

PRESS NOTE

DEVELOPING NATIONS REQUIRE GREATER FOCUS IN INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM : Professor G.L. Peiris addressing UN General Assembly.

Sri Lanka believes that in the settlement of international disputes, action must be based on the fundamental principle of sovereign equality of states, a principle firmly enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, stated Professor G.L. Peiris, Minister of External Affairs in his address yesterday to the 67th Session of the UN General Assembly. He regretted that the noticeable recent tendency to selectively and arbitrarily intervene in the internal affairs of States flies in the face of this principle, and dilutes the confidence so carefully nurtured in the UN system.

Dealing with the challenge of the global financial crisis, Minister Peiris emphasized that it is of the greatest importance to ensure that any strategies employed to achieve recovery, do not impose unjustifiable burdens on developing countries, as they strive to achieve better living conditions for their people. He stressed that a recovery without uplifting the developing countries simultaneously will be unsustainable. In this context, he regretted that it is paradoxical that it is the same countries where the financial crisis originated, which now seek to provide policy prescriptions to others. While observing that the voices of developing countries are an important element to this end, he stressed that there cannot be a "one size fits all" approach, and therefore the views of all and the experiences of the successful, especially the newly emerging economies, must be taken into account.

Minister Peiris noted that many countries of the South have weathered the financial storm successfully by, the lessons learnt from the previous crises and precautionary measures to minimize the negative impacts of the current crisis have been taken. He pointed out that Sri Lanka's economy, which has been carefully managed during this period, is an Asian economy which has recorded impressive gains by achieving a growth rate of 8.2% in 2011. He also referred to the fact that since the end of the terrorist conflict in 2009, an area in the former theatre of conflict, the Northern Province recorded a 27% GDP growth in 2011, towards which the exponential boom in agriculture and fisheries has contributed substantially.

Speaking on the relationship of environment with sustainable development, Minister Peiris warned that the transition to a green economy must not generate negative externalities that would retard economic growth, perpetuate societal inequity and poverty. Therefore, he said, developing countries under North-South Development Co-operation mechanisms need to be assisted by taking into account global initiatives to mitigate the adverse consequences of too rigid an application of relevant economic principles. With regard to Sri Lanka, he observed that almost 22% of the land area has been conserved as forest cover with the goal of increasing it to 35% by 2020 and the country's carbon footprint being a meagre 0.6 tons per head and simultaneously, will achieve the goal of energy for all in 2012 while realizing a 20% saving through efficiency measures. Further, to achieve sustainable development he stated that no constraining conditions should be applied to development models or approaches adopted by countries while eradicating poverty.

Having observed that Sri Lanka's balanced socio-economic policy strategies propelled the country to middle-income status a few years ago, Minister Peiris outlined that this achievement has been facilitated by employing a unique development strategy empowering citizens, with special attention to social development needs. This, he said, has continued to achieve transformational change in the lives of its people by effectively mobilizing available resources and through the delivery of sustainable and citizen-centered programmes. Sri Lanka has emphasized synergistic interactions between healthcare and education, public infrastructure development, including improved water and sanitation, and transport and communication, especially under an

integrated regional development approach. He referred to the fact that Sri Lanka enjoys a 98% literacy rate with the score for girls being higher, and the ICT literacy rate is following a path of exponential growth, with cellular phone penetration being over 100%. The Minister observed that the investments, which brought these results, are essential if States are to build a healthy, literate, productive and entrepreneurial human resource base and the success of this strategy is reflected in Sri Lanka's high-ranking in the human development index.

Though it was a challenging task for Sri Lanka to balance resource mobilization while fighting a war against terrorism, Minister Peiris pointed out that the Government has launched many progressive programmes, especially on poverty reduction and citizen empowerment. He cited the need to ensure that the fruits of economic development are equally distributed and are accessible, especially to the most vulnerable sectors of society and therefore facilitated social mobility to penetrate deep into the rural sector.

The Minister outlined the action taken in facing the challenges by a society emerging from the shadow of a sustained conflict which spanned three decades, and entering an era of peace and stability. He referred to the significant diminution of these challenges and the brevity of the period which had elapsed since the end of the conflict, leaving no room for doubt as to the degree of success achieved by the Government of Sri Lanka in respect of a wide range of issues relating to development and reconciliation. He explained that prioritization was a central feature of the Government's plan of action. Professor Peiris observed that the progress on the ground is quite apparent with regard to the complete resettlement of internally displaced persons, the re-integration into society of thousands of ex-combatants after exposure to programmes of livelihood skills training which equipped them to earn their living with dignity and independence, the rapid completion of the demining process, and the unprecedented focus on infrastructure development leading to very visible invigoration of the economy of the Island as a whole, and the Northern Province in particular.

Minister Peiris said that the dynamic leadership and unwavering commitment of His Excellency President Mahinda Rajapaksa, provided for an effective political and military strategy and strong rapport with all sections of the public, making it possible to prevail against the most ruthless forces of terror. He stated that unhelpful external pressures which support narrow partisan interests could easily derail the result oriented initiatives, as the country begins a new and exciting chapter in its history.

Professor Peiris observed that all current endeavours should seek a stronger focus on children and youth who are the custodians of our future. Therefore, empowering them with marketable skills, including knowledge of new technologies and vocational training, he said, would enable them to be independent contributors to Sri Lanka's economy. Therefore, he was of the view that the strong link between education and vocational training policies has created a conducive environment for the younger generation to spearhead even the global development strategies.

Recognizing terrorism to remain a scourge in the contemporary world, threatening societies and impeding socio-economic progress of peoples, the Minister warned that in the collective quest of the international community for its eradication, selective application of principles and double standards must be avoided. He therefore pledged Sri Lanka's continued support of all multilateral efforts to eliminate all forms of terrorism to enhance peace and security. He outlined the close links which had developed with terrorism citing links with transnational organized crime including in cyber space, environment, maritime piracy, smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons and drugs. Pointing out maritime piracy being a major threat to international sea lanes, he upheld that since piracy originates on land, any solution for it must also address its causes on land.

The Minister referred to the necessity of collectively addressing the pull and push factors for the illicit transportation of migrants by criminal networks. He explained that Sri Lanka has now implemented a National Action Plan to counteract human smuggling and trafficking, and has been cooperating in capacity building and law enforcement and the exchange of best practices. He upheld the necessity to share information in good faith, acknowledging that a variety of national interests of member countries are essential to counter the sophisticated human smuggling rings.

Minister Peiris unreservedly condemned the defamation of all religions and religious leaders. While pointing out the right to free speech as being fundamental to value systems, he stated that this should not be abused to hurt the religious beliefs of the followers of Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism or other faiths. He underscored the necessity for all available mechanisms to be employed in preventing the defamation of all religions and exploitation of religious symbols for commercial purposes.

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