President Mahinda Rajapaksa addresses the Diplomatic Community

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Hon. Ministers,Excellencies,Other Representatives,Ladies and Gentlemen, I am pleased to have this opportunity to meet with all of you today. The Hon. Minister of External Affairs has made my task easier. I believe he has wonderfully summarized the matters which I wish to highlight. I appreciate your presence here this evening and I also wish to express my thanks for the congratulatory messages sent to me by you and your governments, on the recent election victories of my government and myself.

I know that some of you have served long terms in Sri Lanka. I met you then, at a time when 15 thousand square kilometers of our land mass and 2/3 of our coastline were under the control of terrorists. From then to now, there has not been any change in my government's policy on democracy and human rights. At that time LTTE terrorism was a threat to the existence of all including the mass media. That is why it became necessary for us to launch operations against it, in order to secure the rights of the civilians in the North and the East and free them from the grip of terrorism. We have attempted at all times to resolve this issue through negotiations. I don't need to go into detail on that. I recall how I expressed my willingness in my maiden statement after being elected to this Office to meet with the LTTE leadership. I did so because of nothing else but my wish to restore the freedom and democracy of the innocent civilians living in the North and the East. It is with high expectations that we sent delegations of senior rank for talks in Oslo and Geneva. But you all know that those endeavors ended in failure. Nevertheless we were always ready and entirely committed to act in a manner so as to protect democratic rights, while engaging in security operations against the most vicious and barbarous terrorist group in the world. Immediately after the East was cleared from the grip of the LITE, we held elections in May 2008 in the Eastern Province. Different people came up with different opinions at that time. But we believed always that it is with the elected representatives of the people that we should deal with and move forward. I am always of the opinion that the only proper way is to deal with the representatives elected by the people who then become the representatives of the masses, instead of trying to deal with government appointees or public servants. It is in this spirit that during the time of the conflict, we held Provincial and Local elections in all parts of the country, as it was felt necessary to strengthen democracy in the country. People in the North and the East were able to participate in the Presidential and General Elections held recently after 28 long years without the threat of terrorism. We also saw during the recent elections that the people in the North and the East are showing an interest in their wellbeing, rather than in petty political gains. It was evident at this General Election that they gathered around the main political parties rather than parties restricted to represent a single ethnic group. Furthermore I am happy to be able to announce that more than 70 % of the IDPs who were one time held by the LTTE as a human shield, have left the welfare camps and have returned to their respective hometowns. Excellencies, my dear friends, As an extension of those democratic policies, on the 5th and 6th of this month in Parliament we took steps to relax a large number of important emergency laws and regulations. I remember a statement made by one MP who said that the emergency regulations are older than him. That indicates that the youth of this country have lived for a long time under a state of emergency and they had been born in a period when the emergency regulations were in operation. Our elders have spent half their life time under a state of emergency. We are taking the relevant steps towards scaling down these regulations. These laws and regulations that have been amended have been done so very carefully. We are conscious that significant caches of arms and ammunition hidden by the LTTE are still being recovered at present. You are aware that remnants of the LTTE abroad are carrying out massive propaganda campaigns to raise funds to destabilize our country. One such example is the process of holding referenda for setting up a so called provisional transnational government of Tamil eelam. I believe you are aware of this destructive objective. You are also aware that a large number of countries in the world are experiencing great difficulties due to the threat of terrorism. It is not a secret that even today there is a serious threat to civilian life in certain major cities. I do not need to go into detail as to how hundreds of thousands of civilians have been displaced in certain countries. Therefore, we too have to be vigilant about our national security. Certain groups express various views to you about our country. I wish to remind you that there is a vast difference between their stated stance and that of the majority of the people in our country: the expressed opinion is not always the same as that of the people in the North. It is my belief that in such circumstances, when you come to know of any matter, if you ascertain the true and factual situation from the Ministry of External Affairs, the government and the rest of us before reporting it to your country, it would help us to maintain our existing friendships and firm relations. We have our own historical heritage. What is more, we have a cultural history built upon a religious environment. Buddhism was introduced to this country as early as 2500 years ago and later came Hinduism and Islam, and then with the arrival of the Portuguese and the Dutch, their religious beliefs were introduced. As a result we have a history spanning for more than 500 years which is based on this multi-religious background. Therefore, we are very careful when taking decisions to take into consideration the cultural distinctions and affiliations of our country. I believe that we look at issues from our own perspective of the close relationship between our activities and our cultural foundations. Therefore, we are taking steps when dealing with other nations to sensitize them of our historical traditions and that Sri Lanka provides an example of people to people, inter-religious and cultural relationships. There have been no conflicts based on religion in our country. Our endeavour is always when problems arise to solve these matters through dialogue due to our deep feeling about cordial relations among peoples. My dear friends, my government has especially recognized the need to take steps in order to heal the wounds caused to the cordial relations between peoples due to the conflict. That is why my government has decided to appoint a Commission for Lessons Learned and Reconciliation. We have completed the initial work in that regard. We cannot allow future generations to suffer a similar pain due to the conflict which prevailed for 3 decades. We have already accepted it as a responsibility of our government. The period covered by the Commission would be from the commencement of the Ceasefire Agreement in Feb. 2002 to its failure, and upto 2009 when the conflict ended. Our intention is to appoint a

Commission consisting of eminent persons recognized as such by Sri Lankan society, representing various national and cultural aspects. I am confident that this Commission will function with commitment. Furthermore, I hope to conduct the Northern Provincial Council elections as early as possible. It would be correct to say that the people of this country are tired of elections. However, it is our responsibility to hold that election. We are confident that a proper leadership with a clear insight of the specific needs of the area including development needs and national unity will emerge during the course of the Provincial Council Election, as has happened in the recent General Election. As mentioned earlier the people have elected a large number of representatives in the recent Elections who are dedicated to implement the policy and plans of the government. Further, as mentioned by the External Affairs Minister we are in the process of a comprehensive dialogue with all political parties in a bid to stabilize the democratic administration. We believe that today the people of this country are in a better position to be in contact with the outside world due to the restoration of democracy and stability. At the Presidential Election as well as in the General Election the people of this country have given me and my government, a clear mandate to protect and preserve the peace and freedom which we have won with great sacrifice. They have provided me and my government with a clear mandate to bring our country - Sri Lanka - to be a global hub. From the time I was elected to power in 2005, special attention was focused on the economic development needs of our country. While concentrating on a plan to maintain freedom, and the unitary status of our country, we have equally focused our attention to implementing development plans to fulfill the economic needs of our country. In a bid to narrow the unjustifiable gap between the rural and urban communities and to solve the problem of discrepancy in income that has no place in a democratic society, we have given priority to develop infrastructure facilities. At the same time, we have developed areas such as education, health and skills development, while we have given priority to food security and conservation of power and energy. We were also able to increase the per capita income from 1000 to 2000 dollars within a period of four years from 2005. We are planning to increase our Per Capita Income to more than 4000 dollars using development strategies. I am hopeful that the newly appointed Cabinet would function as the institutional structure of the Government to achieve this target. We are hopeful and have initiated policies to have overall investments to exceed 35% of the national income of Sri Lanka and to achieve an economic growth rate of 8%. We are determined to provide a high level of education and health to every citizen and to build an environment friendly civilian life pattern. The donor community has a major role to play in this respect. I am happy to say that our development partners stood by us in critical circumstances. I also take this opportunity to recall that the International Financial Institutions have contributed in a big way in our development efforts. We highly appreciate the assistance provided by the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and long term bilateral development assistance. Furthermore, I strongly believe that all the countries that you represent would extend their assistance in this endeavor. I hope that the international community as well as donor agencies would play a role in strengthening and broadening the opportunities available to us as a middle income country, to grow and to move forward as a developed nation within a democratic framework. Ours is a country that firmly believes that the concept of global prosperity as well as security is a common obligation. It is also our belief that the best way to ensure the advancement of mankind is to bring about a world of equity based on legal principles. Therefore we are continuously committed to carry out our mission in the UN and other multilateral fora. Dear friends, you are well aware that global warming is closely linked with the existence and destiny of mankind. There are no borders for environment pollution. Therefore the pollution in one country affects another. The reasons for global warming are the high consumption of petroleum, which has also contributed to the industrial development of nations. Therefore I believe that the time has come for developed nations to contribute actively in compliance with the Kyoto Protocol, to minimize global warming. Even though Sri Lanka implements her development work with the lowest possible of emission levels, I wish to emphasize that we take maximum precautions to prevent this phenomenon. We are getting ready to contribute to the global endeavour in a fair manner under the "Green Lanka" project. Dear friends, you are aware that our foreign policy has always been a non-aligned independent one. Historically we have been maintaining close and cordial relations with neighbouring states such as India, China, Japan and Middle East countries. We also had close contact with other Asian countries as well as with African, Western and European states. I need not go into detail about them. Since colonial times, when we were under the Portuguese, Dutch and British we have been maintaining strong bonds with Europe. We have a relationship with Rome that is more than 500 years old. In the ancient past we have sent Ambassadors to Rome. Therefore our relations with neighbouring states and many other nations of the world are strong and historically long-standing. We have also been maintaining close ties with all other states for more than 50 years since independence. Therefore we are ready at all times to respect the sovereignty of other states when dealing with them and to maintain mutual contacts with other countries. Hence we have always appreciated the friendly nations who assisted us in our endeavours of combating terrorism and development activities during the past four years. Dear friends, I wish to reiterate that Sri Lanka is committed to upholding relations that are based on trust which I hope is a common feature of relationships among nations. I wish you all a prosperous future.