
Reconciliation the Way Forward for Sri Lanka – Secretary Defence Gotabaya

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Secretary to the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development Mr. Gotabaya Rajapaksa today (24 Nov), delivering the key note speech at the Inaugural National Conference on Reconciliation: "The Way Forward for Post Conflict Sri Lanka" said "Sri Lanka today is not only one of the most secure and stable countries in Asia but in the entire world." The Secretary briefly explained how the LTTE unleashed its terror on the citizens of this country, starting from the assassination of Mr. Alfred Duraiappa, the Mayor of Jaffna, in 1975 to the end of Humanitarian Operation concluded in May 2009. Further the Secretary Defence went on to explain that how the countrymen irrespective of ethnicity, religion or political affiliation, are reaping the rewards of peace, and he said that freedom of movement, restoration of democracy and improvement of the country's economy are significant achievements with the return peace. "The return of peace, the restoration of freedom and democracy, and the prospect of a resurgent economy have all been made possible by the success of the Humanitarian Operation that put an end to the terrorist activities of the LTTE" he said.

The full text of the speech: I am grateful to the Honourable G. L. Pieris, Minister of External Affairs, for having invited me to deliver the keynote address at the inaugural National Conference on Reconciliation, hosted by the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies. The late Honourable Lakshman Kadirgamar was a great servant of this nation, whose determined and selfless contributions to Sri Lanka were tragically cut short by an LTTE sniper in August 2005. During his life, Mr. Kadirgamar strongly believed that "People who live in Sri Lanka are first and foremost Sri Lankans". As this country builds its future on the foundation of peace resulting from the defeat of terrorism, these are words for us all to remember. Sri Lanka's experience with terrorism began in the 1970s. By the time His Excellency the President Mahinda Rajapaksa assumed office in December 2005, terrorist activities in this country had continued for nearly thirty years. During these 3 decades, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam unleashed waves of terror that caused untold suffering for all Sri Lankans. The list of its atrocities is long. The LTTE carried out ethnic cleansing in the North and parts of the East, brutally driving out more than 100,000 Sinhalese and Muslim civilians from their homes. The LTTE attacked places of worship including the Sri Maha Bodhiya, the Temple of the Tooth, several churches, and also carried out massacres at Mosques. The LTTE's countless attacks on the vulnerable villages near areas they dominated, together with the bombs they unleashed in the rest of the country, killed approximately 9,800 civilians and grievously wounded more than 10,000. The LTTE continually attacked vital national infrastructure in its bid to disrupt normal life and cause maximum casualties to civilians. Its attack on the Central Bank in the heart of Colombo in 1996 killed 86 and wounded more than 1,300, and it also put at risk the entire financial system whilst badly damaging much of the financial hub. Its numerous attacks on the Kolonnawa oil refinery, as well as its attacks on the Kelanitissa and Kerawalapitiya power plants were intended to cripple the country by attacking its energy infrastructure. Its attack carried out at the International Airport in 2001 destroyed several passenger aircraft and caused untold damage to the entire tourism industry. Its attack on the Central Bus Stand in Fort killed over 100 people and injured close to 300, and its numerous attacks on train and buses all over the country killed hundreds more, spreading panic in the country at large. The LTTE was relentless in its use of suicide cadres, car bombs, truck bombs, and even light aircraft in carrying out these attacks to destabilise Sri Lankan society, and it showed sophistication and ruthlessness beyond any other terrorist group in the world in pursuing its objectives. The LTTE's skill at political assassinations was another defining feature of its campaign of terror. Mr. Alfred Duraiappa, the Mayor of Jaffna, was the LTTE's first political target in 1975. Defence Minister Ranjan Wijeratne was killed in a bomb attack carried out in 1991. Former Deputy Minister of Defence Lalith Athulathmudali was killed in 1993. Opposition Presidential Candidate Gamini Dissanayake was killed along with Parliamentarians G. M. Premachandra, Weerasinghe Mallimarachchi, Ossie Abeygunasekara, and numerous others in a bombing just before the Presidential Election in 1994. Killings by the LTTE continued through to the recent past, with Ministers D. M. Dassanayake and Jeyaraj Fernandopulle being killed in 2008. The most notable assassinations carried out by the LTTE were the killing of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 and the killing of serving Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa in 1993. In sum, the LTTE killed 7 Cabinet Ministers, 37 Parliamentarians and more than 50 office bearing political figures during its terror campaign. Its intention was to undermine Sri Lanka's democracy. The overall impact of the LTTE's terrorism was devastating. In addition to the thousands of casualties it caused, the aura of fear and uncertainty it created had a severe impact on all Sri Lankans. In areas outside the LTTE's control, ordinary peoples' day-to-day lives were transformed. Parents did not travel together in the same vehicle for fear of orphaning their children by getting caught in a bomb blast. Students' school attendance dropped every time rumours spread about impending terrorist attacks. Law and order deteriorated as terrorism fostered crime and corruption. The underworld became more powerful and its members gained access to arms and ammunition from various armed groups operating in the country at large. An entire generation grew up under a veil of fear. In areas under LTTE dominance, matters were even worse. The LTTE did not tolerate any opposition. It assassinated democratic leaders and intellectuals in the Tamil community in order to style itself the sole representative of the Tamil people. In this effort, it killed such democratic politicians as former Opposition Leader A. Amirthalingam, Secretary General of the Tamil United Liberation Front, Mr. Y. Yogeshwaran and Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam of the same party, Mr. Sam Thambimuttu and Mr. K Pathmabanda of the EPRLF. In addition to moderate politicians, the LTTE also assassinated the leaders of other armed groups in these areas, including C. Thanabalasingham of the TNT, K Sundaram of PLOTE and Sri Sabaratnam of TELO. On occasion, the LTTE even wiped out the entire command structure of groups it saw as opponents. By eliminating all rivals, the LTTE was able to keep the people in the areas it dominated under a virtual dictatorship. Though it pretended, at its height, to have a judicial system and a police force, these were shams constructed to disguise a territory ruled at gunpoint. No one

in those areas was truly safe; no one was truly free. Apart from all this, the simple fact that a ruthless terrorist group was operational in the country and dominated parts of its territory had a devastating impact on Sri Lanka's prospects. The economy stagnated. Infrastructure development could not be given due priority. Large areas of fertile land were inaccessible for agriculture. Restrictions on sea movements affected the fishing industry. Bad publicity and adverse travel advisories kept tourists away. Industrialisation was virtually halted as both local and foreign investment slowed to a trickle. Many of our best and brightest sought to build safer lives for themselves away from Sri Lanka, resulting in brain drain. Most of the economic growth that took place was localised in the Western Province and the largest cities in the other provinces. The North and East were virtually isolated. The political, social and economic costs of terrorism set back Sri Lanka's national progress by many years. When His Excellency Mahinda Rajapaksa was elected to the Presidency in 2005, he had a mandate from the people to end the terrorist conflict once and for all. This was a daunting task. Four previous Presidents as well as several successive Governments comprising various political parties had grappled with the issue of LTTE terrorism without success. Over the years, a range of different approaches including military campaigns, peace talks, and even international mediation had been tried. None had succeeded. The first peace talks took place in 1985 in Thimpu, Bhutan. The LTTE was one of several Tamil groups participating in these talks. During the ceasefire granted by the Government to facilitate the talks, it strengthened itself militarily by obtaining AK-47 machine guns, Rocket Propelled Grenades and explosives. After the talks failed, the LTTE used the military advantage it had gained to systematically attack and decimate the other Tamil groups. By 1987, when the Indian intervention occurred at a time the Sri Lankan Government was in a position to end the conflict militarily, the LTTE was the dominant militant group. Its refusal to surrender arms and its many provocations during that period led to the Indian Peace Keeping Force becoming combatants in the conflict. Eventually, more than 1,100 soldiers of the IPKF were killed and over 2,700 wounded in combat with the LTTE. By 1989, the LTTE was weakened and once again sought the respite of a ceasefire. As a gesture of goodwill, the Government requested the IPKF to leave Sri Lanka. In June 1990, in the middle of peace talks with the Government, the LTTE unilaterally broke the ceasefire and returned to violence. It launched severe attacks against Muslim civilians, killing nearly 150 during prayers at Kathankudy and more than 170 in Eravur, Batticalao. It then expelled the 75,000 Muslim residents of Jaffna. LTTE violence continued until October 1994, when the Government once again offered to negotiate in the hope of a peaceful settlement. The ceasefire entered into was once again unilaterally broken by the LTTE in 1995 when they destroyed naval gunboats at Trincomalee harbour. Not long after, the LTTE used Surface to Air missiles obtained during the preceding ceasefire to shoot down aircraft of the Sri Lanka Air Force. Despite the long history of LTTE treachery during peace talks, the Government of Sri Lanka continued trying to end the conflict through peaceful means. In 2001, the Norwegian facilitated peace process commenced. The LTTE never took action to address any substantive issues during this period. Instead, it exploited all the concessions granted under the ceasefire to strengthen itself militarily. The LTTE acquired new arms, ammunition and equipment, including light aircraft. The LTTE recruited more cadres, including child soldiers, and its strength grew to approximately 25,000. Although the peace process was stalled and the ceasefire was nominally in place, it was clear that the LTTE was gearing up for war just as it had done during each previous peace process. Despite the LTTE's history of insincerity and its opportunism during the ceasefire period, the President was keen to restart the stalled peace process as soon as he was elected into office. His intention was to resolve the conflict peacefully. Towards this end, he repeatedly requested the LTTE to come for direct talks with the Government. Instead of responding genuinely, the LTTE misused the attempted peace talks in 2006 and intensified its provocative behaviour. It relentlessly attacked key military targets, including our highest-ranking officers, and continued to carry out acts of mindless violence against innocent civilians. The Government bore these provocations with patience for many months, until the LTTE threatened a major humanitarian disaster by shutting down the sluice gates at Maavilaru in July 2006. This was a key irrigation canal for agriculture in the East, and its closure cut off water to thousands of acres of farmland and over five thousand households. Over 9,500 Muslims, 8,000 Sinhalese and 4,400 Tamils were left without access to water by this inhuman act, and immediate action was needed to prevent a major catastrophe. When all peaceful efforts to resolve the problem failed, the Government had no option but to launch a limited military operation to reopen the sluice gates. During the initial stages of that operation, the LTTE attacked military positions around the Trincomalee harbour and launched attacks in the North shortly afterwards. It was clear that the closure of the Maavilaru sluice gate had only been the LTTE's first move in a well-planned offensive. Because of the immediate threat to strategic military positions, the Government expanded the limited operation that had been launched to liberate Maavilaru. Considering the long history of the LTTE's atrocities against the people of Sri Lanka and its repeated rejections of all efforts for a peaceful settlement, including those efforts with international mediation, the Government decided to rid the country of the LTTE menace once and for all. In three and a half years, that objective was achieved. Today, Sri Lanka is a nation at peace. As a result of the Humanitarian Operation to defeat terrorism, the primary obstacle to Sri Lanka's prospects-the LTTE-has been removed. In looking back at what has happened over the last two years, the benefits this country has gained through the dismantling the LTTE are very clear. The senseless killing has stopped. Irrespective of ethnicity, religion or political affiliation, all Sri Lankans are reaping the rewards of peace. The quality of life has improved tremendously. With the constant threat of terrorism removed, people can live their lives in full and without fear. Sri Lanka today is not only one of the most secure and stable countries in Asia but in the entire world. Perhaps the most heartening outcome of the dawn of peace has been the freedom of movement that all Sri Lankans finally enjoy. People are able to travel throughout the entire country without being impeded; the numbers travelling from North to South, and vice versa, are truly remarkable. The number of expatriates travelling to the North is also extremely noteworthy. Thousands of people from nearly 100 countries have returned to Sri Lanka to visit the homes they left behind during the dark days of the conflict. This is a very encouraging sign, and one of the great benefits of the restoration of peace. Another critical gain from peace is the holding of free and fair elections in every part of Sri Lanka. Local authority elections, provincial council elections, a Presidential election and a General election have all been held over the past two

years. In the areas formerly dominated by the LTTE, people exercised their franchise without fear for the first time in three decades. The fact that political plurality has returned to these areas is clear from the results of these elections. The swift restoration of democracy to those parts of Sri Lanka previously under LTTE dominance is something to be proud of. Further, it needs to be noted that many former militants are now playing an active role in politics. The LTTE's one time Eastern Province Commander, Vinayagamoorthi Muralitharan, also known as Karuna Amman, is a junior Cabinet Minister. A former LTTE child soldier, Sivanesathurai Chandrakanthan, also known as Pillayan, is the Chief Minister of the Eastern Province. A number of former LTTE cadres have also become Chairmen of local government bodies. Their participation in the political process demonstrates the robustness of Sri Lanka's democracy, and highlights the focus on reconciliation. The economy is also showing marked signs of improvement. With thousands of acres of arable land once again accessible, and key irrigation infrastructure being restored, agriculture is poised to expand significantly in the coming years. With the removal of the restrictions that had to be enforced due to terrorism, the fishing industry has already rebounded and registered tremendous growth. With the withdrawing of adverse travel advisories and the knowledge that the country is finally at peace, tourist arrivals have increased significantly. Local and foreign investment is on the rise, and new commercial activity is starting to take place in previously ignored areas. Sri Lanka is finally in a position to realise the economic potential that has been pent up for so many years. The return of peace, the restoration of freedom and democracy, and the prospect of a resurgent economy have all been made possible by the success of the Humanitarian Operation that put an end to the terrorist activities of the LTTE. However, it should be noted that the rump of the LTTE is still active outside Sri Lanka, and is still attempting to tarnish the image of this nation and set back the peace that was achieved two years ago. We must remain vigilant, and not allow ourselves to be divided or distracted by their destructive agenda. Having been so closely linked with the terrorist cause, they seem unable to let go of their outmoded ideas and face the reality of a united and peaceful Sri Lanka. Instead of providing any support for the on-going reconstruction and reconciliation efforts, the sole interest of these parties is in casting aspersions against the Government. The true commitment of the Government of Sri Lanka to all its citizens can be gauged by the actions it took in the aftermath of the Humanitarian Operation in 2009. It is important to understand that the Government faced several immense challenges at that time, and it should be appreciated that these challenges were met with great professionalism. Without doubt, the most pressing issue of concern in the aftermath of the Humanitarian Operation was housing the 294,000 Internally Displaced People who had served as the LTTE's human shield. The villages and towns they had been displaced from had been mined heavily by the LTTE during the last stages of the Humanitarian Operation, and it was impossible for them to safely return to their homes until those areas had been completely demined and made safe for habitation. Taking care of such a large number of IDPs in this way was a tremendous undertaking that involved a concerted effort by the Government machinery, together with assistance from various international actors, including the UN organisations and other agencies. While the IDPs were being looked after in the camps, the Government, together with several Non Governmental Organisations such as the Danish Demining Group, the Foundation Suisse de Deminage and the Sarvatra demining group of India, worked very hard to demine the towns and villages in the North and make them habitable once again. The Corps of Engineers of the Sri Lanka Army did the bulk of the work, with assistance from several foreign governments and international organisations. As demining progressed, the internally displaced were resettled in their places of origin. Today, only 3,173 families remain to be resettled, and less than 3,000 IDPs remain in camps. Most of the IDPs who are yet to be resettled come from areas caught up in heavy fighting during the last stages of the Humanitarian Operation. While the clearing of those areas takes place, they will be given houses in adjacent, unaffected land and given the option of moving back to their homes once they are certified as safe. It must be stressed that the speed at which demining has taken place is remarkable, considering the extent of the problem that the LTTE caused. To date, more than 42,000 Antipersonnel Mines, 227 Antitank Mines and more than 15,000 items of Unexploded Ordnance have been recovered from these areas. Another issue that faced the Government was dealing with the more than 11,000 former LTTE cadres who surrendered or were detained by the military during the course of the Humanitarian Operation. All of them were sorted according to their level of involvement in the LTTE's activities. Cadres with known higher-level involvement in LTTE atrocities were separated and identified for prosecution. The vast majority of former combatants, however, had a lower level of involvement in LTTE activities, and were therefore sent for extensive rehabilitation programmes. Rehabilitation was an area of particular concern to the Government, as its intention was to reintegrate the former combatants to normal society as soon as possible. This is an important consideration in terms of reconciliation, and it is heartening to note that the work done in this regard to date has been very successful. All programmes were conducted under the close supervision of the Commissioner General of Rehabilitation, and they were geared towards ensuring that the former combatants could readjust to normal life and reintegrate with society. Psychological care was provided to all those in the rehabilitation programme, including counselling and drama, dance and music therapy. Spiritual and religious programmes were also conducted. Adult cadres were given extensive vocational training and have been able to acquire new skills to help them become productive citizens. The rapid progress of reintegration is laudable, with over 10,300 former cadres returned to society, and less than 700 remaining in the rehabilitation centres. Careful attention was given to the care of the 595 LTTE Child Soldiers in Government custody; they were rehabilitated under a programme assisted by UNICEF, and sent back to their families within one year. I am happy to note that several former child soldiers successfully passed their Advanced Level examination, and some even gained entry to medical school. In addition to demining, resettlement and rehabilitation, the Government has provided numerous forms of assistance to help citizens in the North lead normal lives. Infrastructure development is being carried out at a very rapid pace. Major programmes are underway to develop the road network, the railway track, electricity grid, and irrigation infrastructure. The Government has already restored the irrigation infrastructure that had remained in a state of disrepair for so many years. The tanks and irrigation canals are back to full working condition and agriculture can now flourish in the North. Indeed, a great deal of produce from this area is now coming into markets in the rest of the

country. In addition, support has been extended for the restoration of livelihoods, with schemes in place to provide concessionary financing to people seeking to engage in farming, fishing, agriculture and business. Through all these means, the Government is doing everything it can to restore normalcy to these civilians, who had suffered for so many years during their virtual isolation from the rest of the country because of the LTTE. We need to understand that this long period of isolation has caused several other issues. An entire generation grew up knowing nothing but war. As a result of being under the LTTE for almost thirty years, most of the civilians in these areas were brainwashed into fearing the Government of Sri Lanka. By demonising the Government and the majority Sinhalese, the LTTE created a fear psychosis that is only slowly disappearing. By rehabilitating the vast majority of LTTE cadres, looking after the Internally Displaced, demining their villages, restoring the infrastructure, and by providing assistance for the restoration of livelihoods, the Government of Sri Lanka has already done a great deal to dispel this psychosis. More is required. It is absolutely essential that the parties in the democratic mainstream understand the grassroots level requirements of the people and refrain from pushing a divisive agenda purely for their own political gain. It is clear that some politicians wish to promote an agenda not very different from what the LTTE wanted to achieve. They make baseless allegations against the Government to this day, and have failed to recognise the Government's genuine efforts. Instead, they distort the true picture of what is taking place and continue to promote ethnic divisions for their political gain. This is extremely unfortunate. Heritage and ethnic identity are important, and it is important to foster them. However, instead of thinking only along ethnic lines and continuing to focus primarily on what differentiates people at the expense of what they have in common, we should look at forging a national identity first and foremost as Sri Lankans. Take Colombo as an example. The majority of people living in Colombo today are from the Tamil and Muslim communities. They live side by side with the Sinhalese, who comprise the largest community in Sri Lanka. Many parts of Colombo that used to be predominantly Sinhalese in times past are now no longer so. When you travel across the city, you will come across a large number of Kovils, Mosques and Churches that stand alongside Buddhist Temples. Devotees of all religions and ethnicities participate in large numbers in religious and cultural functions at these various institutions without any problem. There is no communal tension in the Colombo of today; instead, it is a shining example of a thriving multicultural hub where people of all communities live side by side in harmony. They identify themselves first and foremost as Sri Lankans. Replicating the success of Colombo throughout Sri Lanka is largely a function of time, economic development, and the breaking down of any misperceptions that still remain. All Sri Lankans require and deserve equality and equal opportunity. As a nation, Sri Lanka needs to address any complaints of discrimination that exist in society. It is fundamentally important that all Sri Lankans feel equal to one another, and that nobody feels that their ethnicity, language, religion, caste, gender or political beliefs stands in the way of their opportunities. In actual fact, it should be noted that there are very few such barriers prevailing in today's society. If we look at the Universities, it is evident that students from all communities pursue studies in a variety of fields. In all professions, whether it is medicine, engineering, law, academia or business, each and every community is very well represented. Even in the one area in which minority communities were underrepresented—that is, the military and the police—the Government has taken action to redress the balance. Soon after the war, the Government aggressively pursued the recruitment of Tamil speaking policemen. Many of these policemen have already been trained and have been posted to Police Stations in the North and East. Steps have also been taken to encourage public servants to learn Tamil. These initiatives will help ensure that no Sri Lankan has cause to feel disadvantaged in their interactions with the state, irrespective of the language they speak. Unfortunately, the conversation in the political sphere focuses less on such basic initiatives, and more on abstract political ideals that will only lead to further differentiation rather than assist reconciliation. It must be said that this is not done with any true feeling for the needs of the people, but to safeguard existing political advantages and further personal agendas. Race politics has long been a crutch for politicians who do not have constructive ideas. It is extremely sad that there are still a number of politicians in Sri Lanka who cannot rise above this petty instinct. It is even more unfortunate that there are some in the international community who wittingly or unwittingly exploit this petty instinct to rekindle the flames of communal disharmony in Sri Lanka. They do this by complaining about certain issues in relation to the Humanitarian Operation. The first issue they focus on is accountability. In the aftermath of the Humanitarian Operation, various people started making various claims about the number of civilians killed and missing during the last stages of the conflict. Some say 10,000 people were killed; others say 40,000, and a few make claims for even higher numbers. I strongly emphasise that these are arbitrary figures with no basis in reality. Nevertheless, the Government has been conscious of the need to address this issue through a proper assessment. The approach the Government took in this regard was a very professional one. The Department of Census and Statistics, which is the official Government arm for these matters, conducted a complete census of the concerned area. In keeping with the usual practice, Government servants of the relevant districts were tasked with carrying out the work. In the case of the Northern Province, this meant that Tamil Government servants were given the responsibility to conduct the census. In the questionnaire that was used, the issue of people who died and went missing during the Humanitarian Operation was specifically addressed. With the completion of the census, it has been possible to identify, specifically by name, all such persons. The census is now in the process of finalisation, and the relevant information will be released in the near future. It is important to note that number of dead and missing in this forthcoming census will include people in the following categories:

* Those who died of natural causes

* Those who died of accidents

* Those who left this country through illegal means, particularly by boat to India or to South East Asia, and from there to the West

* Those who died whilst fighting as members of the LTTE

* Those who died as a result of being coerced to fight by the LTTE * Those who died as a result of resisting the LTTE-for which we have ample evidence through other sources, including aerial footage. There is also new gruesome evidence that has come to light, which will be made known to the public very soon, about how the LTTE killed injured cadres and even young children who were housed in a church during this time. * The final category of deaths are those that occurred due to military action It is only for the deaths of people in this last category that the Sri Lankan Military can bear any responsibility. As a result of the census, we already know that the real number of dead and missing is far too small to provide any substance to the absurd allegations of genocide and war crimes that have been made against our military by the rump of the LTTE and their cronies. Another fact that needs to be understood very clearly is that the Sri Lankan military was engaged in fighting a formidable foe. The LTTE was not far behind the Sri Lankan military in the arms, ammunition and equipment that it had at its disposal. It also had approximately 25,000 cadres in its ranks at the time the Humanitarian Operation commenced. During the three and a half years of this Operation, 6,000 personnel of the Sri Lanka Armed Forces were killed in action. Another 25,000 were severely injured. This should give some indication of the ferocity of the fighting that was taking place. If the extremely well trained Sri Lankan military suffered 6,000 deaths and 25,000 serious injuries, it should be evident the number of LTTE casualties should be comparable or higher. However, this consideration gets almost no attention when allegations are made about the number of dead and missing during the conflict. It is almost as if those who make allegations about the deaths in battle are under the impression that the Sri Lankan military was fighting phantoms. The manifest absurdity of this underscores the lack of perspective of those who make these claims. The second major issue focused on by those who criticise Sri Lanka concerns impunity. Again, those who level this criticism have very little understanding of the true picture. In 2003, Mr. Ranil Wickramasinghe, who was then Prime Minister, requested the United States Department of Defence to study the situation in Sri Lanka and make a detailed report on the conflict. The team that visited Sri Lanka carefully analysed the threat posed by the LTTE and the capability of the Sri Lankan military to meet that threat. This team's report commends the professionalism of the Sri Lankan military, with a particular emphasis on the excellence of the officer cadre and its wealth of practical knowledge. The report states: "The strength of the Army is undoubtedly their impressive soldiers who endure tremendous hardship while maintaining a fighting spirit that has prevented more drastic defeats. They have an impressive training programme using Special Forces and Commandos to improve their individual and small unit training. They also have an excellent training site at Maduru Oya." The praise contained in this Department of Defence report is unsurprising. Our officer cadre comprises people of high calibre, who receive ample local training, including university education, as well as training in many prestigious military academies all over the world. The training of those selected to the elite Special Forces and Commando units is comprehensive and extremely professional. In keeping with the professionalism of the Sri Lankan military, the Humanitarian Operation was conducted with a great deal of precision and care. However, it needs to be understood that during the three and a half year period of the Humanitarian Operation, the Sri Lankan military had to be expanded at a rapid pace. In the circumstances, it is possible that a few individuals who lacked the capacity to withstand the pressures of warfare with the required composure may have been recruited. This is not a very unusual thing in warfare, and there have been unfortunate examples of excesses by individuals in each and every war that has been fought, whether in the World Wars, Vietnam, Afghanistan or Iraq. The most crucial thing to realise is that the Sri Lankan military, as a professional fighting force, has robust internal mechanisms to minimise the occurrence of crimes during warfare as well as deal with any who commit them. With the assistance of the ICRC, the UNDP and other organisations, Sri Lankan military personnel have undergone extensive training on Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law during the past several years. Training is conducted even at the field level, and there is a strong institutional framework to monitor alleged infringements. Human Rights cells exist in each division, brigade and battalion of the Sri Lanka Army, and these cells provide assistance to the inquiries of the Military Police as well as the civil police in case of any complaints being lodged. During the course of the Humanitarian Operations, investigations were conducted on all allegations, including those concerning major offenses including murder, rape and sexual abuse. Swift action was taken by the military to punish those individuals found guilty of such crimes. Action was also pursued in the civil courts. If, in future, any substantial evidence is provided on crimes committed by its personnel, the Sri Lankan military will not hesitate to take appropriate action. In this context, it must also be stressed that the Government is committed to following through on its responsibilities in terms of accountability. The Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission appointed by His Excellency the President in 2009 has gone into all matters concerned with the conflict. Its report has been handed over to the President, and if there are any specific allegations or evidence of crimes therein, investigations will be undertaken and necessary action taken against those involved. The Government is also committed to implementing general recommendations made by the LLRC with regard to reconciliation. However, it must be borne in mind that on all these matters, Sri Lanka will act on its own accord. As a sovereign nation with a rich culture and a proud heritage, Sri Lanka does not need external guidance to achieve reconciliation. This will be achieved through an organic, local effort consistent with our culture and our values, and not based on external ideal others try to impose on us. It is evident that cultural norms differ from country to country. People living in the United States of America, or Australia, or Canada, or the United Kingdom, or any other country, have no proper understanding of the ground situation in Sri Lanka nor do they understand our current cultural context. It is not for outsiders to impose their values or their judgments on Sri Lanka. It is the same Sri Lankans who suffered from the ravages of LTTE terrorism for thirty years and who are now reaping the rewards of peace that will find solutions to our national issues-not outsiders. Sri Lanka today is a nation striving to achieve prosperity on the foundation of peace resulting from the defeat of terrorism. Reconciliation is an essential part of this endeavour, and it is one that will be achieved. As we step forward into a peaceful and prosperous future, I have

every confidence that all of us, irrespective of our ethnicity, religion, caste, gender or political affiliation, will put aside our differences and work and live together. We will first and foremost be Sri Lankans. Source: Defence.lk