The West must help us and stop unfair criticism - President Rajapaksa

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President Mahinda Rajapaksa in an interview with Italy’s Le Figaro daily newspaper focusing on wide range of contemporary issues of the country emphasized that the Western bloc should stop criticizing the country over alleged human rights violations and should assist in its endeavor to rebuild the nation that is now entirely liberated from the grip of terrorism.
The wide ranging interview by Pierre Rousselin covers, many issues. Among other matters, the recent Channel 4 fabrication of a summary execution of civilians by Sri Lankan forces, the verdict and sentence on journalist J. Tissainayagam, the President’s plans for a political solution and the next Presidential Election surfaced during this interview. Here is the transcript into English of the interview published in French, conducted in Colombo on September 4, 2009 and published in Le Figaro of September 08. Le Figaro. – In May, you won the victory against the Tamil Tigers, putting an end to a thirty-year-old conflict. How are you going to bring peace in your country and rebuild it?

Mahinda Rajapaksa. – First of all, we have to permit the displaced people to go back to their villages, especially in the North. We first need to finish the mine clearance for people to be able to go back home and cultivate their land. This is the absolute priority. Then, we need to develop the country and we are calling upon foreign investors to do so.
Why is the return of refugees so slow? Will you be able to honour your commitment to repatriate 80% of them by the end of the year? The obstacle resides in mines. It’s a more serious problem than we expected. The Army works relentlessly from morning till night to remove them. Over one thousand families are home now, and so are the eldest people. Currently, there are 220,000 refugees. By mid-September, 50,000 are likely to have left the camps.Why are displaced people locked into camps? We can’t leave them outside and let them step on a mine. We also have to sort out the ones who are linked with terrorists and those aren’t. They are not in camps by our own doing but because the LTTE took them hostages.The western countries criticize your army for having killed many civilians towards the end of the war. What is your answer? I do not accept those criticisms. I don’t know how another country would have coped. We fed, we paid the salary of civil servants who were fighting with the terrorists. When we took over the Eastern Province, there were no civilian victims. There were in the North. But we wouldn’t have lost so many men in the army if we had used heavy weapons. We did not tell it publicly at the time because the military officers would have rebelled. But this is a fact and the opposition criticized us for this.You are still criticized even though the war came to an end. The recent condemnation of a journalist, J.S. Tissainayagam, to a twenty-year sentence gave rise to a broad disapproval…

The judge gave the verdict in all independence. I can’t interfere in court orders. There are still possibilities of appeal before the Appeal Court of the Supreme Court. People say the freedom of the press is threatened, but they do not say a group of journalists was demonstrating in front of the court even before the judgement was given. Should the sentence be confirmed, could you use you right of reprieve?We need to wait until all the recourse procedures have been used. I’ll take my decision when the time will have come, but we can’t consider that journalists are above the law. You do know that this question is an international issue for your country…This is due to the LTTE propaganda. For the West, the LTTE can do whatever they want, kill whoever they want, murder Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi (in 1991) without anybody to protest. This is a shame, but that’s the way it is. There are two sets of rules. The journalist we talked about has not been tried because he is a journalist but because of his ties with the terrorists.

The war is over. When are you going to raise the state of emergency? As soon as possible. We have to sort out the people displaced to see how many of them are linked with the LTTE leaders and have to be prosecuted. Terrorists do not wear uniforms; they become civilians as soon as they lay down arms. But we can’t let them free.How long is it going to take? Weeks, months, years? It depends of the return of the refugees. It could take six months, one year. I don’t want to make promises I would not keep. The West has to help us and stop criticizing us so unfairly.From November onwards, you will be able to call for presidential elections. When will they take place? As soon as possible.At the beginning of next year? Yes.

Will you campaign with a program of settlement of the Tamil issue?Yes. We are ready to apply the 13th Amendment of the Constitution which provides decentralization and the establishment of local [provincial] councils. This provision was not enforced because of the war. We are even ready to go a little bit further. Will this satisfy the Tamil leaders?There will always be people asking for more. But what the population wants is peace and security. They want schools. They’ve had enough of the war. Politicians are interested in these other questions. Are you satisfied with the help brought by the West?The aid for the return of refugees goes through NGOs, who are spending about 40 to 60% for administrative matters. We saw this with the tsunami. You don’t like NGOs…Some of the NGOs helped the LTTE. Others did their work. But even the UN agencies slow down the process of normalization. A video broadcasted in Great Britain showed what looked like summary executions by soldiers of the Army. How do you retort to the sharp criticisms it gave rise to?We have elements showing that this video is a set-up. This is not the first time members of the LTTE use Army uniforms to stage events with propagandist aims. You met Colonel Gaddhafi and Hugo Chavez in Tripoli. You went to Burma. Why do you carry on openly with leaders who are not the best friends of the West?No western country is inviting me! But when I’m invited in a friendly country, I go. We are a founding country of the non-aligned movement. I also go to India when I have the opportunity… Journalists disappear, others are assassinated. Sri Lanka does not embody a very rigorous democracy… This is all propaganda. The press is free, criticism is free.

The opposition can even go to Brussels to do lobbying against the renewal by the European Union of the GSP + system. As for journalists disappearing, most of them reappear to claim visas in consulates. We want to develop this country. We want to avoid any kind of discrimination against Sinhalese, Tamils or Muslims. We want western countries to help us, to trust us and stop listening to the LTTE propaganda. France has been fairest than many other countries. It supported us in our fight against terrorism and never aligned itself on the LTTE.

Interview done in Colombo by PIERRE ROUSSELIN Last Updated (Friday, 11 September 2009)Courtesy:news.lk