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# I want to re-settle these people as soon as possible: Rajapaksa

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“We’re spending on electricity, on roads, on water. We can’t send them back to a place where there are just jungles.” PRESIDENT RAJAPAKSA: “Their problem is movement, freedom of movement. Since there are security concerns, I don’t know how to do that immediately.” The human drama of some 300,000 Tamils fleeing the LTTE in the weeks before its elimination as a military force moved the world as it watched in shock, awe, and eventually great relief. What is their present condition in the Vavuniya IDP camps and what will be their future? And what is the nature of the political solution Sri Lanka’s government has in mind? President Mahinda Rajapaksa responds to N. Ram’s questions in this first part of an extended interview to The Hindu in Colombo. Lalith Weeratunga, Secretary to the President, participated in the conversation, filling in some details and adding his insights. P.M. Amza, Sri Lanka’s Deputy High Commissioner in Southern India, was also present during the June 30 meeting at Temple Trees, the former official residence of Prime Ministers.

N. Ram: Mr. President, are you satisfied with conditions in the Vavuniya IDP camps where close to 300,000 Tamils are housed? President: I sent some people close to me to the camps. They went and stayed for several days. They spoke to the girls, the Tamil children, and others. And they came and reported to me. I don’t rely on information only from the officials. We released people over 60. You know, a 74-year-old man, when he was released he immediately came here and went to Singapore. He was the man who had the money list, the other list. [Velupillai] Prabhakaran had given lists to many, not to just one person. This man escaped; he was one of the leaders. I would say the condition in our camps is the best any country has. We supply water. There is a problem with lavatories. That is not because of our fault. The money that comes from the EU and others, it goes to the NGOs and the U.N. They are very slow; disbursing money is very slow. We supply the water tanks; we have spent over [Sri Lankan] Rs. 2 billion. Giving electricity, giving water, now we are giving televisions to them. They have telephone facilities. Schools have been established. Some of the leaders are using mobile phones. I had a special meeting on the disposal of waste. I sent a special team of specialists to see how mosquitoes can be eradicated. We know there are shortcomings. Slowly, we have to overcome them. In some camps there are no problems. What these people I sent told me: they are satisfied with the housing, the shelter. They have undergone much worse conditions earlier [when they were under the LTTE’s control]. Their problem is movement, freedom of movement. Since there are security concerns, I don’t know how to do that immediately. So I said: “We have to identify these people. So if anybody takes the responsibility, we are ready to send them.” We have called an all-party meeting for Development and Reconciliation. The reconciliation part, all parties must participate. The TNA [Tamil National Alliance] must participate. Resettling displaced Tamils NR: Why can’t more Tamil IDPs be sent back to the places they hail from, provided of course their security and wellbeing can be assured? Why not a grand gesture of sending tens of thousands of people to safe places where they can be looked after – at this stage, in the Eastern Province, the Jaffna Peninsula, and the Indian Tamil areas? President: You must remember it is only one month, my friend. I said on the 20th of May that as soon as possible, we must send them to places where they can stay. My problem is that we have to get the certificate of de-mining from the U.N. We have already sent people back to several places; you can get the details. As soon as we get the clearance, I’m ready to do that. But before that I must get the clearance from the U.N. about the de-mining. I can’t send them to a place without basic facilities. Now we’re spending on electricity, on roads, on water. We can’t send them back to a place where there are just jungles. Every square centimetre has been mined by the LTTE. If something happens, I am responsible. Lalith Weeratunga (Secretary to the President; LW): Sri Lanka is adopting a very good system. We are de-mining the paddy fields first; then you can get into rice cultivation. The other thing is that the U.N. has been so slow in de-mining. It’s the Indian companies that have been doing the good work. President: And the [Sri Lankan] Army. They’re doing the best work. My personal feeling is that as soon as possible, we have to re-settle these people. We have to send them to the villages. But my problem is that to provide security for them, I will have to recruit another 200,000! I don’t want to do that. Now I am recruiting Tamils to the Army and the police. I was always for that. I said: “Have a Muslim regiment and a Tamil regiment.” All these people started opposing it for political reasons: “No Muslim regiment, no Tamil regiment.” Not by the Sinhalese who welcomed that, but by the Tamils, by the Muslims. You know, the mothers of our soldiers – some of them though their sons had been killed by the LTTE – when we told them that these people [Tamil civilians fleeing the LTTE] were coming and we must send them food and meet their other basic needs, these mothers contributed. The mothers of ex-soldiers contributed. Bikkus contributed. But not some Tamil businessmen. I had to remind them, shout at them, plead with them to get that support. NR: Another issue is three doctors under detention: one may be an LTTE man; the other two are government doctors. Why can’t they be released now? President: I told them to organise a press conference. Let the doctors come and say what they have to say. LW: They were lying through their teeth [about civilian casualties in the No Fire Zone]. And they are public servants, paid by the government. If they go scot-free, it will set a very bad precedent. President: Everybody is worried about the doctors. So let them explain to the public, to the journalists, who can question them, why and on what basis they said what they said. Let the pro-LTTE journalists also question them. The question of Tamil leadership NR: How do you see the post-Prabhakaran situation evolving politically? President: My view is this. Most Tamil people believed they had a leader – whether he was right or wrong. This man [Prabhakaran] made them proud. It was a ruthless organisation, it killed people, those are all immaterial for others. They thought: “There is a leader who is keeping us up in the world.” Suddenly that leadership vanished, after thirty years. Immediately they couldn’t digest it. Many of them know he was wrong. It will take time. Some of these people, the older people, can’t accept it yet. Still the Internet – &KP; [Selvarasa Pathmanathan, the former head of the LTTE’s Department of International Relations]; and chief arms procurer who is at large and on

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Interpol's most wanted list] and the rest are sending messages, right? "You don't worry, the organisation is still there," and so on. Their propaganda machinery is alive, to get the money. Things that they bought individually, they are not giving it. There are Sinhalese businessmen here who invested the LTTE money. We know it but various powerful people protected them. My fear is this. Now, to collect money again, somebody will have to plan something here. Just one incident. Just to upset the world and then to show they have started the movement — so that they can continue to collect the money. They think that will help. But we are very vigilant. No racism. In this whole thing, we have to think aloud. I have warned my party people, all party people, whether Sinhala, Tamil or Muslim, that "I don't want any statement, anything that creates a disturbance among our three communities." Now my theory is: there are no minorities in Sri Lanka, there are only those who love the country and those who don't. They tried to twist that but I still maintain that position. NR: That was in your speech of May 19. President: Yes, in Parliament. And in my Parliament speech, I spoke in Tamil also. And I spoke only in Tamil when I gave a small message when we started the new ITV Tamil channel, Vasantham. LW: The public service is learning Tamil. Some are following courses of 40 hours of spoken Tamil. President: I learnt that in one school the master said: "If the President can learn Tamil, why can't you all? You are students. You must learn Tamil." We are paying people in the public service for learning Tamil, to encourage them. LW: There is a one-time payment if you pass Tamil. But if they go for classes also we pay. H.E. [His Excellency] has issued a directive that with effect from July 1 we will not recruit people to the public service unless they know Tamil — and vice versa, that is, Tamils must know Sinhala, Sinhalese must know Tamil. President: Let them learn, let them learn. I can remember that in 1970 as a young MP I said that we must teach all Sinhalese Tamil and all Tamils Sinhala. If that had happened, I think there would have been a different world. NR: There was this famous and prophetic statement in the 1950s [in 1956, when Sinhala was made the official language]: "Two languages, one country. One language, two countries." President: Yes, by Colvin [Dr. Colin R. de Silva, the LSSP leader who between 1970 and 1975 was a key Minister in the Cabinet of Sirimavo Bandaranaike]. Towards a political solution NR: Now about your political solution. You talked about the 13th Amendment plus. President: I am waiting for them. The TNA representatives must come and participate in the discussions [on the political solution]. I am getting delayed because they haven't done this yet. [On July 2, leaders and representatives of 22 political parties, including the TNA, participated in the inaugural meeting of the newly constituted All Parties Committee to build a consensus among political parties for development and reconciliation, giving priority to the speedy resettlement and rehabilitation of the war-displaced.] I am waiting but it will be after my [re-]election [as President]. I must get the mandate. After that, the political solution comes. Even tomorrow I can give that — but I want to get that from the people. Even today somebody said: "The 13th Amendment. We are not for..." I called them and gave them a piece of my mind. I called our party leaders and told them: "Now what I'm going to tell you, you're not going to tell anybody. It's between you and I." Only party leaders were there. But today a professor from a university called me to say, "Thank you very much." I said: "For what?" He said: "This morning you have warned all the people about racism. And what you said has been highly regarded. This call is to thank you." I asked, "How do you know?" He said: "No sir, I just heard." This professor, a Tamil man, had immediately got the news. "Whether it is Sinhalese, Tamil or Muslim, I am telling you all. No racism. Don't try to create problems for me." [As for the political] solution, I'm willing. I know what to give and I know what not to give. The people have given me the mandate, so I'm going to use it. But I must get these people [the TNA representatives] to agree to this. They must also know that they can't get what they want. No way for federalism in this country. For reconciliation to happen, there must be a mix [of ethnicities]. Here the Sinhalese, the Tamils, and Muslims inter-marry. In my own family, there have been mixed marriages: Sinhalese with Tamils, Sinhalese with Muslims. This is Sri Lankan society. No one can change this. NR: You have this idea of a Second Chamber. President: Yes, I want to get representatives from the Provinces involved in national policy-making. And if there is anything against a Provincial Council, they can protect their powers constitutionally. I have an arrangement in mind — this is what we call "home-grown solutions" — but the idea needs to be discussed and the details settled. I don't want to impose any arrangement. Parts II & III will follow. Courtesy: hindu.com