
"We are against double standards"

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- Russian Ambassador In this interview, the Ambassador of the Russian Federation in Sri Lanka, Vladimir P. Mikhaylov speaks to C. A. Chandraprema, about the ongoing situation in Sri Lanka. Mr Mikhaylov has served in, among other places, the USA and Pakistan before being posted to Sri Lanka last September. He has visited the IDP camps in Vavuniya and takes a keen interest in the unfolding situation in this country.

Q. What is your overall assessment of what is happening in this country at this particular moment? A. This is a historic moment for Sri Lanka. For a quarter of a century, the LTTE has been fighting for an independent state. Their struggle was not based on political methods but on military and terrorist methods. So the LTTE was categorised in many countries as a terrorist organization. There were various stages in the struggle. For some years, the government was trying to fight terrorism, then during other periods, both sides tried to reach some agreement. Unfortunately, those agreements were not fulfilled. Every time the LTTE used the negotiations which were held with the assistance of some international mediators, only for regrouping and strengthening their military capability. So the present government from my point of view, had no option but to give final battle to this terrorist organization. Not only the Sinhala people in Sri Lanka, but Tamil people themselves suffered a lot. We know that the areas which were under the control of the LTTE were not developing normally - there was no democracy there, or socio-economic development. People were practically enslaved. Even other Tamil organizations and political parties were either suppressed by the LTTE or were annihilated and the LTTE dominated the lives of the Tamil population in the northern and eastern parts of the island. This is also one of the major reasons why the LTTE finally lost its struggle: because it lost the support of the local population. After many years, Tamils in the east and the north realized that the LTTE and its leaders were not fighting for the betterment of the population but for their own power, and their own interests. That's why this organization lost the support of the local population. That is why it became much easier for government forces to conduct anti terrorist operations. Within a historically short period of three years, the government has been able to destroy the military machinery of the LTTE. Of course it is a very sad story because hundreds of thousands if not millions of people suffered from this development. There are a lot of internally displaced people and this now is a major concern of the international community. Russia is concerned about the fate of the civilian population of the north as much as any other country in the world. But at the same time, we are realists and we understand that under the present circumstances, when the resources of the government are quite limited and after the 26 years of war, it is not easy to solve all problems within a short period of time. I with a group of my colleagues, visited camps in the Vavuniya region and we saw the sincere efforts of the government to do its best for the internally displaced people. Shelters were put up for them and children were provided text books for studying – we saw hundreds of them studying, – people were given access to water and food was supplied, they could communicate with their relatives and receive money from them. Of course such conditions are far from ideal and far from how people should live. But it is impossible to send these people to the places where they lived before the conflict, because many villages were destroyed and there is no electricity, no water in many areas, so it will take some time to restore the economic infrastructure, in those areas and to create proper conditions for people to live in. There is also problem of de-mining. We know that the LTTE left a lot of mines in the areas that they controlled. So the safety of the people is also the concern of the government. That's why I think the international community should pay more attention to providing assistance for the government of Sri Lanka than to criticizing what is not done or what is not good enough. Of course there are some shortcomings. But representatives of the United Nations Organisation and the representatives of many countries visited Sri Lanka and they recognized some progress. More shelters are being put up and more facilities are being provided to the internally displaced people. At the same time the general situation may not be improving because the number of people increased dramatically and more than doubled during the last week. So the government has to deal now with about 200,000 people. We should also take into account the need to register all these people to avoid any possibility of any of them going missing. There is also the problem of reuniting families because in this chaos, many families were split, mothers in one camp, children in another, fathers in a third. Besides that, there are a lot of sick people and some wounded people, so they have to be given medical assistance. But an important thing is that we should never give equality to a democratically elected legitimate government of a country on the one hand and a terrorist organization on the other hand. This is not only in Sri Lanka's case, it's for any country. We should see the difference very clearly. Q. Do you see any parallels between the LTTE issue here and the Chechen problem in Russia? A. Every country's situation is specific. But there are some similarities as well. In Russia we had this problem of terrorism and separatism. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation was rather weak and some forces which were interested in weakening our country even more, together with internal nationalistic forces joined hands and that is how this problem of Chechnya emerged. There was also a mistake made by our government when it was declared that every national region could take as much sovereignty as it could take. Some national leaders decided the time had come for them to become local kings. Later the central government of Russia realized that this slogan was not correct, and that it was misused by some local leaders. So we had to start resisting disintegration. In Chechnya some local leaders started military resistance to the central government and declared independence. So we had no choice but to start counter terrorist operations. The similarity is that they were also supported from outside, just as the LTTE here is also supported from outside. Some governments, I remember, at that time, were criticizing Russia for the excessive use of force, and there were demands to stop fighting and to start negotiations with terrorists and separatists. So we can see some similarities and maybe that is why we understand the situation here much better than some others. We managed to gain the support of the local population – we were not fighting just against the terrorists but for the hearts and minds of Chechens. There were also some local leaders who were not in favour of an independent Chechnya but who understood that the Chechen

republic could develop successfully within the Russian Federation. Finally, they took power in Chechnya and elections were held and people democratically elected their leaders and after those developments, Chechnya became quite successful. If you visit this republic nowadays you can see a very successfully developing territory. A lot of schools, hospitals and houses have been constructed and despite the allegation that Moscow was fighting against Muslims, now when Chechnya is within the Russian federation, the biggest and most beautiful mosque in Europe was constructed recently in Groznyy - equal to the best mosques in Saudi Arabia. So life is quite normal there. This is the way we hope the government in Sri Lanka will also go, because it is most important to find a political solution. With leaders of the terrorists, it is practically useless to negotiate because they are not inclined to reach a political solution. But it is important to find a political solution to the problem in general and to remove the root causes that led to the emergence of this problem, the inequalities of various nationalities, imbalance in socio-economic development, unemployment, access to education - there are many problems which should be solved and democratic elections must be held in those regions and this way, I hope, a lasting peace will be achieved in the future.

Q. We read about this tug of war between the West and Russia in former territories of the Soviet Union such as Georgia and the Ukraine. Was the interest of the West in Chechnya due to genuine humanitarianism or was it a part of this battle to establish spheres of influence?

A. I wouldn't say we are at a tug of war with the western countries. Of course there are some differences in our approaches to particular problems. In many spheres we cooperate quite successfully with the United States, Europe and Japan. As far as human rights are concerned, we also actively participate in the United Nations ensuring that human rights are respected in all countries. But at the same time we do not share the approach that human rights question is used, or I would say misused just to pressurize this or that government to adopt this or that political decision about its domestic problems. Also we are against double standards. If we are concerned about civilian casualties, why should we concentrate only on Sri Lanka? Why should we forget the civilian casualties in Afghanistan? Why is the international community practically silent about those casualties? There are the same kind of casualties in Iraq. Let's address all problems equally. Then it would be fair. This is the difference in approach between the Russian Federation and some other countries.

Q. During the cold war, what we had was a bi-polar world. If any given country was not with one block, they were with the other block. What would you prefer, a uni-polar world or a bi-polar world?

A. First of all I must say that the system in the world in the past was not as simple as you made it out. Yes, there were two superpowers, but there were also other countries strong enough like China and Japan and there was even a non-aligned movement. The term non-aligned meant that they did not like to be aligned with one or the other camp. For some time after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, it did seem as if the world had changed into a uni-polar structure. But very soon it was proved that such a structure cannot be stable, politically, economically or financially. So our concept is neither a uni-polar nor bi-polar world. We are for a multi-polar world because we believe that only such a world can be really stable and much more fair and secure than at present. The interests of all countries should be taken into account. Big or small, every country should have its voice. That is why we were always advocates of a stronger United Nations Organisation, because this universal organization gives opportunities and the mechanism for smaller countries to influence international relations. The present financial crisis proved once again that a financially uni-polar world which is based on one currency is very unstable. That is why we proposed the creation of regional reserve currencies, to make the structure more stable. So we believe that we should work together to construct a multi-polar world. Courtesy: Island.lk