Freeing civilians, Government’s key objective - President

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In an interview to CNN-IBN in Colombo, President Mahinda Rajapaksa has made it clear that the Government’s key objective now was “getting the civilians out from the clutches of the LTTE”. Noting that the military operations were “almost over,” the President said the choice before the LTTE was “either surrender or face the Army”. The interview:

Q: Have you instructed your Army to ceasefire? A: No, it is not a ceasefire. Freeing the people, who are kept there as hostages, is my duty. So the army is now only helping the civilians. We want to get the civilians out from the clutches of the LTTE. Q: So the hostage rescue operation is still continuing? A: Yes, it continues. For the first time we made a statement saying we are not using heavy weapons and attacks. This area, which was called a No Fire Zone, was cleared by the Army on a day-to-day basis. So we managed to send the hostages to the No Fire Zone. And the LTTE also took them there, thinking that they could escape from the sea. But now they have realised that they can’t move forward. But still they are using heavy weapons inside. They have heavy weapons inside the No Fire Zone. Q: Indian Home Minister, P. Chidambaram, declared that the Sri Lankan Government had actually declared a cessation of hostilities. A: You know, when you say you are not using heavy weapons and you are not using air attacks, then what is it? It’s proceeding almost like a ceasefire only. Yes, our soldiers are moving forward. So when you view all this, it looks like a real war. But we are not using our heavy weapons. Q: So what happens to the LTTE leaders who are there inside? Do you believe they are still there? A: Yes. The intelligence report says they are still there but we are waiting. We have asked them to surrender - lay down their arms and surrender. They have never done that. As far as we can say, it is either surrender or face the Army. That’s all. Q: So the Army will eventually clear the area? A: Yes, they will do that. These are very clear instructions. Q: So you have given the Army very clear instructions not to compromise in the battlefield with regard to the LTTE. A: Now it is almost over between them. Because either they have to surrender or face the end. There is no [other] option for them. This is only six square kilometres, so we will be cleaning up. We will continue till the last hostage is taken out from the LTTE’s hold. We are not worried about Prabhakaran or any other person. Q: If you catch Prabhakaran alive, will you hand him over to India? First he has to go through our trial. A: First he will have to face that trial and then we might send him there. Q: So the laws of the land will catch up with all the top LTTE leaders? A: Oh yes, definitely, why not? We have to do that. Q: But you will also look into India’s request to extradite them [Prabhakaran and other proclaimed LTTE offenders in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case]? A: Certainly. I will be sending them back to India. Why should I keep them? If anybody wants them, they can take them. Because I think India has a right. Because a man who killed Rajiv Gandhi, who is responsible for the killing of Rajiv Gandhi - one of the greatest leaders in India - the Government, any government, whichever Government comes, they have to deal with this man. This is what my personal views are. So we will tackle him in our country for the things he has done. Q: So the instructions to the Army is very clear: catch the top LTTE leaders dead or alive? A: You know, I would prefer to catch them alive. We don’t want to kill them. We want to get them alive and tell the world, ‘These are the terrorists.’ They are the people who have deprived the people, the Tamil people in Sri Lanka, of their rights. For 30 years, they were suffering - no development in that area, nothing at all! They built bunkers; people were never given food, whatever we sent them; no education. The children of the LTTE leaders were educated in various universities and colleges abroad but not these people who are suffering! They were given cyanide and a gun -a T-56 - in their hands. Prabhakaran’s son and daughter, all these people got university education. So the people must know who they are. That’s why I want them alive. Q: And what happens to the LTTE cadres? Those who were recruited? A: Today itself we have given clear instructions that they must be rehabilitated. We want to rehabilitate them. I have seen some of these young ones who have surrendered today, about 50 people. We are going to rehabilitate them. We have some cadres who have confessed to killing many people. But even then we want to rehabilitate these young boys. Q: So you will begin a program of reintegrating them into mainstream society? A: Yes, we have to do that. Otherwise should we lock them up and keep them there? Feeding them? Why should we do that? If we can change them, we will do that. We want to change them. Rehabilitate them. Use them for our society, for our development, for this country. We have to get their talent. Q: What is your political vision for the post-conflict phase? How will you assure the Tamils that their political rights are protected in this country? A: We have been protecting that from the beginning. What we are trying to do is the Indo-Sri Lanka Treaty - [after which] the 13th Amendment was introduced - to which even Prabhakaran agreed and then suddenly he changed his mind! I mean the 13th Amendment is a part of our Constitution but unfortunately it was not implemented because of Prabhakaran and his crowd, because of the LTTE. So now we will have to implement that. I have categorically said that it will be 13+. We called an all-party meeting, invited all the Tamil parties. But unfortunately because of the LTTE, the proxy of the LTTE, the TNA (Tamil National Alliance), didn’t come for talks. We call them proxy because they were actually the people representing the LTTE in Parliament and abroad. But still we are trying to get them down and we will have a dialogue with them and with the other political parties. Q: So you have a plan? A: I have a plan. Whatever we did, the Government, we had a plan. Clear this area, defeat terrorism in this country, then give them a political solution. Q: Is it possible for you to sketch out the political solution? A: I think I must not impose any political solution on the people. It must come from the people. So I don’t want to say that “I’m going to give this and that.” Let the people call me. All the propositions must come. We must all get together and decide on that. Agree upon the things that we are going to give them. So then only we can see a solution. Q: What do you think about the political drama that has happened in Tamil Nadu in the last few days? A: I don’t want to comment on that. It’s not done, no? I shouldn’t. You must be knowing better than me and the voters know. I was listening to one of the interviews on television and I think it was very clear what the general feelings are. Q: So these politicians are only staging it for the elections. That’s your belief? A: I said no comments. Why do you want

to go into that? Q: As regards the LTTE, as you said the worst is over. It’s just a small task that needs to be done. How will you dismantle the LTTE support structures that exist? A: So this is where the international community comes in. They must help. There are organizations, different organizations who collect money and buy weapons and are helping them. I think this is where we would like to see other countries take action. And we will be doing that in Sri Lanka. We will not allow anyone else to reorganize the LTTE, terrorism, again in this country. Suddenly 200,000 people, 150,000 people come to your side fleeing from the LTTE clutches. We have to provide them food and shelter, and now we have managed to do that. And the whole country - if you can go around Sri Lanka, you will see in temples, churches and various organizations, we have managed to mobilize all of them. And some of the countries, of course, are helping us also. Q: And what about the humanitarian crisis the world is also concerned about? A: There is no crisis as such. Suddenly 150,000 people come to your side from the LTTE side. We have managed to do that. We have managed to mobilize the whole country to help us, other countries are also helping us. I will not call it crisis. When it comes to development that is crisis. This is where the international community must come in and help us in the reconstruction of destroyed area. Q: How about supplies to the small area where civilians are still trapped? A: We have already informed the ICRC. It is our responsibility to supply; we must deliver it to them. They will take it forward. Q: What about India’s role? Is it tactical, moral support? Do you think you are in a position to talk about it? A: The moral support, whatever support India gave us, is what they should have given to us. It is their duty to help us in this stage. Q: Was that a demand you made when you visited India in 2005, when you said that when you come to power you need help to wipe out terror? A: I can’t demand, I shouldn’t demand anything from a neighbouring country. I request. Q: So your request was complied with? A: Yes. We understand what terrorism is. A man who killed Rajiv Gandhi. India knows what terrorism is, it is facing terrorism from the North. You know what happened in Mumbai.Courtesy: dailynews.lk