and a few related problems remain.

The internally displaced Sri Lankans need to be resettled in their villages again.

These are people who got displaced from their homes due to the conflict between the Tamil Tigers and our security forces.

It is our responsibility to resettle them and to carry out the planned development projects.

It is necessary to completely wipe out the LTTE network which operated locally as well as internationally (supported by both local and international sponsors.)

When our forces were fighting against terrorism, the terrorists used various ways and methods to escape the pressure.

A population close to 300,000 was kept as a human shield by the tiger terrorists while attacking the military forces.

These unarmed innocent Tamil civilians tried many times to come over to the government forces for security. At times the terrorists shot and killed those who tried to escape.

But finally all of them were able to break away from the LTTE and come under the shelter of the government security forces.

Among them were small children, pregnant women, the elderly and those suffering from various illnesses.

Our soldiers received them kindly and treated them as their own. That is their discipline and how they were trained.

Our motherland is nourished with the teaching of Buddhism. We were brought up in that background.

The true Buddhist shows compassion towards all others. Helping those who suffer enables them to bear suffering with a tranquil mind.

This is the disciplined and civilized army that the tiger terrorists attacked. The citizens were aware of this. They respected and trusted the military. Thus, close to 300,000 Tamil civilians came to us for security.

As you know, it is not an easy task to provide welfare to these people all at once.

Yet we accepted this challenge. Again my heart goes to the friendly nations who supported us.

Today, the people are being resettled systematically and efficiently.

A considerable number of people who were sheltered in temporary camps in Vavuniya, Jaffna and Trincomalee districts are already resettled.

The government accomplished a huge task in being able to do this in such a short time.

But there is a serious obstacle to overcome. Terrorists have planted landmines in playgrounds, holy sites, farm fields and on roads.

There are death traps in farm land after decades of terrorism.

We are not ready to push our people on to these death traps.

Mine clearance in the North is efficiently under way. For this several NGO's are helping the govt. with the leadership of the Sri Lanka Army. In addition special machinery is imported from abroad to increase the speed of mine clearance. For the benefit of the displaced persons educational and health services have been revived.

Infrastructure is being developed.

Main roads are being rebuilt in those areas. A 9 the main highway to Jaffna is being re-opened for public transport.

The Northern and Eastern sea is also open for fishing. For the past few decades the fishing industry in the North and the East faced challenges due to terrorist activities.

The tigers prevented people from cultivating their lands. But now our govt. has started agricultural projects in vast areas. Steps have been taken to provide the necessities for the farming community. Now the future livelihood of the Northern farmers is secure.

Our Government has re-opened the cement and paper industries which once operated very successfully in the Northern and Eastern provinces in the past. Communications have been restored. Programs are underway for the reconstruction and re-awakening of the Northern and Eastern provinces.

Some of the leaders of LTTE understood that this separatist war was not practical. Those leaders laid down their arms and joined the democratic process. One of them is a Cabinet Minister in our government and another is the Chief Minister of the Eastern Province.

They understood that by a democratic process people's needs can be met, not by the bullet but only by the vote.

A great number of youth are regretting today that due to intimidation, or voluntarily, they joined the LTTE.

Those who have been harassed physically & mentally will be rehabilitated through several programmes that have been implemented by our government.

We are in process of rehabilitatiing them by giving them education, vocational training and psychological treatment.

In our President's manifesto 'Mahinda Chinthanaya' he proposed a way to develop the country by using the talents and powers of the youth.

Many of them who were trapped in LTTE's grasp lost not only their childhood but also their youth.

We give them life. Although terrorists took away their childhood, our vision is to secure their future.

Children who were forced to carry arms now experience life without it. They study at school, sit for government exams, and exercise their vocational skills. A challenge that we are faced with is to channel this talent for the benefit of the country. For this purpose it is necessary to boost the economy of the country which was retarded by the three decade long terrorism, with new projects and programs.

There is a great opportunity for the investors from countries like yours to visit Sri Lanka and invest.

Our Constitution provides for the protection of foreign investors, perhaps the only instance of such constitutional provision you would find anywhere in the world.

I would like to take this opportunity to welcome you in advance.

We have started to improve the infrastructure which helps the investors in their new projects.

There are lots of new investment opportunities in the North & the East of the country.

We request you to join the development process of our nation by taking advantage of the investment opportunities in natural & traditional sectors.

There is a great space for the Sri Lankan tourism industry.

The Eastern beaches of Sri Lanka, considered some of the world's most beautiful, are now open for the public. The renowned Arugambay, Nilaweli & Pasikuda beaches in the East are fully crowded these days with local and foreign tourists. More opportunities have opened up in the tourism sector as well. Tourist arrivals which stagnated during the years of conflict have begun to catch up again.

Special attention needs to be given to children and women who have suffered from terrorism.

We have taken steps to strengthen them physically and mentally through rehabilitation programs.

The Tiger terrorists cared nothing for our traditional consideration for women and children. They gave weapons to the children and pushed them to war, and they transformed women into suicide cardres. Those who have surrendered to the government reveal all these hardships they faced.

To cure them psychologically is a duty of our government. We have taken steps to fulfill that duty.

In the meantime we have a challenge to stop further LTTE activities.

The LTTE will try to reorganize themselves. They will try to influence the people by issuing statements while hiding in various cavities of the globe.

It has been revealed that this terrorist organization has links with other extremist organizations in the world.

We need to stop the trafficking of drugs, weapons and people through these links. All nations should co-operate in eradicating this menace. There should be no double standards in this.

Some powerful nations in the world while invading other countries bring human rights allegations against us for trying to defeat terrorism.

There should be a common agreement in the war on terror.

It should be common for the entire world. There can't be different treatment or laws for different countries on the subject of terrorism.

If there is a problem for any ethnic group in our country we are ready to solve it. Compassion is ingrained in our national psyche.

There is something that our President says often.

‘We do not have a majority or a minority in our country, we only have one race; that is, we all are Sri Lankans’. These are his words.

To resolve the issues and grievances faced by the Tamils, discussions were held frequently. On the invitation of His Excellency the President an All Party Conference has been meeting to evolve a formula to solve the national problem.

Even the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) considered to be proxies for the LTTE had discussions with HE the President recently. They declared willingness to work with the Government in the interests of national development.

Some believe that devolution of power is not a practical solution.

47% of Tamils in Sri Lanka live in the North and East.

53% of Tamils are living in the Western Province and other provinces, among the Sinhala people.

It is hard to assume that these 53% will migrate to the North and East. Their houses businesses and day-to –day life are in the Western province among the Sinhalese majority. There, all races live in harmony
I have briefed here the challenges that Sri Lanka is facing at present and what programmes are done and others still underway for long lasting peace.

As a world we face two great challenges. One is the environmental crisis, the other is terrorism.

We can overcome these challenges by facing them together, through being united, and co-operating with each other.

I beseech you to proceed towards overcoming these challenges together. This will result in building a better world for us all.