
Sri Lanka No Platform For Anti-India Activities: Rajapaksa

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New Delhi, 30 July (Asiantribune.com): Asserting his nationalist credentials Sri Lanka President Mahinda Rajapaksa has told all countries "even if I call them friends", that he is nobody's stooge. "I will never be", he declared in ringing tones "all countries must realise that even if I call them friends, I am nobody's stooge and never will be. I am a Sri Lankan nationalist", the President said in an interview to an Indian journalist. He rejected outright the criticism that India was pressurizing him on the ethnic Tamil issue. And disclosed that if there was any pressure on him it has been coming from the West.

"There has never been pressure from India. Only a desire for more understanding. If any pressure has come on me, it has been from the West", Mahinda Rajapaksa told Inderjit Badhwar of Gfiles in a candid interview. The Tehelka magazine's latest issue (August 1, 2009) carried the interview that covered the entire gamut India- Sri Lanka relations, regional security, China's influence, West's concerns over human rights, ethnic Tamil issue and above all LTTE's brutal mission. While on India, the SL President said, "I am sensitive to India's feelings because India is my elder brother, and I have said this openly to Western powers". He however did not subscribe to the view that Sri Lanka's commercial and defence ties with China would come in the way of further strengthening and deepening Sri Lanka-India relations. The arms shipments from China and concessions given to China at the Hambantota port are "commercial arrangements and strategic deals", he pointed out. And added that at no time "did I keep secret from the Indian government the sources of my arms purchases". He disclosed that the India was kept in the picture most of the time. "In fact, we gave your security establishment regular briefings". President Rajapaksa stated that he would not allow Sri Lanka to become a platform for anti-India activities by any country. "So long as I am in charge (Sri Lanka) I will never allow Sri Lanka to become a platform for anti-Indian activities by any country", he told the interviewer. Rajapaksa brushed aside the criticism of the West that after his decisive victory over the LTTE he was no longer concerned about the rights and grievances of Sri Lanka's Tamils. "I do not need lectures from outsiders on Sri Lankan Tamils", he told his western critics, saying the Tamils are "my people" and "our country is proud of them (Tamils)". The President pointed to his own abiding ties with Tamils at the personal level and at the political level to make it abundantly clear "I will tolerate no injustice towards them (Tamils) as I would not tolerate injustice to any Sri Lankan". On political solution to the ethnic issue, President Rajapaksa blamed the LTTE for the delay in resolving the Tamil imbroglio. The political solution was delayed "not by me" but by the LTTE "who held everyone seeking a political solution hostage to their gun or assassination or mass murder". He also spoke of his continued adherence to the 13th amendment as a starting point. "I have openly spoken about the 13th Amendment as a starting point. It is acceptable to India and it has been accepted in Sri Lanka". How do you react when your critics call you a dictator, the interviewer asked the President. Pat came the reply: "Would a dictator answer embarrassing questions like this interview with you? Yes, there have been wartime restrictions. They have been imposed by all countries, including the US in Iraq and (the then British PM) Margaret Thatcher in the Falklands".

Text of the Interview

"Prabakaran Closed The Door On Me. I Wanted Peace" In an exclusive interview, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa is combative towards the West and conciliatory towards India This year's stunning and decisive military annihilation of the LTTE by Sri Lankan forces has created, in its wake, a humanitarian crisis of colossal dimensions. Some 3,00,000 displaced persons, most of them Tamils who were forced to flee their homes, are living in government refugee camps awaiting rehabilitation. The architect of this victory, President Mahinda Rajapaksa, is hailed as a national hero at home, but international human rights groups and many European countries have been vociferous in criticising him for war-related excesses, questioning his commitment to giving his country's minority population a fair shake, and expressing suspicion about his growing closeness to China and Pakistan. In one of the most candid and hard-hitting interviews he has ever given, Rajapaksa spoke about these issues. Inderjit Badhwar Editor-in-Chief, Gfiles Was India's ambivalent attitude towards you while you were fighting the war a source of irritation? Has it strained relations? India and Sri Lanka are actually each other's heart and soul. Our people, our cultures, our languages, our spiritual values come from ancient India. Modern India has always been my inspiration. Not only us, the world has a lot to learn from India. Let me congratulate your country and your prime minister for once again proving to the world that you are a vibrant democracy with a leadership role not only in our region but in the world. We can all benefit from the way you have managed your economy. Has there been international pressure on you — from your big neighbour India and the West — regarding your forging ties with China and Pakistan for military assistance to win your battle against the Tamil separatists? There has never been pressure from India. Only a desire for more understanding. If any pressure has come on me, it has been from the West. But my people did not elect me to succumb to pressure and give in to terrorist blackmail. I am sensitive to India's feelings because India is my elder brother, and I have said this openly to Western powers. But all countries must realise that even if I call them friends, I am nobody's stooge and never will be. I am a Sri Lankan nationalist. Yet let me reassure you that so long as I am in charge I will never allow Sri Lanka to become a platform for anti-Indian activities by any country. What about arms shipments from China and concessions you have given them in the Hambantota port in the South? Will this not upset the geopolitical balance in the region? These are commercial arrangements and strategic deals. India has joint naval exercises with China and the US. We welcome such things if they enhance our regional security. At no time did I keep secret from the Indian government

the sources of my arms purchases. In fact, we gave your security establishment regular briefings. There is increasing concern in the world, particularly Europe, that after your decisive victory over the LTTE you will no longer be concerned about the rights and grievances of Sri Lanka's Tamils. I do not need lectures from outsiders on Sri Lanka's Tamils. They are my people and our country is proud of them. I will tolerate no injustice towards them as I would not tolerate injustice to any Sri Lankan. My family is intermarried with Tamils. My cabinet has Tamils. Seventy percent of our Tamils have always lived in peace and harmony and prosperity in the south and west, which were outside LTTE control. Let me ask you one question: Would these Western nations who were calling for a ceasefire when the LTTE was about to be defeated be willing to give safe refuge to all the LTTE cadres in their own countries? Does this mean you are committed to sharing more power with the Tamil minority in the north? I have always believed in grassroots-level administration and I have respect for the Tamil language. I know how strongly people feel about their mother tongue. There is a saying in Tamil that even God forgives those who abuse him in Tamil! The political solution was delayed not by me but by the LTTE who held everyone seeking a political solution hostage to their gun or assassination or mass murder. I have openly spoken about the 13th Amendment as a starting point. It is acceptable to India and it has been accepted in Sri Lanka. You must be aware that Tamil groups have accused you of genocide and that many European countries like France have tried to bring UN sanctions against your government for the killing of civilians and for human rights violations. Those who live in glass houses cannot afford to throw stones and act holier than thou. Just because I did not suit the Western media prototype and defied their predictions and refused to be coerced or be their puppet, they choose to use loose terms. Genocide is the systematic elimination of one community by another. First, no community has been systematically destroyed in my country and no Sri Lankan government would stand such brutality. We are not Pol Pot or Idi Amin regimes. And we do not bomb civilian targets thousands of miles away from our homeland. Second, if my government wanted to destroy any one community, why should we have rescued more than three lakh civilians from the war zone and from LTTE guns? People who commit genocide don't save the people they are supposed to be destroying. Our people are peace loving and gentle. I come from the south, from a rural background. I believe in the Buddha Dharma, in the middle path. But when the Middle Path is closed to me by force then I must fight to regain that ground. How do you react when your critics call you a dictator? I could have chosen the easy path and brought in draconian legislation in fighting the LTTE after all the assassinations and bombings they carried out, well after the Norwegian-brokered Cease Fire Agreement in 2002. I did not. I went in for local and provincial elections. Do dictators hold elections in the middle of a war? Also, the criticisms you hear about dictatorship appear in our own press. Would a dictator not censor the press? The article from a Sri Lankan journalist implicating my government appeared posthumously in the Sri Lankan press. Would a dictator have allowed this? Would a dictator answer embarrassing questions like this interview with you? Yes, there have been wartime restrictions. They have been imposed by all countries, including the US in Iraq and (the then British PM) Margaret Thatcher in the Falklands. In what way were you different from past Sri Lankan leaders in dealing with the LTTE? Were you always seeking only a military solution? Earlier, there was a confused wishy-washy approach that played into the hands of Prabakaran and the terrorists. It was a two-pronged approach: one, try and contain terrorism while still maintaining the status quo and keeping the door open for a negotiated peace. In the first two years after I was elected I too followed this course. I continued to hold out my hand to Prabakaran, even though he was a wanted terrorist, and said openly that I would prefer to talk to him man to man. I said he was a Sri Lankan. The only condition I imposed was that he should declare that he believed in a united Sri Lanka. What changed so suddenly? That door was closed on me when the response was more terrorism, bombings, and the building up of the LTTE's armed strength, including an air force and navy. After the LTTE tried to close the annicut at Mavil Aru about two years ago and deprive farmers in the east of water, I decided that he wanted all-out war. And we gave it to him. There was no hesitation after that. My mind was clear. The priority was to eliminate terrorism and the LTTE first and only then start the reconciliation process. We accomplished goal one, and now we will accomplish goal two, no matter what others may think. There will be peace, prosperity and democracy for the first time in the north and the east, and freedom from terror. And for this, our people will owe forever a debt of gratitude to our soldiers who died fighting the kind of war that nobody has ever won in this kind of situation. Did India's domestic politics, given the pressures from India's 60 million strong Tamil community, create problems for you? And do you accept that Sri Lanka's Tamils had legitimate grievances? I will not criticise anybody who expresses his view peacefully and stands up for the rights of their community. As a human rights lawyer I am the first to admit that the grievances that sparked Tamil animosity towards Sri Lanka in certain regions had a basis. And we will make sure we do not repeat those mistakes. As far as Indian compulsions are concerned, well, politics is the art of the possible and we have to deal with the fallout of ethnic and linguistic tensions with skill and maturity. I agree that today no war is a 'national' war. They all have international consequences because of human rights issues, civilian populations and ethnic identities. No one can deny that Tamils all over the world feel for each other as a group as all others do. If India's students get assaulted in some Western nation, India rightfully lodges strong protests. Similarly, I had my own domestic compulsions when I came to power. I would have liked to move faster on devolution but I only had a slim majority in the government and had to create a wider consensus. But even if I were able to move faster on a devolution formula, it would not have worked because Prabakaran's only goal was to cut my country in half and create an independent state through terrorism. That would have created a civil war of the kind that President Lincoln had to fight to keep his country together. Was the concept of Eelam — a Tamil nation — always far-fetched? Just for theory's sake, suppose Prabakaran had succeeded in creating an independent Eelam. How would India react to an independent state within Sri Lanka, headed by a terrorist military dictatorship under a tyrant who had murdered an Indian prime minister as well as all his Tamil political rivals, with a navy and air force capable of threatening India's sea lanes, funded by foreign money and actively interfering in India's domestic politics? I do not believe any Indian government could live with such a situation. Which country do you expect should play the major role in reconstruction, reconciliation and

rehabilitation in Sri Lanka? I had always urged India to play an active role and to get actively involved in the peace process during the last three years. I again invite India and the world to participate in the reconstruction of the war areas, in the rehabilitation of people and to participate in developing industry and to help create jobs for the youth, who have far more opportunities now than they had under the LTTE terror. I know the big challenge before me now is to demonstrate to our Tamil brothers and sisters and sons and daughters in the north and east that they are and will be far better off and safer now than they were in the past. Badhwar, an author and journalist, is currently editor-in-chief of Gfile http://www.tehelka.com/story_main42.asp?filename=Ne010809prabakaran_closed.asp

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