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We really welcome assistance of our friends who stood by good standards- Prof.

Wijesinha

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Right of Reply of Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha, at HR 11th Special Session on Sri Lanka 26-27th May 2009 It is an emotional moment today, because for the first time in many years we talk on behalf of the entire nation, all our Tamil citizens as well as our Muslims, and Sinhalese are represented by us today. It is also important because we have recognized the importance of our friends, who have understood our situation and have helped us. Of course, I have to make it clear that they have also helped us on the basis of principle, the principle of universal values, not just Asian values, or African values or European values, of the 21st or 20th or 19th or 15th centuries, but in terms of universal values. They have asked us, and I think rightly so, to address certain issues that are of enormous importance, which we have tried to address and which we need assistance to address more fully.

Click on the photo to listen to the speech Firstly there is the question of the condition of the people in our camps; they have suffered a long time and it is our duty to give them not only minimal standards but decent standards. In this respect let me say that if anyone would like to go to the camps the gratitude of those IDPs is extended particularly to governments such as those of China and India, who have given unstintingly. Any IDP will tell you that the best tents are those that the government of China gave us recently, the best relief packages were those given by the government of India, and it is that type of generous giving for people who have suffered that we appreciate. We much appreciate the work of the UN and UNHCR, but for some reason there has been a concern with minimum standards. I have complained before about things like toilets, and I am delighted that now whenever I'm in Colombo the UNICEF head rings me up and says 'Don't worry, we are doing better'. We are also doing better, he says, by consulting local NGOs, and this is an important fact. At a meeting chaired by his Excellency the President, local NGOs made the fact that they were being squeezed out by a system that had been put in place. The Deputy Head of OCHA, with whom I had a long discussion said that perhaps they had been approaching Sri Lanka in the wrong way, thinking that we were helpless, and I think our local NGOs have made it very clear; they had a discussion with Sir John Holmes in New York last week, and when he was in Colombo he said it had been very helpful and he understood our concerns. Mr President, we need to build our own capacity and we intend to do so; we would welcome the assistance of the UN but we need to monitor and make sure there is not a cascading effect of people who are making money from us. We want NGOs who bring aid and many have done a wonderful job but we also don't want people sitting around begging for the crumbs from the rich man's table that should go to our poor citizens, not the NGOs who have done sub-contracting and sub-contracting beyond belief. Access, of course we will provide and we have been doing so and we intend to continue with it. Two more things I should just mention very quickly; it was asserted that we should start discussions with Tamil parties. Mr President, it is vital that we do so but we have done so in the past. Now the Tamil parties can speak out more forcefully because they are rid of the fear of terror. We are going to have elections soon for the Jaffna municipality. The last elections were held in the 90s, the mayoress was killed by the LTTE. It was impossible, after her successor too was killed, for the municipality to function. We can restore democracy now. I was horrified today to hear one delegation privileging Mr Padmanathan; he is a criminal wanted by Interpol and to bring his name up here as someone we should be negotiating with, shows the contempt in which some countries hold the elected Tamil representatives of our people, with whom we will work. We would like to say that if this session is intended to make suggestions about resurrecting the LTTE we do not want it. It is about humanitarian assistance for the Tamil people and we really welcome the assistance of our friends who have stood by good standards, swift rehabilitation and return and a decent political settlement that will encompass all our people. Anything else, Mr President is designed to prevent this process going further and we welcome all your assistance in assisting Sri Lanka to have a decent future. Thank you.