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Transparent policy on human rights issues In an interview with the Daily News Disaster Management and Human Rights Minister Mahinda Samarasinghe speaks about Sri Lanka's recent diplomatic triumphs. Its international human rights obligations and the way forward. Rasika SOMARATHNA Excerpts of the interview: Q: Sri Lanka has had several diplomatic triumphs in recent times including the one at the UN Human Rights Council special session, what is your observation?

A: Sri Lanka has always maintained a transparent and accommodative stance when facing, issues related to the armed conflict as well as its human rights obligations. We have never shied away from deliberating related issues in any international fora. We have always maintained that any allegations should be properly investigated before pointing the finger. Thus I personally think that our been able to garner majority support is an endorsement on the stand taken by us. It also has sent a clear message to the rest of the world that here was a country which had successfully eradicated terrorism after three decades of bloodshed, and had liberated 250,000 people from the clutches of terrorism and that this success should be acknowledged. Also what the international community and the UN should be doing is to support Sri Lanka in meeting the future challenges that it has to meet in looking after these liberated civilians and resettling them. Q: However a few member countries voted against Sri Lanka at the concluded UNHRC special session? A: Yes, and these countries proposed nine amendments to our resolutions at the last moment, with the hope of diluting our resolution. But at the end, the Council decided that Sri Lanka and the other co-sponsors had accommodated many changes to the original resolution and had been quite flexible in this regard. Thus they decided that there was no need to make further amendments. This decision was endorsed by a vote where the majority of the Council voted in favour. In my view the adverse and aggressive propaganda by a section of the Tamil Diaspora, acting on false and one sided information, had misled these countries. In recent times supporters of the LTTE has come out on the streets openly in Western capitals, lobbying these countries to the extent of pushing them to take this course of action against Sri Lanka. In this regard our counter propaganda abroad has been found wanting at times. Thus, it is essential for us to maintain a close dialogue and better information sharing methods with these nations in the future. Thus, they would be able to take a more balanced approach in the future when they have to take positions when faced with similar situations in the future. Q: Don't you think that the UN and the International Community has a legitimate right to raise concerns on issues related to human rights obligations of other countries? A: Of course it does, and the international community voiced their concerns at the UN Human Rights Council, which we took on board in our resolution. We are conscious of a need to apprehend wrongdoers and violators of human rights. In the case of Sri Lanka we have always maintained a stand up diplomatic policy in this regard. We have always taken a very practical and open stance and have not shied away from engaging in dialogue with concerned parties. But in this case we did not want to be in the focus of attention of the council having ended a three decade old conflict successfully, and liberated nearly 250,000 civilians held hostage by a terrorist organization. The situation in Sri Lanka was essentially an internal matter which the majority of the members too had acknowledged during deliberations. Thus the vote showed that the overwhelming majority of the peoples of the world were with Sri Lanka, and not its critics. Q: How has Sri Lanka responded to its international obligations in promoting and protecting human rights over the years? A: We have engaged with the International Community in a constructive and consistent basis and always cooperated as far back as the 1980s by subscribing to 13 core international human rights conventions and several optional protocols. We have put in place 11 pieces of domestic legislation which has given effect to the ICCPR and has effectively put in motion the implementation of these rights. We have put in place mechanisms to protect children in armed conflict to prevent recruitment of child soldiers. Sri Lanka is a multi cultural multi lingual multi ethnic and multi religious society. This is the great diversity and the strength of Sri Lanka . And we are committed and we believe in the fact that it is only through the protection and nurturing of this diversity that we can build the unity that we need to overcome the challenges that are before us in the national, reconstruction and development efforts that our country needs to put in place towards our goal of sustainable peace and development. Q: Human Rights groups and certain Western nations have been calling for an outside inquiry into alleged human rights abuses which they say took place during the last phase of the conflict? A: This so called outside inquiry was not acceptable to a clear majority in the Human Rights Council. Sri Lanka too does not see the need for such an inquiry. What is needed now is a process to heal the wounds inflicted by the three decade old conflict. The best way forwards is by way of a reconciliation process which is something that should be also home grown. Our Ministry hopes to take a lead role in putting in place such a mechanism with the concurrence of the President and the Cabinet of Ministers. What is important now is to rebuild the country and provide equal opportunities\rights to all its citizens especially those who have suffered as a result of this conflict. Thus, it is not the time to go back and ask for lengthy probes. The need of the hour is to lend support to nurture this reconciliation and development process. Q: Do you think that Sri Lanka should adopt a strategy to win back a section of the Tamil Diaspora which has come out openly against the Government during their demonstrations, especially in Western capitals? A: Definitely; we see this as another important challenge, and we have already initiated a scheme, to reach out to the Tamil Diaspora living abroad. Thus with such a constructive dialogue and confidence building measures we can embark on our own reunification process and reconciliation process which is vital to ensuring non repetition of a similar conflict in the future. Q: What are the Government's future plans for the displaced civilians? A: Our objective is to resettle all displaced people in their homes in the shortest possible time. However the decision to go back should be decided by the people themselves. What we have to do is to ensure that the environment is created, conducive, so that an informed choice can be made by the people themselves whether they want to go back to their homes or not. Until such time we are committed to looking after our people ensuring their well-being. Q: There is a call by certain organizations to allow more access to IDP Welfare Villages\centers for NGOs and INGOs? A: Today 52

International Non Governmental Organizations and other non governmental organizations are working side by side with government officials in complementing efforts of the Government. They are given all necessary support to complement Government efforts. However those who are willing to support should come up with specific targets and necessary funding. I have never encountered any situation where INGOs or NGOs has told us that there are people dying of malnourishment, of starvation and there is lack of food, medicine etc. So for the record 250,000 of our citizens are being well looked after and cared for, and we will continue to show that commitment and we will continue to offer access and facilitate our partners in the international community to complement efforts of the Government within a national framework. Courtesy: dailynews.lk