Speech made by Rohitha Bogollagama, M. P., Minister of Foreign Affairs in Parliament

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Hon. Speaker, As we all are aware having remained victims of terrorism for over 27 years, the people of Sri Lanka have just crossed over to a new epoch of peace and development. If encountering the brutal terror of a ruthless enemy in the military front required a great deal of commitment and dedication on the part of all those who were involved in it, from the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces to the soldiers, facing the obstacles in the political front which surfaced in innumerable guises both locally and internationally required, by no small measure, sheer far-sightedness and resolve on the part of His Excellency President Mahinda Rajapaksa and his government. I need not emphasize how various forces tried, in vain, to stop the government in its march to victory. The story is long and now history, which is no secret to any of us, anymore.

Hon Speaker, I am making this statement to assess the developments which followed this victory over terrorism and in that backdrop, to bring to the attention of this House some challenges unfolding before us. The first daunting task which demanded our priority in the aftermath of the defeat of the terrorists was, as I have told this House before, to provide all the necessary facilities including shelter, food, medical assistance, getting ready the areas for permanent resettlement for the population in the North numbering approximately 280,000.The task, by its very nature, never looked easy. But it never looked insurmountable either, to a government which had the confidence of its ability to fulfill this undertaking, having experience in the East and unwavering commitment to the welfare of the people. We have shown the world the progress achieved between the years 2006 and 2008 in the East in resettling all those civilians who had been displaced due to fighting. The government’s efforts in facing these challenges are evidenced by the comprehensive programmes launched in the aftermath of the defeat of terrorists and the rescuing of all the civilians held hostage by them. At that hour, the top priority was to attend to the urgent needs of those who had been displaced. You would recall that the process was monitored at the highest levels of the government. Many steps were taken swiftly to bring back normalcy to the lives of the displaced. Some of these programmes had been initiated even prior to the defeat of the terrorists. They all have been related to post-conflict reconstruction & resettlement, rehabilitation and reconciliation. As you are aware, as the first step the displaced were accommodated in welfare centres in Vavuniya, following a registration process which was hurriedly arranged with the exodus of people from the area of conflict. The government wanted to ensure a roof over everybody’s head, which task was deftly completed. Immediate action was taken to regularize matters relating to their basic needs such as food, water, sanitation and healthcare. There have been no cases of starvation nor epidemics which stands testimony to the efficacy with which the government has worked, despite many difficulties. These centres have been visited by journalists both local and international and also by a number of prominent foreign dignitaries including the Secretary General of the United Nations. Those who have visited, including the officials of the UN, have positively acknowledged the government’s efforts of progress and pledged support to Sri Lanka . In fact Sri Lanka continues to receive assistance from its friends in the international community who are working with 53 international non-governmental organizations and the UN, in providing relief services to the displaced. The Government remains committed to resettling the people and restoring their livelihood, in the shortest possible time, in their original villages while implementing a massive development drive. In fact, providing food amounting to a million packs a day is no mean task for the government, and resettlement, therefore, becomes a top priority. In addition to the 59,608 IDPs who have already been resettled in the past few months, another 15,000 from the Jaffna district will be resettled in their original homes soon. One of the impediments to the process of resettlement is the evidence that some terrorist cadres have infiltrated the IDPs and the release of the civilians very correctly depends on a screening process. The worst challenge in this regard, however, is the extensive mining by the terrorists in these areas which they previously held. There are 08 de-mining organizations currently working in Sri Lanka . Large caches of weapons and ammunition continue to be found. Mine clearance has been accelerated with the security forces and international collaborator teams working together. However, due to opposing philosophies surfacing in the procedure of mine clearance, where one school of thought favours first investigating the presence of mines in areas and then de-activating them and the other is to seek to de-mine without an initial investigative process. This has stymied the speed of de-mining to an extent. However, the security forces have been delivering a yeoman service in de-mining and therefore the government has sought assistance in procuring equipment through the international community. In fact the government sought to procure de-mining equipment and went to the extent of having it airlifted, in order to ensure the rapid clearance of mines. As you aware, de-mining is a tedious process but we have achieved commendable progress. In fact the UNICEF recently acknowledged the Government’s efforts in ensuring a secure environment for the people who have been resettled. Under the family reunification programme over 5000 people have been re-united within the IDP relief villages with further releases anticipated in the near future after bona fides and capacities of prospective host families are established. It may also be noted that a number of persons released to host families have returned to the welfare villages re-seeking refuge. While these programmes are ongoing, a number of steps have been taken to reduce the overcrowding in the relief villages, ensuring the provision for water, sanitation and pipe borne water sufficient for 250,000 persons. The WFP has stated that sufficient food was reaching the people in these villages, and therefore the incidences of malnutrition have been drastically reduced. The resettled civilians also have been provided with livelihood support. Infrastructure facilities in these villages have been restored and improvements are being carried out. The Presidential Task Force which is overseeing resettlement, development and security in the Northern province has taken several steps to stabilize the living standards and income of the people from that region coming under the on-going programmes for rehabilitation. The process of political reconciliation has already been initiated with local elections in Jaffna and Vavuniya. You would no doubt agree that the pace of addressing issues related to reconciliation has to be determined by the Government since it is best placed to interpret the ground situation which needs to be in tandem with the policies to

be implemented. His Excellency the President, being cognizant of the need for reconciliation process and having recognized that it is now timely for political proposals to be presented has sought to engage with the wider polity. We must welcome the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) coming on board with regard to assisting the government in its endeavours in ensuring in bringing normalcy back to the lives of the displaced. It is hoped that the TNA would also become involved in the political process in the near future , which is imperative for reconciliation. The draft proposals of the All Party Representation Committee are presently under consideration. Hon Speaker, Various questions have been raised, over all this time, by many parties, on the situation of the IDPs and their resettlement. It is imperative to be mindful of the fact that the fall out of the three decade old conflict is still in existence. The terrorists militancy has completely destroyed a large extent of the North, the rebuilding of which will undoubtedly take time. Let me place on record that the government’s resolution to address all the issues relating to the post conflict phase remains intact. However, action to this end should be taken at a pace determined by the Government of Sri Lanka. All that the Government requires is space and constructive understanding. To be clearer, we need space for progress in our efforts, and constructive engagement from our international friends. Hon. Speaker, While all these efforts are underway, it is regrettably no secret that some critics of Sri Lanka , either as a result of their being misinformed or by their lack of understanding of the ground realities in the country, have been harsh and unfair. In fact the time and energies they have spent vilifying Sri Lanka could have been well spent in assisting the country to come out of the devastation caused by a decades-long bane of terror. It is regrettable that some untenable observations by some sections of these critics only had the potential to polarize the Tamil community from the Government at a time it is painstakingly seeking to follow a path of reconciliation. Sri Lanka was compelled to withstand many a fanciful allegation, particularly towards the end of the conflict. The critics seemed to have easily missed the point that it is a democratically elected government which had to legitimately fight a banned terrorist organization for being responsible for a trail of blood and subjugation of the people through intimidation marking a dark period of this country, while trying to maintain law and order and the fundamental rights of all its citizens. In fact a good deal of these allegations have been targeting the valiant armed forces in sinister moves to implicate them in the alleged violation of international humanitarian laws. Both in the prosecution of the hostilities against the LTTE, as well as in the post-conflict operations catering to the needs of the IDPs, our security forces have exemplified the noble and sublime values of all the great religions and cultures of co-existing peacefully amidst our people. However, a culmination of the said vicious trend was evidenced most recently in the ludicrous allegation made against our armed forces by Channel 4 television in the U.K. The government has reiterated its strong and unequivocal rejection of the contents of this video footage. That is a con story and scientific proof has been brought up to confirm that the video is a fabrication. The fact remains that the TV channel has not checked the authenticity of the contents or its location. It is also surprising that the supplier of the footage has not come forward to answer any of the questions raised on its authenticity. It is also regrettable that some sections of the international community seem to be giving undue credence to this doctored video, by their calls for an international inquiry. Reputed television networks should conduct themselves ethically and with decorum and not be driven by interest groups seeking to undermine sovereignty of countries. Hon Speaker, Much interest has been evinced from different quarters in the case of Mr. J. S. Tissanayagam, possibly because he is a journalist. It is regrettable that the verdict of the court is being portrayed as a threat to freedom of expression in Sri Lanka when an indictment had been filed against him through the normal judicial procedure of this country. The High Court commenced its trail on September 9, 2008 and Mr. Tissanayagam has made a confession disclosing his links with the LTTE. Howls from the international community have overlooked that Mr. Tissanayagam has been found guilty of inciting terrorism and related issues. He is not the only one to have been convicted under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) but just one of them. Those who have conspired with terrorists in a manner to pose a threat to security of this country have been convicted earlier, including some members of the security forces. In fact a senior police officer who is also in detention for alleged links with the LTTE, investigations on which is presently on going, is a case in point. It may be recalled that Tissanayagam was also in detention in the same manner. Those who have expressed concern on the Tissanayagam verdict therefore must realise that the due process of law has taken place and no one in this country is above the law be it a journalist or a member of the security forces. Mr. Tissanayagam can still recourse to the appellate courts in accordance with Sri Lanka ’s judicial process. The criticism of the judicial action could amount to the disrespect of the laws of this country. Hon Speaker, With regard to the concerns expressed by many interested parties about access issues and the role of the ICRC, it may be noted that the nature of work undertaken by the ICRC as well as other international organizations has changed with Sri Lanka entering a post conflict era. Due procedures have been laid in order for genuine assistance from civil society organizations to come and work in Sri Lanka , which are followed by many such organizations. In fact the UN Resident Coordinator has expressedly informed me that access to humanitarian organizations working in the IDP welfare centres is now not an issue of concern. Further the Government is in discussion with the ICRC in working out a new mandate reflecting the ground realities. Hon Speaker, The Government seeks to engage with the international community because we are transparent to the world at large. Despite all the misconceptions formed, Sri Lanka is always open for a wider engagement with the international community. In fact we are amenable to re-orient our relations according to the unfolding needs on ground for which we expect reciprocity and mutual understanding of our international partners. As I have quoted in this House before from His Excellency the President’s address at the Victory Day Parade on 3rd June; [QUOTE] As a nation we have to go very far to make our independence complete. Terrorists were able to get the world to bring pressure on us, a free and sovereign State. That was possible because the terrorists had the capability to bring pressure on those governments. Therefore, it is necessary to begin a new era in foreign relations to safeguard my motherland. Having won the freedom of our motherland, we must next establish our freedom and sovereignty internationally. [UNQUOTE]. Let me also quote from the said speech of His Excellency the President where he paid a warm tribute to Sri Lanka’s friends [QUOTE] we have also been able to build genuine good relations with the

international community. These honest friends have carried out the greatest responsibility towards our freedom and sovereignty in this era. We value very much the assistance we received from all these countries at this moment. Our people who enjoy the satisfaction of freedom together with them must always have in their hearts the friendship extended by these friends. [UNQUOTE]. Hon Speaker, The call of the hour is for us to shed all the differences arrived through erroneous notions, political or otherwise, to ensure unity amongst us as a nation in view of our duty by the nation at this historic juncture. Sri Lanka is at the threshold of an era of peace and harmony, a long-cherished dream, which can certainly be a reality only with that kind of unity and determination. Towards that end, we need our friends and we welcome our friends from all over, to join hands with us in our quest for sustainable peace and prosperity for our people. Public Communications Division Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic Building Colombo-01

Sri Lanka

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