
Historic unity for Development and Reconciliation

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A historic meeting of all political parties represented in Parliament, and others too, to discuss the development and reconciliation needs of Sri Lanka, following the defeat of terrorism, took place in Colombo today. Leaders and representatives of 22 political parties from all communities met at the invitation of President Mahinda Rajapaksa in a groundbreaking move to create consensus among political parties for the tasks of development and reconciliation, giving priority to the speedy resettlement and rehabilitation of nearly 290,000 civilians at present in relief centers in the North of the island. This was the first time since the ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka erupted into armed conflict more than 30 years ago, when all democratic parties across the political spectrum met to discuss national issues. Opening the discussion President Rajapaksa stated the humanitarian operation to free the people from terror is now over and it's the time for a humanitarian mission to address the new challenges. He said it was time to set aside the past and look ahead towards the important tasks of development and reconciliation that lie ahead. It was necessary to bring peace and tranquility to the minds of the people in the North whose lives had been so badly shattered in the recent past, and restore their democratic rights and self-respect. It was more important to search for the commonalities that existed among the political parties gathered than seek the causes that divided them, said the President. Mr. N. Srikantha of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the single largest party of the Tamil people that had so far not participated in any all party meetings, expressed the sincere gratitude of the party to the President for affording the opportunity for it to participate in this forum. He said the leader of the TNA Mr. Sampanthan was unable to be present as he was in his electorate but had directed him to place certain views before the President. The TNA made a plea for the speedy resettlement and rehabilitation of nearly 300,000 hapless people in IDP centers in the North. This was a humanitarian problem that required utmost urgency in attention. Following the resettlement and rehabilitation of these people, there should be a just and visible political solution which should be achieved setting aside petty differences of the past and joining hands in the interest of all people. "Our party assures all support to you and all democratic parties in achieving democratic solutions" he said. He added that the TNA believed the country now has the political will to solve the national question and all related issues. He was grateful to the President's opening remark that the past should be left behind and they should all look forward to a better future for all people. He said the TNA hoped to be a partner in the progress of the country based on the ideals of democracy, equality and fraternity. Mr. Nimal Siripala De Silva, Minister of Healthcare and Nutrition representing the SLFP (Sri Lanka Freedom Party) said the President's initiative was most welcome as it was a transparent move to achieve the tasks ahead. The present situation required a positive attitude towards development and reconciliation to ensure lasting peace. It is necessary to move away from opinions of ill-informed observations regarding the IDPs and create proper awareness. Mr. Kabeer Hasheem, MP, representing the UNP said they welcomed the President's initiative in setting up this new forum and look forward to co-operating with the activities that would benefit the people. The UNP would look forward to priority be given to the issue of the displaced people in the North. This initial move and the action already taken were most welcome, he said. The representatives of the EPDP also stressed the need to give priority to resettlement of IDPs as well as opening the A-9 highway for civilian traffic. The Ven. Ellawala Medhananda Thera, MP, representing the JHU, said their party welcomes the President's initiative in bringing all parties together to discuss urgent and common issues. He said the terrorism of the LTTE had badly affected the Hindu community and it was necessary for action to revive and strengthen Hinduism in those areas. He said the government should act with caution about NGOs and any other organizations that come forward to help in this situation in view of the pro-LTTE activities of such organizations and the problems caused by them in the past. Mr. V. Anandasangaree, of the TULF said the President's initiative deserved the fullest support. He said we have to be pleased at the conduct of the Sri Lanka Army which was well-disciplined, cordial and humane in treating the affected Tamil civilians, and the Security Forces should be congratulated for this. Life for the people in the new situation should be better than under the LTTE. He requested special attention to be paid to the needs of women and children among the IDPs. Mr. Anura Kumara Dissanayake, MP of JVP also welcomed the President's action in initiating this forum. The JVP paid a tribute to the Armed Forces and all others who contributed to the defeat of terrorism. He said the challenges before the country today must be solved with new attitudes. Mr. Sivenesathurai Chandrakanthan of the TMVP who is Chief Minister of the Eastern Provincial Council said the President had shown foresight in calling this meeting of all political parties. After liberating the Eastern Province from LTTE terrorism the government had launched a speedy development program that was already showing good results. There was a harmony among the Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim communities in the East. The resettlement of IDPs in the East was done fast and their party was confident there would be such action about resettling the IDPs in the North. In his concluding remarks President Mahinda Rajapaksa thanked all parties for their participation and offers of co-operation. The government was giving priority to bring the maximum relief to the displaced people of the North and ease their pain both in mind and body. The initial challenges had been met and necessary action was being taken with speed. The biggest problem facing resettlement was de-mining. After an area was de-mined it was necessary for this to be certified by the UNDP. These were necessary but unavoidable delays. However, the government had launched 180-day program for resettlement of IDPs and was moving with determination to achieve this goal. The government did not see any need or necessity to keep its own citizens in relief centers. He said the government was committed to a pluralistic and inclusive approach in addressing the immediate problem of resettlement and other important political issues. Parties that attended today's conference were

1. All Ceylon Muslim Congress 2. Ceylon Democratic Unity Alliance 3. Ceylon Workers' congress 4. Communist Party of Sri Lanka 5. Eelam People's Democratic Party 6. Jathika Hela Urumaya 7. Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna 8. Lanka Sama Samaja Party 9. Mahajana Eksath Peramuna 10. Tamil National Alliance 11. National Congress 12.

National Freedom Front 13. National Unity Alliance 14. Pathmanabha Eelam Peoples' Revolutionary Liberation Front 15. Peoples' Liberation Front 16. Peoples' Liberation Organizaton of Tamil Eelam 17. Sri Lanka Freedom Party 18. Sri Lanka Muslim Congress 19. Tamil United Liberation Front 20. Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal 21. United National Party 22. Up-Country Peoples' Front 23. Western Peoples Front Lucien Rajakarunanayake
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