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## Sri Lanka's Rajapaksa says development his next fight

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By C. Bryson Hull/COLOMBO (Reuters) - Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa on Wednesday pledged a development effort on par with the nation's fight to defeat the Tamil Tiger rebels during a military parade capping celebrations at the end of a 25-year war. The military sealed off the capital's colonial-era Fort district along the waterfront for a show of military might and celebration of victory in a war long viewed as unwinnable, which Sri Lanka declared won on May 18.

Tanks and armoured cars rolled across the Galle Face Green, while soldiers marched before assembled politicians and diplomats. Field commanders snapped salutes from jeeps, jets roared over the water and navy attack boats shot up plumes of white foam. Rajapaksa again called for unity between minority Tamils and the majority Sinhalese, and said the nation's obligation to the fallen was to push economic development and put politics aside. "We can definitely achieve targets of reducing the budget deficit, economic development, and increasing investments without any doubts, the same as we have suppressed terrorism," he said. Already, the end of the war and the death of Tamil Tiger founder Vellupillai Prabhakaran has propelled Sri Lanka's stock market up by 14.5 percent by Tuesday's close, although foreign purchases have yet to overtake sales and provide a clear sign of a solid rebound. Sri Lanka is pursuing a \$1.9 billion International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan to help it meet a balance of payments deficit and bolster foreign exchange reserves hovering at about five weeks of import cover. The IMF loan became entangled in diplomacy at the end of the war, with the United States and Britain calling for a delay as leverage to stop the final military offensive because of a large civilian presence in the tiny war zone. Rajapaksa is counting on foreign funds to rehabilitate the northern areas held for decades by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and has pledged to build infrastructure and homes with Indian help.

"There is no doubt this will be a massive development exercise, similar to the operation carried out to end the terrorism of 30 years within two-and-a-half years," he said. The deaths of nearly 24,000 soldiers and the 5,000 left permanently disabled since the war started in 1983 demanded national resolve in the country of 21 million people toward growth and unity, Rajapaksa said. "You have lost your feet in enabling a nation to rise on its feet. You have lost your hands, eyes, flesh and blood ... Our responsibility is to honour those great sacrifices by joining to build a great nation," he said. He spoke briefly in Tamil and urged troops, most of whom speak Sinhalese: "It is now the time to win over the hearts of the Tamil people. The Tamil-speaking people should be protected. They should be able to live without fear and mistrust." Sri Lanka has been furious at Western criticism over civilian casualties at the end of the war, which the United Nations have termed "unacceptably high" and remnants of the LTTE have used to try to galvanise support among the global Tamil diaspora. Last month, Sri Lanka won a diplomatic victory by outflanking a Western-led move to pass a critical resolution at the U.N. Human Rights Council, instead winning passage of its own draft that praised its defeat of the LTTE and upheld its sovereignty. Diplomats say it is too early to say what kind of terms may be attached to post-war aid. Sri Lanka has pledged to swiftly resettle nearly 300,000 Tamils being held in crowded refugee camps that rights groups have criticised. Sri Lanka is keeping a close eye for signs of separatism among the displaced and is demining the former war zone, Minister of Disaster Management and Human Rights Mahinda Samarinthe told the U.N. Human Rights council in Geneva on Tuesday. (Reuters India) Courtesy: reuters.com