“Regaining of dignity and pride is important”

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As the security forces delivered the final blow to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), capturing the last bit of land held by them, the entire nation celebrated with jubilance. None would be more relieved of the conclusion than the security forces personnel and their commanders who fought continuously over the past three years to bring about this victory.

The person who held the three forces together, liaising between them and Commander-in- Chief President Mahinda Rajapaksa, is none other than Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa. In an exclusive interview with The Nation, the Defence Secretary assessed the significance of the victory that defeated 30 years of terrorism that threatened to break the country into pieces and expressed his deep gratitude to the soldiers who fought tirelessly to bring about this liberation, Following are excerpts of the interview: By Vindya Amaranayake Q: What do you think about the military victory over the LTTE? A: Everybody in this country knows what this war had done over the past 30 years. There was countless loss of life, damage to property, hindrances to the development process, breakdown of the economy during that period. More than anything else, our national pride was greatly damaged. We had to live with the label that we could not defeat terrorism and that it was impossible for us to deal with this problem. All the while, our country was gradually breaking into two pieces. If that situation continued, it was inevitable that the country would end up as two separate nations. When we take into consideration the large hauls of weapons seized by the military over the past few years, the number of naval vessels destroyed and the way that they fought the security forces until the last moment, we could definitely say the country would have broken into two, if we had not launched the operation to liberate the areas held by the LTTE. Now we have managed to put a stop to this catastrophe and we have stopped the continuous loss of life because of this war. The next step will be to re-unite the fragmented society and regain what was lost during those 30 years by launching programmes to develop the country. This victory also gives back the people the dignity and pride they have lost over the years and re-convince them that we are in fact one of the great nations in the world. We can now safely say we are the only country that has been able to defeat terrorism effectively. I can say that we have now set an example for all the countries around the world that are battling with terrorism in their domestic fronts. Q: What is your opinion about the commitment and sacrifice made by the soldiers in bringing about this victory? A: What I always say is that it is not the weapons that win the war, but the person behind that weapon. Not only within the past three years, but starting from the first soldier who sacrificed his life in Kilinochchi in 1980 till today nearly 25,000 soldiers have served the country with their lives. Not only that a large number, perhaps another 25,000 has been disabled and yet another large number is still receiving treatment at hospitals. It is through these types of sacrifices that we have walked towards victory. This was not an easy victory. It was made possible through the sacrifices made by the security forces personnel. The people in this country should take inspiration from the kind of commitment displayed by these brave soldiers. Especially in the process of developing this country, the people should take them as an example. They have achieved an objective that the entire world thought impossible. They were victorious because they strived day and night; from the Mavil Aru operation until today they never had a day’s rest, but fought continuously with the same intensity under dangerous conditions. The terrorist that they fought was very dangerous and the battle was very hard; it was never a cakewalk. They had to face brutal weapons and had to keep on moving forward, even when their friends fell behind wounded or dead. They set an example for the entire world. Therefore, we must follow their example when developing this country. Q: What is your message to the Tamil community at this important juncture? A: The operation we conducted was against terrorists. These terrorists destroyed our entire country, without giving a second thought to the fact whether they were harming the lives of Sinhala, Tamil or Muslim people. In fact, it was the Tamil people who suffered more because of terrorism. They eliminated moderate Tamil political leadership, they destroyed the Tamil culture and they prevented the development process of the Tamil community. Most of all, they conscripted Tamil youth and children and destroyed their future entirely. It is this terrorism that we put an end to today (May 18). We must ensure that this terrorism is never allowed to raise its head again and make sure that this country is a place where people of all ethnicities can live in peace and harmony. We want to rehabilitate the misguided youth who were with the LTTE and let them enjoy normal and free lives. We will develop the North and East and establish democracy there. We ask the Tamil people to join hands with the rest of the country in this forward march towards peace and development. Q: The international community was one of the most important factors in this war. What is your opinion about their contribution? A: We received an immense contribution from the international community. I must especially mention the countries in the region including India and Pakistan, and also China and Russia. The Non-Aligned countries were greatly helpful too. When we had to face difficult situations at the UN, in Geneva as well as New York, these countries as well as the countries in the Middle East rendered us invaluable support. I must mention that many countries helped by providing intelligence information. We express our deep gratitude towards these countries. The fact that we were able to strengthen our diplomatic ties with India – to an unprecedented level – helped us greatly in defeating terrorism. This is important in terms of India’s interest and its role in ensuring security in the region. Q: Did the fact that you are the brother of the President of the country helped in ensuring this victory? A: Indeed it was helpful. There are several reasons. The liaison between the military chiefs and the President is conducted through the Defence Secretary. Because we are siblings, it was easier for me to maintain this link effectively. Also, since I’m the President’s brother, there is more commitment than in just another official. Q: You experienced this war as a professional soldier, a civilian and then as a bureaucrat. How did these experiences shaped your point of view on how to strategise the military operations? A: I have served in the Army for 20 years and took part in operations during that time. That helped me understand the difficulties faced by the service personnel. What is important is not the understanding of the tactical side of the operations; that is the task of the commanders; but what is important is to understand the hardships experienced by the soldiers and

commanders. It is also important in understanding what the political interference into military operations does to the military personnel. Because of this understanding I knew what was happening during the periods when the war was ceased. Sometimes, when you are a civilian only, it is difficult to understand certain repercussions that happened. Those maybe minor things for civilians. But, when it comes to the military actions, they are very important. Not having consistency or focus can have very bad effects on soldiers. When going into peace talks and giving into certain demands can create uncertainty among the personnel. That is why we were very clear on the mission that the military had to accomplish. It was never ambiguous. It was very much clear. We had to do certain things. If you go through the past three years, we had to take certain unpopular measures. At that time some people questioned why are you doing this. But those measures were necessary. There were issues with certain media. Those things had a bearing on the military. I was able to understand all this because of the military experience. Courtesy: Nation.lk