“Winning the War to Winning the Peace: Postwar Rebuilding of Society”

Saturday, 29 August 2009
Last Updated Saturday, 29 August 2009

Keynote Address by Hon Mahinda Samarasinghe MP, Minister of Disaster Management and Human Rights at the Seminar on “Winning the War to Winning the Peace: Postwar Rebuilding of Society” organized by the Regional Centre for Strategic Studies (RCSS), Taj Samudra Hotel, Colombo, Friday, 28 August 2009

Mr Chairman/ Madam Chair, Ladies and gentlemen, Good morning. I welcome the opportunity to engage in a discourse on an issue of critical importance to Sri Lanka with a distinguished and erudite group of academics, analysts and professionals who are present here on this occasion. Your choice of topic is of immediate relevance and the convening of this seminar is timely and, indeed, necessary. It is time that we reflect on where we are as a country and where we want to go from here, now that the military capabilities of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have been completely degraded. This demands dispassionate analysis and impartial comment. On this occasion, the combined talents and strengths of the Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, Colombo and the Centre for Security Analysis of Chennai, have created an opportunity for us to engage in just such an exercise. This is not an opportunity that we should let slip from our grasp. I sincerely appreciate the invitation extended to me by the Executive Director of the RCSS, Professor Amal Jayawardena, to join you on this occasion and share with you some thoughts on the Government’s vision and programmes for the future of the war-affected areas which will, in turn, affect the fortunes of the entire Sri Lankan nation. At the outset let us consider two terms in the Seminar’s title that are key to giving our deliberations over the next two days, focus and direction. The first is the word “peace” and the second the phrase “rebuilding of society”. These two are, to my mind, fundamental conceptual paradigms that we must gain a common understanding of and evolve consensus on. What then is this “peace” that we aim to win? As I recently recalled at a meeting of the Sri Lanka-America Society’s Forum, quoting the famous words of Spinoza, that peace is not the mere absence of open violent conflict but an innate predisposition towards benevolence, confidence and justice. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, also perhaps inspired by the sentiments expressed by Spinoza, put it thus: “Peace is not a relationship of nations. It is a condition of mind brought about by a serenity of soul. Peace is not merely the absence of war. It is also a state of mind. Lasting peace can come only to peaceful people.” Thus it appears that what is necessary is to internalize the core values of peace if we are to achieve the societal goal of “winning the peace”. To do this we must be committed to demonstrating benevolence through tolerance and accommodation of our fellows, confidence and trust in one another and justice predicated on principles of equity and equality. This leads us to the next concept of the rebuilding of society. To my mind, there are four limbs to the rebuilding of society which are closely interconnected and interrelated. They are: reconstruction;resettlement; reintegration including rehabilitation; and reconciliation including democratic political accommodation. I will, in the ensuing minutes, expand on these four areas. All these facets must be supportive of the generation of and spread of peace, in the terms I outlined earlier, within our country. Allied with these main facets are the provision of safety and security as a condition precedent and democratization to maintain long-term stability. We also have to put in place preventive measures which will forestall a resurgence of violence and conflict. The debilitating and corrosive influence of nearly 3 decades of conflict, on the entirety of society and its institutional structures, needs to be gradually and carefully redressed. I believe the 3 sub-themes you have chosen amply cover the scope and ambit of these interlinked aspects of rebuilding society. The cardinal rule that must govern all our actions is that the new society that we build for ourselves must be better than any we have known, learning from our past mistakes and building on our successes. Prior to all of this we must take measures to care for those who are the immediate victims of the conflict. Much is spoken of the situation of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) rescued during the humanitarian operation in the northern theatre of conflict. Less is spoken of the casualties of war in the South – the dead, wounded and disabled amongst the security forces and the police and also their families. We need to care for all these persons to see to their welfare. There are also older categories of IDPs – among these are Muslims who were evicted from the North by the LTTE nearly 20 years ago – that we have undertaken to resettle in a durable and sustainable manner. In talking about the approximately 270,000 IDPs in several districts – mainly the welfare centres and relief villages in Vavuniya District, I have just received reports that in 2009 over 15,000 displaced persons have been resettled in Jaffna, Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Ampara and Mannar Districts. We have screened and readied for release over 10,000 persons from welfare centres and relief villages who are elderly, are pregnant or lactating mothers or are children. We have a population of 10,000 persons (including child recruits) who have been members of the LTTE or affiliated with the organization in some way, in centres who are subject to rehabilitation programmes. All these persons are deserving of our care and attention. We are in the process of registering them, with well over 50% having been registered to date. The issue of their freedom of movement is currently being canvassed before the Supreme Court so I will not delve into the details but can state that the Government bears a responsibility to the rest of the people of Sri Lanka to care for their safety. We have reliable information that LTTE cadres have infiltrated the ranks of the IDPs. Until the screening process is complete and these elements are identified and apprehended we have to take utmost care in permitting even limited freedom of movement as the risk exists of LTTE cadres posing as civilian IDPs and entering the general population. This is a chance we cannot afford to take. The decision was not taken lightly but rather by a careful balancing of the rights of the IDPs against those of the rest of the population, especially given the LTTE’s propensity to cause maximum carnage among the civilian population by launching terrorist acts. There is also an international dimension created by the intense pressure brought to bear on the political leadership in countries that are host to the widespread Tamil Diaspora. We need to engage with those nations and with the Diaspora itself to convince them that we are working to rebuild a new Sri Lanka; one in which the diversity that has characterized our polity is cherished, celebrated and nurtured. Our multi-lingual, multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural social structure must

be safeguarded and given space to express itself. It is only then that confidence in an overarching, cohesive and common Sri Lankan identity can be fostered that will enable us to move forward as one nation and one Sri Lankan people. It is only then that we can collectively overcome all the post-conflict challenges in our way as well as other new challenges that any modern nation state is called upon to face. We must seek to attract the vast pool of expatriate Sri Lankan talent – a resource which is vital to the rebuilding of the conflict affected North and East. We must encourage the Tamil Diaspora to invest in these areas and let their brethren enjoy the benefits of their expertise and entrepreneurship. At the same time we need to be on our guard against those, particularly Western, media outlets which, by disseminating disinformation spread by the LTTE network’s remnants and their proxies, constantly seek to besmirch the name of Sri Lanka. Just recently we saw a respected UK newspaper reporting of tremendously exaggerated numbers of supposed mortalities in the IDP welfare centres and relief villages in Vavuniya. When we did check on this reportage, we found that the number was grossly overstated. A few days ago a horrifying video of supposed executions of Tamil persons in January this year was played on a Western television channel’s news programme and the canard was immediately picked up by many news organs and given wide publicity. On both of these occasions, we were able to ascertain the truth and promptly denounce the distortions and untruths for what they were. The Tamil Rehabilitation Organization, a proscribed LTTE “front” organization, continues to spew out the most outrageous falsehoods regarding the situation of the IDPs. These are attempts to generate ill-will against Sri Lanka and distance her from her many friends and we must be alert to such machinations. These efforts were at their height during the final phases of the conflict when pressure was brought to bear at several international forums. Sri Lanka faced those pressures and emerged victorious. To enable us to continue to hold our heads high on the international stage, our foreign policy must be geared towards portraying the truth about Sri Lanka overseas and must be aimed at constructively engaging and cooperating with our international friends and partners while at the same time preserving national sovereignty. There also others who, for reasons best known to themselves, are domestically spreading false reports about the situation in the relief villages and welfare centres. Just last week, I was able to inform Parliament of the steps taken to mitigate the risks of flooding and of diseases spreading due to the pre-monsoonal rains experienced in the North. Exaggerated stories of deteriorating conditions and catastrophic outcomes raised alarms and the national legislature decided to conduct an adjournment debate on the issue. The Government was able to respond fully to all queries and explain the many preventive and mitigatory measures it had taken. Mr Chairman, let me now briefly make reference to the 4 main planks of our recovery efforts. As Minister in charge of the subject of Disaster Management I view all disasters from the perspective of preparedness, mitigation, prevention, response and recovery. Terrorism and conflict are prime examples of human-made disasters. We are now in the late-response and early-recovery phase where we are now over the immediate impact of the disaster, i.e. armed conflict and terrorism. We are now dealing with the fallout of the disaster - those who were harmed and displaced. In humanitarian terms, we are currently in a care and maintenance stage. We are, contemporaneously, moving over to early recovery phase involving what you have identified in your sub-theme as “economic reconstruction” and from there to achieving longer term development objectives. Our ultimate goal is the return of IDPs to the areas in which they originally resided. The process requires ensuring that these areas must be rendered safe, free of mines and other unexploded ordnance. The areas of return must be cleared of the vast caches of weapons that our forces are recovering on a day-to-day basis. To facilitate this process, basic infrastructure must be put in place which will sustain the restored communities. Economic life must be restarted. A return to traditional livelihoods must be enabled. Income generating activities from small and medium industry, services, agriculture and fisheries must be recommenced. If people in the conflict affected areas are to face the future with any degree of confidence, the public facilities and institutional edifices providing essential services must be available and on par with those in the rest of Sri Lanka. It is also necessary to enable and empower them to take charge of their own lives and not be continuously dependent on humanitarian assistance and relief. These are challenges that the Government of His Excellency President Mahinda Rajapakse has taken on and is determined to meet and overcome. The next step is the housing and urban renewal of metropolitan centres. This will enable the second phase of recovery – resettlement. This process itself must be open and transparent. People must be informed of the plans for their eventual return and their movement must be voluntary. To ensure this voluntariness, “go and see” visits by representative groups of IDPs are facilitated to view conditions in the areas of resettlement/return and report to their fellow IDPs. My Ministry has with the assistance of the Sri Lankan representation of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) put in place a strategy of Confidence Building and Stabilization Measures which will sustain and help the resettlement process by building capacities and confidence between and among key actors in the resettlement process – IDPs themselves, government officials, security forces and host communities in locations of displacement and also in areas of return. The first two limbs of this recover effort are being coordinated and implemented in consonance with the overarching Wadakkin Wasantham (Northern Spring) programme under the purview of the Hon Basil Rajapakse, Chairman of the Presidential Task Force for Resettlement, Development and Security in the Northern Province. He is assisted by the Hon Rishad Bathiudeen, Minister for Resettlement and Disaster Relief Services. The Wadakkin Wasantham programme will bring together all focal points and agencies that have a role to play in ensuring the success of the resettlement process and creating the conditions for the rapid economic development of conflict affected areas in the medium to longer term. You point out in your background note explaining the purpose of this Seminar that proper and effective coordination of a post-conflict recovery effort is a sine qua non for rebuilding society. Another major post conflict challenge is the reintegration of ex-combatants into civilian life. In support of the Wadakkin Wasantham initiative and the attempts at normalization and reconciliation launched by His Excellency the President, my Ministry has, after wide consultation, recently completed a national framework proposal on the reintegration of ex-combatants into civilian life. We laid the conceptual underpinnings of this exercise in 2006 within the ambit of the disaster recovery mandate of the Ministry and began work in October 2008, long before the conflict was successfully concluded.

The proposal takes a holistic view of reintegration which includes not only disarmament and demobilization followed by rehabilitation but also transitional justice, reinsertion and socio-economic integration. The integration process will enable those who took part in the conflict to rebuild their lives and become productive members of society. We are in the process of formulating an action plan in keeping with the national framework in close consultation and coordination with the various Government focal points. We expect the action plan to be finalized shortly with the active cooperation of all key Government actors, civil society and our international partners. Here again, inter-agency coordination and a commonality of approach are the hallmarks of this initiative. This outlook will, we believe, prove effective, prevent duplication and ensure that all agencies are working towards a common goal and are striving to move in one direction. It will help build synergies among the various operational agencies who are working on disparate components of an integrated strategy. Finally Mr Chairman, I will briefly mention the efforts at reconciliation in conjunction with re-democratization and the initiation of a political process within a democratic framework that guarantees equality of status, treatment and opportunity to each and every Sri Lankan irrespective of differences based on culture, language, religion or ethnicity. His Excellency the President has given leadership to this process of national reconciliation with the involvement of all political parties and this is an initiative which, eventually, will bring us closer to achieving a durable peace of the sort I mentioned at the beginning of this address. I would like to point out that the Government of His Excellency the President has consistently taken the position that political problems would be met with a political response. As far back as 27 October 2008, President Rajapakse told the Indian Hindu newspaper: “I am absolutely clear that there is, and can be, no military solution to political questions. I have always maintained this. A military solution is for the terrorists; a political solution is for the people living in this country.” In this context I would also like to recall the historic words of the President when he addressed the national legislature and the entire country soon after the triumph over the forces of terror on 19 May 2009, reemphasizing his Government’s commitment to a locally generated political process. He said: “At this victorious moment, it is necessary for us to state with great responsibility that we do not accept a military solution as the final solution…the responsibility that we accept after freeing the Tamil people from the LTTE is a responsibility that no government in the history of Sri Lanka has accepted”
It is necessary that we give these [Tamil] people the freedoms that are the right of people in all other parts of the country. Similarly, it is necessary that the political solutions they need should be brought closer to them faster than any country or government in the world would bring. However, it cannot be an imported solution. It is necessary that we find a solution that is our very own. It should be a solution acceptable to all sections of the people, he said.

Having defeated the most ruthless terrorists of the world, we now have another powerful challenge, the President said. It is the task of restoring the rights and dignity of the Tamil people destroyed by the LTTE.” This then, Mr Chairman, is the pith and substance of the Government’s vision when it comes to the initiation of the political process that is necessary if we are to finally win the peace. The North saw the recent establishment of two democratically elected institutions which are a bellwether for the re-enthronement of democracy in the entirety of Sri Lanka. We successfully met this challenge in the Eastern Province after the military victory in 2007. In a similar manner, the Government has committed itself to the re-establishment of democracy in the North. In the recent past, the people of conflict affected areas were subject to a separate system of police, courts and administrative structures imposed on them by the LTTE. They had to endure and survive enormous hardships during this era. It is vital that, in the future, we engender trust in a democratic framework and amongst the people and familiarize them with modes of popular and good governance. Elected political representatives should be entrusted with the responsibilities of working for the people and running an administration in the Northern Province. Additionally, trust in the rule of law and structures to ensure good governance must be encouraged. Administrative agencies must be strengthened in order that the people of the North are able to attend to their needs in a manner similar to others in the rest of the country. A functioning democratic system itself can prove a cohesive force and greatly aid reconciliation efforts. Each community will, in the course of democratic give and take, have to eschew narrow parochial thinking and make some sacrifices for the common good. This is how the military victory gained during the humanitarian operation will be made more productive and meaningful and will be of eventual benefit to us and to future generations. It is in this manner that a stable peace in a new, unified Sri Lankan society can be won and sustained. I wish you every success in your deliberations over the next two days and look forward to receiving the outcome of your efforts. I thank you once again. [Ends]