“Stand up for others, they stand up for you...’’

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By Thava SajitharanSri Lanka’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations in Geneva, Dr. Dayan Jayatilleka told LAKBIMAnEWS in an e-mail interview that the world is no longer Euro-centric. Ambassador Jayatilleka was part of the Sri Lankan delegation that secured a notable diplomatic victory at UNHRC’s special session on Sri Lanka held in Geneva last week. Sri Lanka successfully thwarted an attempt by EU countries to pass a resolution calling for investigations into alleged war crimes on the government’s recently concluded military offensive.

What was the most anxious moment at the UNHRC’s special session on Sri Lanka held in Geneva last week? It was speculated that the majority of the member countries of the council would vote against Sri Lanka and reprimand the island-nation for what is alleged to be war crimes. Did you at any point think that Sri Lanka was going end up losing? I never thought that we would lose, and I am not saying this only after the result. I went on public record in an interview given to Priyath Liyanage of the BBC and broadcast a day or two before the vote, going out on a limb, expressing absolute confidence that we would overcome the issue. Had we lost, which many thought was the inevitable outcome, I would have looked a fool. The reason for my confidence was simple. I have always believed that if Sri Lanka is principled and articulate, if it remains faithful to its essential identity as a member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), bonds firmly with Asia, Africa and Latin America, remains in active solidarity with the causes of the global South and the developing world, sincerely articulates a Third Worldist position, correctly understands world politics including the tendencies towards multi-polarity and uses the resultant spaces, it can defend itself from adversarial moves emanating from big players in the global arena. In the international arena wherever Sri Lanka failed to practice that policy it has lost elections or been on the defensive and “drawn” games it could have won. If you don’t stand up for others in their hour of need they don’t stand up for you in yours; and if you don’t stand for something, no one stands up for you because they do not know who or what you are. Cautious pragmatism and ad hoc calculation of the narrow national interest wins no battles; nor does the practice of ‘silent service’. Wherever we actively adhered, as we have here in Geneva, to a correct international policy perspective - best summed up as NAM plus Russia and China, or G-77 plus Russia, which is our natural constituency, while engaging in dialogue around all points of the compass, we have prevailed over huge odds. After all, as you rightly said, it was widely speculated that we would lose!

Sri Lanka won the diplomatic battle thanks to her allies. Nonetheless, doesn’t the fact that the country could not stave off a special session at the UNHRC calling for investigations into alleged war crimes indicate the inefficiency on the part of Sri Lankan foreign diplomacy? The friendly countries voted for Lanka, alright. But what about those who opposed Sri Lanka? Isn’t it with adversaries that we need diplomacy? The attempt to hold a special session of the HRC was on for four weeks. Those driving the move wanted to hold it when the war was on, and they pushed for it to be held on May 14th. They wanted to put the international brakes on our final offensive. In short they wanted to save the Tigers. We thwarted that exercise and bought the time and space for our armed forces to finish the job. The EU failed to collect the requisite signatures for three weeks running, despite intensive lobbying in capitals all over the world. Was the holding of a Special session a victory for the other side? Well, only if you think that starting the war was a victory for the Tigers. What is important is not who starts a fight but who finishes it and how it is finished, the endgame or outcome. The EU driven Special session produced a result that was a resounding victory for Sri Lanka and a crushing defeat for movers of the session who could not even retain their original 16 signatories, dropping down to 12 votes. The TIMES (UK) caption states “Sri Lanka forces West to retreat over ‘war crimes’ with victory at UN”, the AFP says “Sri Lanka celebrated a major diplomatic victory Thursday...” while Radio Australia/Australian Broadcasting Corporation says “ Sri Lanka had a diplomatic victory this week”. I think that should answer your question. You ask whether it isn’t with adversaries that you need diplomacy, but that is a very strange view. Yes you do need to have diplomatic interaction with your adversaries but the main thing about foreign policy is to build the broadest possible coalitions in defense of the national interest and those who would harm that national interest. In this regard the priority must be to strengthen ties with allies and friends and make new ones, thereby expanding our global family. This is what brought victory in Geneva. Was there any quiet diplomacy behind the scene to solicit the support of countries that took an opposing stance earlier? The fact that 17 countries backed the call for a special session, 13 countries signed the Swiss text, but only 12 countries voted against us shows that our ‘adversaries’ were unable to retain five of their original signatories. That should provide the answer to your question. It is understood that some of the proposals contained in the Swiss-EU resolution were incorporated into Sri Lanka’s counter-resolution. Could you briefly tell us as to what those proposals were? As I said while introducing the resolution, everything that we found benign or well intentioned from whichever quarter was incorporated, and some things that were worded in an unacceptable manner were incorporated after we de-mined the language. The EU and other powerful western countries did not endorse Sri Lanka’s stance at the UNHRC session. Wouldn’t this status quo be detrimental to Sri Lanka’s resettlement plans? How could the government cope with the humanitarian challenges without the backing of wealthy nations? The world is no longer Euro-centric and has not been so for quite sometime now. These are ex-colonial powers on the historical decline, currently in deep economic trouble due to the current downturn. We live in an era of the economic rise of Asia. We have received generous help for the IDPs from India and China. Isn’t the Sri Lankan government playing into the hands of its critics by denying access to the humanitarian agencies as well as the media to the IDP camps? Why should the government stubbornly stick to the restrictions imposed during war, if not for the reason that the IDPs housed in those camps are being maltreated? The joint statement of the UN Secretary General and the Government of Sri Lanka clearly proves that we are not denying access to the IDP camps. The fact of access and cooperation is mentioned in the joint communiqu‚. The only problem from the UN side is that these should be expedited. Of course no sovereign government will provide “full, rapid and unimpeded or unfettered

access” to any outsiders. Access yes, unlimited access, no. No one, I suppose, is asking for unlimited access. It is not suggested that Sri Lanka should be held answerable to external imperialist forces and submit to their demands. But, isn’t it the responsibility of a sovereign government to be transparent in handling an issue of this nature? All those who have visited the camps, from the UN chief to the ordinary humanitarian workers, have admitted that the situation is appalling. There are some allegations of sexual abuse in the camps. It has also been alleged that some Tamil paramilitary groups have been allowed entry to these camps in an attempt to weed out the Tiger suspects. One might dismiss these as unsubstantiated. But they will remain unsubstantiated and unverified so long as access is restricted to the media... The UN chief did not say that the conditions in the camps were appalling. I have listened to the original audio and he used the term in connection with the scene in the recent conflict zone. Allegations of sexual abuses in the camps are limited to one incident and that too did not involve any members of the Sri Lankan security forces or the Police, but was a case of abuse visited upon an IDP by another IDP. There are no Tamil paramilitary groups, and if you mean the former militant groups, there is no evidence whatsoever that they have been allowed into the camps to weed out anyone. As for the media, anyone who has read Noam Chomsky on Kosovo will know the pernicious role played by sections of the western media in artificially creating the impression of a humanitarian crisis which provided the smokescreen for intervention. These media you speak of are the very same that tried to convince the world that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction! We have provided access to the international media but we aren’t suckers and we do know the role the media play in the global structure of hegemony, and as ideological instruments of so-called humanitarian interventionism. Why hasn’t the government as yet taken any palpable measures to address the conflict politically? Doesn’t the prevailing impasse with regard to the implementation of a political solution that would address the aspirations of Tamils, offer a pretext for foreign countries to continue interfering into Sri Lanka’s local affairs? The Indo-Lanka Joint Communique‚ of May 21st and the joint statement between UN Secy Gen Ban Ki Moon and the GOSL reiterate Sri Lanka’s commitment to the implementation of the 13th amendment. Which government could be accused of non-implementation a mere ten days after the end of a thirty years war? I think that the new political balance that will result from an election and the rejuvenation of democratic Tamil politics will guarantee the implementation of the understandings contained in both communiques. In one of your recent articles dealing with the “future of Tamil politics in Sri Lanka”, you say that “the Tamils have to sell the Sinhalese something they would be willing to buy at a price they would be willing to pay”. In effect, aren’t you urging the Tamils to take a mendicant position? No, I am being a realist and am applying the model of the marketplace. I have also written that the 13th amendment is the lowest price the Sinhalese will have to pay and the more they delay the higher the price will rise. The Sinhala and Tamil positions have to equilibrate, have to reach saddle-point. Why should the Tamil bother to ask for a federalism that they will not get, and why should the Sinhalese strive to maintain a centralised, unreformed unitary state which has no acceptance outside the Sinhala cultural zone, even among our neighbours and friends? The full implementation of the 13th amendment resulting in maximum devolution within the Constitution is the sole realistic option for both sides. Courtesy: Lakbimanews.lk