
Foreign Minister Bogollagama addresses the Sri Lanka Expatriate Forum in Colombo

Wednesday, 18 November 2009

Last Updated Wednesday, 18 November 2009

Address by Hon. Rohitha Bogollagama, Minister of Foreign Affairs at the Sri Lanka Expatriate Forum 2009 on 14th November 2009 at the Presidential Secretariat Ladies and Gentlemen, On behalf of His Excellency the President of Sri Lanka, I warmly welcome you all this afternoon for an interactive session on the role the Sri Lanka Diaspora can play in the post conflict developmental efforts. I am confident that our interactions will be fruitful in view of the overwhelming response we have received to the invitation extended by His Excellency President Mahinda Rajapaksa, for this important event.

I know each one of you has excelled in your chosen professions and having perused your profiles, we are indeed pleased to have you in our midst today. The purpose of our meeting today is multifaceted and stems from the invitation extended to the Diaspora by His Excellency the President in his address to the nation in the immediate aftermath of the LTTE's defeat. I wish to recall the words of His Excellency the President on that historic occasion, when he said, and I quote: "I call on our engineers, doctors, accountants and other professionals living in various countries abroad, to return to your motherland and contribute to its development". The exemplary leadership by His Excellency President Mahinda Rajapaksa resulted in the defeat of the LTTE and the eradication of terrorism from Sri Lanka. In the aftermath of this achievement, His Excellency President Rajapaksa is now focused on steering the nation on the right course to achieve development and economic advancement. As envisaged in the Mahinda Chinthanaya, your share and valuable contribution towards this endeavor, is anticipated. Your contribution can be in different segments including financial and technical support for infrastructure developmental projects, and relief assistance for the IPDs, curbing the LTTE's international network including their propaganda activities, using your influence in your host countries. You may be aware of the fact that pro-LTTE international lobbies have been able to manipulate and promote statements favouring them on a number of occasions in many countries by lobbying political leaders and decision makers. This may be due to pro-LTTE lobbies misrepresenting the facts of the realities prevailing in Sri Lanka to these leaders and decision makers. Owing to the growing vote base of the Tamil expatriate community in many countries abroad, some of these political leaders may even be swayed or compelled to make such statements due to their local political compulsions in order to strengthen their vote base. In this context, I wish to acknowledge the effective role played by many of our expatriate Sri Lankans who have worked tirelessly along with our Missions abroad, to project the realities prevailing in Sri Lanka. At the same time, I would also like to call on those patriotic Sri Lankans abroad to continue their proactive engagement with their host countries and to take whatever measures possible and permissible to counter any attempts and propaganda by pro-LTTE elements. You may also wish to use the vote base of Sri Lankan expatriates who are not sympathetic to the decimated LTTE and make efforts to reach-out to political leaders and decision makers by projecting the actual position prevailing in Sri Lanka. In that regard, you may wish to draw attention to the words of H.E. President in which he stated, and I quote: "We have removed the word minorities from our vocabulary three years ago. No longer are the Tamils, Muslims, Burghers, Malays and any others minorities. There are only two peoples in this country. One is the people that love this country. The other comprises the small groups that have no love for the land of their birth. Those who do not love the country are now a lesser group". On this occasion, I wish to remind those present today that there was never a fight against the Tamil people in Sri Lanka. The conflict that ravaged our country was between an elected Sri Lankan Government and that of an internationally known terrorist organization, the LTTE. During the final phase of the conflict, the Government launched a humanitarian operation to liberate the Tamil civilians from the cruel clutches of the LTTE which used them as human shields. While the large scale relocation of approximately 288,000 that resulted from our humanitarian operations, culminating with the defeat of the LTTE on 18th May 2009, it created an unprecedented challenge to the Government of Sri Lanka. The Government was able to ensure that each and every person who was accommodated at the welfare villages with the support of the local well-wishers and the international community, were provided with food, shelter and medical care. We even made arrangements to enable students to continue their education and even sit for the GCE O/Level and A/Level examinations, including ex-child combatants as well. These measures were appreciated by many foreign dignitaries. In this context, I wish to recall Mr. T. R. Baalu, the leader of the delegation of Members of the Indian Parliament from the constituencies in the State of Tamil Nadu last month when he said that the Government of Sri Lanka was doing an "admirable job", following the delegation's visit to the welfare villages. In the welfare villages, the Government also had in place basic facilities such as banks, shops and vocational training centers to ensure that the people, who were only temporarily accommodated at these welfare villages, were able to lead normal lives until their resettlement, which is now underway. His Excellency, President Mahinda Rajapaksa and I, on a number of occasions and during our interactions with our colleagues from the international community, have repeatedly reiterated the commitment of our Government for the speedy resettlement and I am pleased to say that this process had led to 127,042 as of 12th November 2009 leaving the welfare villages for resettlement. At this juncture, I also wish to share some details on the resettlement process. While our concern was to ensure the speedy resettlement the IDPs, their safety was also of paramount importance to the Government of Sri Lanka in view of the fact that there are an estimated number of 1.5 million landmines and unexploded ordnance which contaminate an area of 402 square kilometers in Northern Sri Lanka. While the Sri Lanka Army was responsible for 70% of the total area cleared so far, 7 INGOs and several NGOs are assisting in this process. The demining is carried out under strict conditions to ensure that these areas will be completely out of danger for civilians after resettlement. Between January - August 2009, a total area of 82.08 square kilometers in Anuradhapura, Batticaloa, Jaffna, Mannar, Trincomalee and Vavuniya districts were surveyed and cleared by the Sri Lanka Army and de-mining agencies, and handed over to the Government of Sri Lanka. The de-mining of nine Grama Niladhari Divisions in Kilinochchi is expected to be completed soon for resettlement. Demining of areas in the Mullaitivu

district has also commenced. For this purpose, the Government recently imported the latest de-mining machinery-five Docking and five MV 4-to the value of Rs. 520 million from Slovakia and Croatia respectively and five more machines have also arrived to speed up the process. The new machines are expected to clear 5000 square metres of land per day, and it is faster than the manual system used by the INGOs/NGOs, where only 50 square metres can be cleared. These are positive developments which have taken place during a reasonably brief period and you may wish to highlight these measures taken by the Government in your host countries. You can also point out to the continuing existence of LTTE's financial networks in some parts of the world, illegal activities such as gun running, humans smuggling and distribution of narcotics with a view of curb these activities and bring to book those involved. Explaining the democratic process that is currently underway in Sri Lanka, you can draw attention to the emergence of a new Tamil leadership in Sri Lanka and the fact that a former child soldier is now the Chief Minister of the Eastern Province. You can also refer to the changing stance of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which was, until recently, sympathetic to the LTTE. In the areas of resettlement and reconciliation, we look forward to your financial assistance and expertise in various specialized fields and your support and expertise on infrastructure and community building projects. You would also have to be vigilant on attempts by pro-LTTE lobbies planning to breathe new life into the defeated LTTE. There may be attempts to politicize and radicalize the youth from the Tamil Diaspora and your actions to prevent such attempts should be more proactive rather than reactive. I have also advised our Missions abroad to work with members of the Diaspora on such matters and our Heads of Missions and other officials will make themselves available to discuss and assist in these efforts. In this connection, I wish to recall my recent meetings with the Foreign Minister of Australia, Hon. Stephen Smith and Hon. Maite Nkoana Mashabane, South Africa's Minister of the Department of International Relations and Cooperation. Both have assured the Sri Lankan Government that they will not permit LTTE activities in their respective countries. The South African Minister for International Relations and Cooperation has further assured our Government that there is no room on South African soil for a Transnational Government which some sections of the LTTE have been attempting to propagate. There are also a large number of world leaders whom His Excellency the President and I have interacted with, who have, I am pleased to state, given similar assurances to our Government which is in keeping with our continuing efforts to ensure that the LTTE's global network is also curbed. While the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and our Missions abroad are working on a diverse and extensive campaign to thwart attempts by the remnants of the LTTE and elements supportive of the pro-LTTE groups from resurfacing, your continuing support would go a long way in our endeavours to curb such activities. It is also important to keep the international community and the Tamil Diaspora informed of the current realities in Sri Lanka and the sincere efforts of our Government, under the visionary and far sighted leadership of His Excellency President Mahinda Rajapaksa, to ensure that all Sri Lankans, irrespective of religion, race and creed, enjoys the benefits of the post conflict developmental phase. While thanking you all for your presence here this afternoon, I also wish to acknowledge the financial contributions and moral support extended to encourage the tri forces by contributing to programme such as "Api Wenuwen Api" and "Ranaviru Upahara". We look forward to your continuing cooperation and support in the months to come. Thank you.