
Ending Terrorism – Winning Peace

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Published by editor Sri Lanka Colombo, 02 July, (Asiantribune.com): Ladies and gentlemen, We are at a critical juncture in our history. We have the unique opportunity to bring our people together and make this blessed island a better place for all. As the Bard said, time and tide waits for no man. We must grab this chance and ride the tide as it rushes in, said Dr. Palitha Kohona.

Delivering a keynote address at the Annual General Meeting of Forum of Chartered Institutes Galle held at the Face Hotel, Colombo on 01st July, Dr. Palitha Kohona, Secretary to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said, "Our next challenge is to consolidate the peace and ensure security and prosperity for all our citizens, from the Dondra Head to Kankesanthurai. And this will be as daunting and complicated a task as winning the war and will require a range of different approaches." He cautioned that this will be as daunting and complicated a task as winning the war and will require a range of different approaches. Success should not be permitted to lead to over-confidence or complacency. The full text of the keynote address by Dr. Palitha Kohona is given below: After 27 years of blood, carnage and frequent disappointment, it was an unparalleled achievement. We did it convincingly and we did it substantially on our own, carefully and deliberately brushing aside the cards stacked against us. We may have ignored the script, but the finale was overwhelmingly convincing. A thousand years from now, bards will sing the praises of those whose valour and dedication made it possible. Our victory has generated much confidence in the country, as was demonstrated by the jubilation that swept the nation following the silencing of the guns, and the outpouring of support for the Government. The Government has continued to enlarge its support base, winning a series of Provincial Council elections emphatically. There is very little doubt that the vast majority of the people this country are behind the government of President Mahinda Rajapaksa. This political confidence must be converted into sustainable peace and economic activity. Our success has also aroused significant admiration around the world which, properly managed, would produce tangible benefits and even some resentment. Terrorist groups remain a threat elsewhere despite the deployment of much more sophisticated forces, advanced equipment and substantially more resources. Our next challenge is to consolidate the peace and ensure security and prosperity for all our citizens, from the Dondra Head to Kankesanthurai. And this will be as daunting and complicated a task as winning the war and will require a range of different approaches. Success should not be permitted to lead to over-confidence or complacency. Nothing worthwhile was ever easy to achieve. We will need to restore universal confidence in the country, among all our citizens, win over those who may entertain reservations that Sri Lanka won, convince all that our victory will benefit our people without distinction, care for the thousands who were displaced and return them to their own homes, generate investment capital, and establish an environment, socially, economically and politically, where every individual's dignity is respected and their true potential can be realized in full. For over twenty seven years due to a conflict which was not of our own making, our resources remained under utilized, were diverted to the war effort, sometimes haphazardly, enterprises struggled to survive, tourism and inward investment suffered seriously, the cream of our youth went gallantly and voluntarily to the front and many paid with their lives, others were maimed, while quite a few took the easy way out and left the country, and a country that was meant to be a beacon to the region, stagnated in the global backwater. Now that the conflict is over and the guns are silenced we have the opportunity stand up, dust ourselves, and rejoin the world as a proud and confident people. We have a unique opportunity created for us to catch up for the lost time and we must start immediately. Peace must be made a reality to all our people and not continue to be only an aspiration for some. The immediate need is to care for those who became the involuntary victims of the conflict. It is now history that the LTTE, as it fled from one town to another and from one village to another, swept with it the civilian population and callously herded them in to an ever decreasing area and cynically used them, the very people it purported to champion, as a human shield while exposing them to the ravages of battle. They were the involuntary victims of a terrorist group's deadly strategy. The LTTE knew that these innocent civilians would suffer terribly by being forced to partake in this dreadful game. But they callously persisted. The vast majority of these civilians clearly had no desire to be part of the LTTE game plan and as soon as the security forces broke through the terrorist defences in April and May 2009, fled in to government controlled areas carrying whatever they could gather. We saw this phenomenon unfolding on our TV screens. These were not scores of reluctant escapees. They were making a desperate dash away from their ruthless captors, on occasion, being subjected to gunfire from them. The security forces, demonstrating the impact of their training and planning, exercised amazing restraint as they advanced, at great cost to themselves. We saw soldiers dropping their guns to assist civilians across flooded lagoons. Many a child lost its soldier father and a young wife her husband because of this policy of trying to avoid civilian casualties. Of course, as a consequence, the much anticipated "blood bath" or the "humanitarian catastrophe" failed to materialise. Today over 280,000 of these compatriots of ours, are sheltering in camps in Vavuniya. While the large number of persons who fled from the unwelcome embrace of the LTTE, has stretched the resources of the government, what the Government achieved in the first two or three weeks is phenomenal. Efforts are continuing to be made to improve the conditions in the camps. This is our first priority. The government has provided temporary shelters which are more like small rural swellings, including by obtaining 6500 large tents from China. The shelters provided by international agencies could be improved considerably. The material used in them may not suit our climate and they create other problems as the former Chief Justice highlighted. While it is agreed that these shelters should not become permanent dwellings, every effort should be made to make the temporary stay of the displaced as comfortable as possible. We have succeeded in avoiding the familiar images from refugee camps elsewhere of forlorn children with sunken eyes – waiting for a passing relief truck to throw out food. We would encourage international agencies and non governmental agencies to take cognisance of these sentiments and respond to these needs. The water supply to these camps remains inadequate. However, in the first camp site established by the government, wells have been

constructed to extract ground water. Sanitation facilities and waste disposal remains a problem. Providing such facilities in such a short period to 287,000 persons was never considered to be easy. In all these, there are vast opportunities for the private sector to get involved. We are aware that some private sector entities are participating in the relief effort. While thanking them for their contribution, I would encourage the others also to join in. This is the time for you to be counted as we try hard to make these internally displaced comfortable in their temporary dwellings. The major camp has a school. This is symbolic of the government's plans for the future. While it may lack many of the facilities of a normal school, it is testimony to the government's commitment to ensuring a degree of normalcy to the occupants of the camps until they return to their own homes. The children who for months had been herded from one LTTE defence line to another or dragged out into jungle training camps to achieve the deluded goals of a sick mind, now have the opportunity to do what other children do – study. To anyone who visits this school, the enthusiasm of these children and their teachers is palpable. It is the government's wish that they return to their own schools as soon as possible. Unlike many of their colleagues who were thrown up as cannon fodder and their young lives vainly sacrificed to satisfy a megalomaniac's delusional dream, it is everyone's hope that these children will grow up to be useful citizens and achieve their dreams in their own way. We also can make a contribution to this process by assisting with the needs of these schools and the children and also in the reconstruction of the schools in the North. For too long have the children of the North been regarded as a dispensable asset in a terrible war machine. The number of teenage girls who have become pregnant simply to avoid being sent for military training, bears testimony to the evil nature of the regime that existed. We can ensure that at least the next generation gets the opportunities that were denied to the present. The possibility of assisting these children in advancing their studies deserves our attention. Some may need financial assistance. The camps also provide banking and postal facilities. In a welcome development, the banks received close to Rs 400 million in deposits in the space of two days earlier last month. On the one hand, this clearly demonstrates that many in the camps had significant financial resources and that all were not uniformly destitute. Obviously, some carefully carried their money with them, managed to keep it away from the LTTE. This is in stark contrast to the IDPs who have poured in to camps elsewhere in the world. On the other, it also indicated that these people have confidence in the banking system headquartered in Colombo. This is a confidence that needs to be nurtured further. It is also no secret that some residents of the camps receive sizable remittances from overseas, from family members and friends. Continuing financial support from relatives living abroad will assist significantly in restoring normalcy to the communities in the North in the shortest possible time as these people return to their homes. Those who either voluntarily, or through coercion, made monthly contributions to the LTTE, should now consider helping a close relative or a family friend through a similar contribution. The business activities, the agriculture, the services, the continued education of children, etc will require large infusions of funds. There will be innumerable opportunities for the private sector also to engage itself also in these activities. Sri Lankan companies established overseas, may also wish to explore the opportunities opening up in the East and the North. Within the next six months, consistent with the Government's 180-Day Action Plan, the bulk of the residents of the welfare villages will return to their own homes, their villages and their towns. The transition camp must remain a transition camp. It is the hope of the Government that these 280,000 people will return home, not with the hatred kindled in their hearts by 27 years of LTTE indoctrination, but with the hope of a better life in front of them and the possibilities of being shareholders of a uniformly prosperous Sri Lanka. They must return to better homes with electricity and water and not to a marginal and fearful existence to which they were condemned by the LTTE commissars. We have seen the footage coming from the battlefield of endless fortification and extensive bunkers in LTTE areas constructed with steel and concrete and very little construction to benefit the civilian population. The children of the returning IDPs must have better schools to go to without the fear of being dragged in to jungle training camps. They must have better hospitals, and not only for the chosen few, but for all. They must return to an environment where democracy prevails, where people elect their own representatives to govern them and where no legacy of an all powerful and eternal 'supremo' remains. What is taken for granted elsewhere in Sri Lanka by way of democratic governance must be theirs to demand. We must not ever again permit a situation where freely elected representatives of the Tamil people were murdered by the dozen simply for not toeing the LTTE line, where dissent was suppressed and non-conformist views were buried with those who held them. The long line of Tamils who dissented, starting with Alfred Duraiappa, Mayor of Jaffna, were eliminated by the LTTE. All in all, they must return to a better life and it is our responsibility to ensure that. If what is happening in the East is something to go by, then we can have confidence in the future. First and foremost, the mighty LTTE tax collector's visits have stopped and businesses are happy. Roads are being widened, electricity is being re-connected. Shop fronts are being spruced up, new restaurants and hotels are being opened up and economic activity is resuming. We all have a role to play, however small, in achieving the national goal. Every effort must be made to reintegrate our fellow citizens with the rest of the country. The same comfort level enjoyed by the 54% of Tamils who live in the South must also be available to all those displaced, as they return to their homes. The country has lost 27 years due to errors made in the past. We must run faster to make up for this lost time. We owe it to the next generation. As we restore the confidence of the displaced, we will also need to reach out to the Tamil community scattered around the world. Many of those now in the camps have relatives elsewhere in the world. Relatives who may have worries about their well being. There are many who have been fed a constant diet of anti-Sinhala propaganda by the LTTE and by a willing media ever searching for cheap headlines. Journalists who sacrifice their principles and impartiality to advance personal agendas, even those who may not have experienced the horrors of 1983 may have lived a life filled with such propaganda. One of our key challenges will be to reassure the Sri Lankan Tamil community overseas that today's Sri Lanka will not tolerate anything like 1983 again. It is a fact, despite the LTTE's repeated bloody provocations, like the attacks on the Temple of the Tooth and the Sri Maha Bodhi, or the massacres like at the Kaththankudy Mosque, there were no reprisals aimed at Tamil citizens elsewhere in the country. The civilian reprisals so desperately sought by the LTTE as part of its devilish strategy,

did not eventuate. I am confident enough to say that there will be no repetition of that infamous event ever again. Minorities have continued to prosper in Sinhala-dominated areas of the country, including Colombo. Some of the leading business houses in Colombo are minority owned. Many of the leading professionals in Colombo come from the minority communities. 54% of Tamils live in the South among the Sinhalese. The inconveniences currently faced by those with no familiarity with Sinhala or English will disappear in time with the implementation of the Official Languages Policy. What the Government is doing in this area has not been acknowledged. Even the nuisance of road blocks and sudden searches will become a thing of the past with the all pervading fear generated by LTTE suicide bombers diminishing and a greater level of confidence being restored, especially to the hard working security forces. In the East, a former child soldier has been elected as the Chief Minister. Elections will be held in Jaffna and Vavuniya in the coming weeks. But if we leave these things to happen on their own it will take time. It is our responsibility, your responsibility, to contribute proactively to the consolidation of that confidence. If we do not consciously work towards establishing that higher level of confidence, it is your businesses that will not achieve the maximum benefit from the new environment. It is for us to proactively grab this unique opportunity and not let it slip by. President Mahinda Rajapaksa has repeatedly invited Sri Lankan Tamils from around the world to return to their homeland and become parties to the nation building effort. It goes without saying that in addition to the Government, we must all contribute our voices to ensuring a confident ring to our message. The Government is also determined to reach out to all our friends and even critics as we set about the task of nation building. - Asian Tribune – Courtesy: asiantribune.com