“Winning the War on Terrorism – The New Dawn”

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(May 22, Colombo, Sri Lanka Guardian) I would like to speak on the theme that is on everyone’s lips. Sri Lanka is one of those rare cases where terrorism has been comprehensively defeated substantially, by our own efforts despite all the advice, reservations and fears, publicly expressed, to the contrary. Once many, including senior officials in our own country, believed that the LTTE could not be defeated by the Government Security Forces. The LTTE is now a shattered effigy of its former self, having been methodically swept aside by the Sri Lankan security forces. The war on terrorism is won – now we have to win the peace.

We have, however, seen the propaganda frenzy of the dying LTTE and its supporters, avidly lapped up by the sensation-seeking media and reflected enthusiastically by Western liberal minded politicians keeping a weather eye on significant Tamil groups in their electorates. The rage continues to be nurtured by falsehoods and clever inventions. The media keeps this going. Allegations of genocide are purveyed. But, we note that thousands of Tamil civilians left LTTE-controlled areas over the years to live peacefully in areas under Government control. (54% of Tamils live in Sinhala dominated areas in the South, outside the so-called homeland). Charges of indiscriminate bombings of civilians, including medical facilities, sometimes backed by satellite images sourced to the United Nations, continued to be made, and had to be refuted by challenging their veracity and the lack of corroborating evidence and large scale movements of civilians to Government-controlled areas. Suggestions of large numbers of civilian deaths, made even by leaders of countries whose own forces were causing thousands of civilian deaths in anti-terrorist campaigns far from their own borders, also had to be refuted. The tendency for the pot to call the kettle black is indeed unfortunate. The Government steadfastly maintained its own commitment to minimize civilian casualties among its own citizens. The Tamils of the North are our own people, and as to why the Government would wish to create sympathizers and recruits for the LTTE cause by harming civilians, is not only confusing – it is not logical. In the early parts of the campaign, the propaganda mouthpiece of the LTTE, the Tamilnet, had hardly anything to say about civilian casualties. This deliberate policy of avoiding harm to civilians slowed down the military’s advance considerably. Each village and each town had to be approached with care to avoid civilian casualties – a policy that produced a dual impact. The vast majority of the Tamils outside the areas of control of the LTTE could be reassured that the Government’s objective was not to harm the Tamil civilians. Even Tamils living in LTTE controlled areas may have begun to appreciate that it was better to live under Government control. (60,000 to 70,000 Tamils moved out of the Vanni to live in Sinhala areas in 2007/08). This deliberate policy of zero civilian casualties instilled a higher sense of caring discipline among the security forces compared with other forces battling rebel groups in the neighbourhood. One obvious victim of the conflict was our economy – and it suffered immensely during the past 27 years. It is estimated that the country lost USD 200 billion in lost opportunity. The importance of targeting Sri Lanka’s economy was recognized early by LTTE strategists and every effort was made to cripple it. Today, our challenge is to revive the economy, now that the war is over. Their propaganda machine succeeded in convincing Western development partners to make human rights, in other words, adopting a softer approach to the LTTE and a distraction from the main effort to crush terrorism – a pre-condition for the disbursement of promised aid. In due course, the USA made access to the Millennium Challenge Account conditional on compliance with standards which appeared to exceed even those that were applicable to themselves in their own “war on terror”. The EC made the continued availability of the GSP + concession on which thousands of jobs depended, including those of women, subject to similar constraints. A cynic has observed that some Western nations have continued to labour under the “white man’s burden” in a different form. In both cases, the Government adopted a hard line. Instead of succumbing to these pressures, the Government sought development assistance from other partners and non-traditional allies and turned to alternative markets where possible. This effort paid handsome dividends. Iran, for example, pledged over $ 1.9 billion in development assistance to Sri Lanka. China’s share of development assistance topped 1 billion Dollars. Japanese assistance continued unaffected by the critical approach of Western democracies. India continued to assist Sri Lanka, including in strategic matters. While Sri Lanka, confronted with the choice of economic blackmail or finding an accommodation with terrorism, had to strengthen its ties with alternative partners. However, it will work assiduously at fostering traditional ties. We must be pragmatic.The critical and central role of defeating the LTTE was played by thousands of young men and women who believed in the integrity of their country, who single-mindedly sought to ensure a land free of violence to future generations and who were driven by the single purpose of protecting what was theirs for the future. Thousands laid down their lives, lives that had not experienced the full range of joys and sorrows of human existence, and thousands were maimed for the sake of unborn generations, so that this land shall be rid of the scourge of barbaric terrorism. Many were left widowed or fatherless. We must never forget, as long this nation remains, those who made the ultimate sacrifice for such a noble cause. The key difference in making these sacrifices was the leadership, the leadership that would not be swayed from its course despite the incessant mud-slinging from within, and the pressures from abroad. The LTTE, even while gasping its last, succeeded in mobilizing its supporters abroad to exert enormous pressure on the Sri Lankan leadership. Fortunately, this leadership remained steadfast. In addition, the men in uniform were now better trained, better armed and disciplined. Their level of commitment was high. The nation gave its sons the support they required and encouragement they deserved. The sons delivered the results. For the first time in this conflict, which had lasted over twenty five years, the entire nation was mobilized. The nation which, by and large, in the past had tended not to be part of the war effort, was made to feel a central part of it. For the first time, billboards appeared calling on the country to back

the security forces. The media was mobilized, making the war a part of everyone’s daily life, which was part of the military strategy. With the mobilization of the entire population behind the war effort, recruitment ceased to be an issue.It was to Sri Lanka’s eternal detriment that we lost so many of our best sons and daughters to other countries and to war, due to the curse of terrorism. While many of them lost their lives, others were forced to leave the country of their birth. This was the sad reality that Sri Lanka was compelled to face during the last three decades. However, the time has arrived to put aside the past and join hands for the reconstruction and development of our nation. Needless to say, we must exert every effort to make all our citizens feel comfortable and respected in this land. Everyone must have an equal opportunity to reach out to their individual dreams, whether in government, in the professions, or in business. Those scattered around the world, must be able to return in peace to enjoy our beautiful mountains, our incomparable beaches and our legendary hospitality in the company of their loved ones. The hospitality for which we were known in the past, must become the magnet for all Sri Lankans scattered around the world.Ours is a caring society influenced over the centuries by the tenets of a gentle faith – Buddhism. Other influences made their impact felt later and further strengthened our caring nature. Our respect for our fellow human beings even extended to all living beings. Even the destruction and displacement rained on us by ruthless foreign invaders seeking material enrichment, did not shake our faith and our values. Our values stayed the same and we were strengthened by them. These values must guide us, as we seek to restore our nation. Please rest assured, that the Government and our Security Forces will uphold the rights of man as we eliminate terrorism from our land, so that all our people can live in peace. Defeating terrorism was our critical goal – terrorism that has killed Tamils, Sinhalese, Muslims and others in their thousands, orphaned and maimed many more and terrorism which has held our economy hostage for over twenty five years.It must be noted that despite all the challenges that we have faced, the war on terrorism, the tsunami, the food crisis, the financial meltdown, etc., we have continued along our path to development. We are still able to boast enviable statistics. We compare well, even with many developed countries. We will be able to do even better, now that terrorism is eradicated once and for all. But for this, we must all come together.After 27 long and fearsome years, today, one hears not the explosions of claymore bombs, but the noise of firecrackers and throbbing of drums. There are many lessons for the world from this epic struggle. There are many lessons for Sri Lanka. Let us hope that using these lessons, we will now set about the task of winning the peace. Winning the peace and ensuring dignity and hope for all our people, will be the next challenge. -Sri Lanka Guardian Courtesy: srilankagaurdian.org