Basil Rajapaksa Turning The Wheel Of Change

Member of Parliament and Senior Advisor to the President, Basil Rajapaksa is a man to be reckoned with. Trusted by the President not only because they are brothers but also because of his sharp acumen and people skills, Basil Rajapaksa is breaking boundaries that none would have thought possible. The President knows that once a task is assigned to him, it will be completed. He is a politician yet a diplomat, he has been able to secure the support of not only local opposition but also international donors and critiques. Following the liberation of the North and East Parliamentarian Basil Rajapaksa was entrusted with the mammoth task of rebuilding and developing the country to its former glory and beyond. By giving leadership and strength he has given hope and life back to a Nation that has suffered three decades of conflict.

Dedicated to the President and the people of Sri Lanka, Basil Rajapaksa MP is determined to guide the Nation as it rebuilds for the future.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe & Thilini Kahandawaarachchi | Photography by Menaka Aravinda

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Starting with the North, with the elimination of terrorism in Sri Lanka this year, development of the North has started under the theme of "Uthuru Wasanthaya". What is the main focus and strategy behind this programme?

The programme was aptly named Vadakkin Vasantham because we wanted the people to have a sense of belonging and have ownership of the programme. His Excellency the President proposed Vadakkin Vasantham in his 2009 budget speech because he knew that the Northern province would be liberated by the Security Forces this year. Immediately after announcing the programme in the budget the President gave me the responsibility of planning it. Therefore planning started at the beginning of 2009. Once the Northern province was liberated the President appointed another Special Task Force to implement this programme as well as to manage other matters including resettlement, development and security. The main reason as to why the President identified security as an important factor is because as seen in many post war countries without security there cannot be development. People cannot engage in livelihood activities without security. Furthermore every Sri Lankan should understand the importance of security. Security is important not only to the Northern province but to the whole country. We have to make sure that security is maintained in the Northern province so that people feel safe and can live with dignity.

We identified two key areas; one was the people living in their home towns under Government control prior to the liberation of the North, for example Jaffna, where 549,000 were living in the peninsular. Then Mannar, Thalaimannar, Mannar Town and Vavuniya including Vavuniya town, in such areas where there were issues in living standards our Task Force took some drastic steps to alleviate poverty.

Lifting the ban on fishing was the first measure taken in this regard. Now anyone in the Northern province can fish 24 hours a day 7 days a week. Re-opening the A9 is another, to enable transportation of materials and also for the public. We are also focusing on providing 24 hour electricity to the entire Jaffna peninsular. In this regard a private investor is constructing a power plant, this is already in progress. The reconstruction of the Mannar Bridge, which was severely damaged, is almost completed and the Japanese Government is funding this programme.

Likewise, the second areas under focus are those that have been liberated from the LTTE. In these areas the number one priority is to resettle the people. According to the UN Charter and to ensure the safety of the people we have to ensure that the land is mine free. This is given high priority in the implementation of the Vadakkin Vasantham programme. Once demining is completed the next task is to resettle the displaced people with dignity in a secure environment.

Developing The North Is Not About Building New Things, It Is About Developing The Province At Least To The Level That It Was Before The Outbreak Of Terrorism…We Are Building Every Bridge, Culvert And Station. We Are Actually Rebuilding.

In order to do that we have to provide them with their basic needs. Firstly, access by providing road networks. Secondly, His Excellency the President directed that the people should be provided with electricity. Thirdly, the returning people need to have an occupation that would enable them to live their lives. The Northern Province economy is primarily based on agriculture, fisheries and livestock. Therefore facilities need to be put in place for the resumption of economic activities. We are in the process of restoring all the large tanks. Work on the Iranamadu tank has already been started. Then we have medium size tanks, small tanks, village tanks and canals. In each and every sector, the Government has progressed in renovating the tanks. Then we have to see the agrarian service facilities such as centres and fertilizer stores etc.

Developing the North is not about building new things, it is about developing the province at least to the level that it was before the outbreak of terrorism. In the past the railway line extended to Kankasanthurai (KKS), now the train only goes up to Vavuniya. There was another railway line from Medawachchiya to Talaimannar to travel to India that was destroyed, we have to build those as well. We are in the process of building every bridge, culvert and station. We are actually rebuilding.

The only chemical factory in the entire country was in Paranthan. That has been completely destroyed. Out of the three salterns in the country, one of the biggest was Elephant Pass, now even that is not there. What about the cement factories? We had two factories in KKS. The cement factory in KKS used the highest percentage of local raw materials, as we know many other factories use mainly imported raw materials.

Therefore we are not building new things, we are giving life back to what was already established in the Northern Province that was destroyed during the conflict.

Establishing the administrative structure is essential. Therefore once the Office of the GA and Divisional Secretary have been set up then public law and order needs to be put in place by having proper Police Stations. The land is there so we have to establish that. Upon resettlement of the displaced we need to ensure that they are able to buy their day to day needs, thus establishing cooperatives and other consumer facilities are a priority. Educating one's child is the highest priority of the parents therefore new schools have to be built and the old reconstructed to ensure their future. In most of the schools we have to build new roofs. Health facilities are of the utmost importance. In an emergency there need to be good hospitals. We have repaired all established health centres etc. In this way we have identified all the key components and we are in the stage of implementation.

What has been the progress so far?

Considering that we are rebuilding an area that has been affected by a 30 year long conflict, the progress of the programme cannot be compared to any other part of the world. We must remember that the North and East were also devastated by the Tsunami. The implementation of the development programme in the East was very fast as everyone can see. The Vadakkin Vasantham programme will be implemented even faster than the Eastern programme.

Infrastructure development has been a key, construction of roads and bridges have been a priority and currently a bridge is being built connecting Pooneryn to Jaffna. Can you elaborate on these measures?

The Jaffna peninsular is connected to the mainland by a small strip of land which is Elephant Pass. Therefore for anyone who wished to travel by land to Jaffna had to go through Elephant Pass. There was a quicker way of going to Jaffna via Pooneryn by taking a ferry at Sangupity. From Pooneryn you could actually see the Jaffna town but to get there they had to travel around through Elephant Pass to Jaffna which was about 65km or they would have to take the ferry or boat. The idea of building a bridge connecting Jaffna to Pooneryn was decided upon after the troops liberated the A32 which runs from Puttlam through Seelawathura and Uddappuwa to Mannar and Mannar to Pooneryn. This route was liberated prior to A9 and thus in order to have a land route the decision to build the bridge was taken. At that time we did not think that our brave forces would be able to liberate the A9 so quickly but actually they liberated the A9 before we finished the construction of the bridge. We have now started work with the aid of the British Government who are funding the structure. The RDA is also working on it and as there is shallow water between the lagoon it is technically very difficult. However we have designed the bridge accordingly and construction work has commenced. We are using the same type of bridge that is in Nugegoda, Dehiwela and Peliyagoda. The bridge has an arch so that boats can go underneath.

What measures are being taken to review the regional economy?

The regional economy of the Northern Province is mainly based on three sectors. One is agriculture, then fisheries and also livestock. There is a fair number employed in the service sector as well. Most of the industries in the peninsular have been abandoned. At one time in Jaffna there had been an industrial village, which had a large number of glass factories. Now these factories are in the Western Province. I remember from my childhood there was a special bottling plant for a brand of nelli syrup. I too am interested in bringing back these industries to the Northern Province. The Wayamba Chamber of Commerce facilitated a visit for 70 businessmen to Jaffna. Then looking at livelihood programmes. We have developed paddy lands. In the Eastern province we did a similar programme, cultivating abandoned paddy land. We are working towards preparing the land to cultivate during the next Maha season. In Chavakachcheri, Jaffna we have started preparing the land for cultivation. Recently I visited Jaffna with the British High Commissioner and there were about 2000 acres of paddy land, which had been abandoned for more than 20 years. We started work because in Jaffna, land preparations need to be done before the rains. We used both old and new technologies; the tractors as

well as the bulls. The farmers were very happy; we provided them with paddy seeds, fertilizer and gave a special allowance to cover the cost of land preparation.

Then when we look at the fisheries sector, we have lifted the ban on fishing and are also assisting them with the transport of fish to Colombo. We have donated freezer trucks to the Cooperatives and the A9 is open for them to transport their goods. Similarly for livestock and other sectors such as industries and commercial ventures we are encouraging the private sector to step in.

In Jaffna We Started Work On 2000 Acres Of Paddy Land, Which Had Been Abandoned For More Than 20 Years Using Both Old And New Technologies.The Farmers Were Very Happy.

Can you tell us a little about the welfare of the IDPs? When and how will the IDPs be resettled?

The priority is resettlement of the IDPs. The IDP camps do not come under my purview, it is directly under the Ministry of Resettlement and the Hon Minister Rishad Badurdeen and the GA are responsible for the camps. Under the Task Force, prior to resettling the people we did a survey in which we were able to gather substantial information.

The main activities were demining and providing them with the basic infrastructure like roads. As we needed assistance with demining, we approached all our donors and India was the first to respond. India has already sent two teams each from the companies Sawatsa and Horizon. Earlier there were two groups in the East and the Indian Government sent two more teams who are now engaged in Vavuniya and Mannar. The number one deminer is the Sri Lankan Army. We have also established Humanitarian Demining Units in the Nation Building Ministry. We found that the demining process can be expedited by using machinery. Therefore we are trying to persuade some of the donors. Unfortunately the donors didn’t agree, but we brought down five demining machines from Slovakia and another five from Croatia. These two machines have different functions and thus advantages; these machines are very expensive machines but efficient. Some machines demine about five to ten thousand square meters.

Once demining has been completed we build the roads and identify buildings for reconstruction. We send our teams from Colombo and the Provincial Council to identify and estimate the damage. We have already awarded contracts. Due to limited access and land mines we have selected Government institutes to do the repair work of Government buildings. That includes the State Engineering Corporation. The teams asses the location, if it is a school or a hospital then the contractor will go and estimate. We select buildings according to priority and the resettlement plan.

Our policy is to first resettle. In the Northern Province the first to be displaced were the people from the Silawathura, Musali AG Division and we have completed resettling them. Then, Manthai West and then Vavuniya. We will go forward one by one. Basically we have very good progress.

With liberation of the East in 2007, 'Nagenahira Navodaya' was launched to develop and regain the confidence of the people in the East. Can you tell us what sectors were focused on and what is the strategy behind this?

In line with the Mahinda Chinthanaya, the development of the Eastern province was guided by four concepts. One was demilitarisation, that is only legal and authorised personnel can hold arms. Any other group had to disarm and this was done by our Security Forces gradually. Therefore firstly the areas under the LTTE were liberated.

Secondly, democratisation from the grass root levels to the provincial level. Local Government elections were held after many years. Provincial council elections were also held. Ground level organisations such as cooperatives and other village level organisations are very active now.
Thirdly, development. People should visit the East to see with their own eyes the progress we have made. Many people visited during the school holidays and long weekends. Many people who came from abroad were telling me the roads were similar to those in the US. Starting from Panama up to Pulmuddai we have built several bridges. We didn't have these bridges even during the British time when there was only ferries. The Kinniya bridge, Pulmoddai, Yan Oya, Puduwakattuwa and then Arugam Bay bridge have all been completed.

Then comes the final solution, which will be the political activity and this is being spearheaded by His Excellency the President. As stated in the Mahinda Chinthanaya, the people will make the final decision. The newly established Provincial Councils have been given the power to look after their activities and they are doing very well.

Under this programme how are you revitalising Productive Sectors and the Regional Economy? How much progress have you made so far?

During the last Maha season, we cultivated 131, 000 acres of abandoned paddy lands which were abandoned for five to ten years. That itself produced a considerable harvest, which gave money to the farmers' hands. As fishing is allowed 24 hours a day, productivity in the fisheries sector has increased. Milk collection has risen; we rounded up more than 100,000 cattle and handed them back to their owners. The LTTE dispersed the herds because due to intense suffering the farmers would join the LTTE. Then the private sector has started some work in Thampalagamuwa, then a factory by Brandix is coming up in Batticoloa. In that way livelihood programmes have already been initiated in the Eastern Province.

Progress Is Very Satisfactory, The Provincial Councils Have More Responsibilities And They Have To Make Sure The Programme Moves Forward…The Provincial Council In The East Has Matured And They Can Take The Province Forward.

How much progress has been made so far?

Progress is very satisfactory. The Provincial Council has more responsibilities and they have to make sure that the programme moves forward. Soon after the liberation of the East there was no Provincial Council and the President appointed me to look into that. Now I feel that the Provincial Council in the East has matured and they can take the province forward. It is up to them to push it forward. The Eastern Province is at the same level as the other seven provinces and is on par with the Southern and Wayamba provinces. Some say that the East is more developed than the other provinces. Each and every person may they be from the village, a Pradeshiya Sabha or Munciple Council, has the responsibility to take the land forward. We have laid the foundation.

What is the progress in Social Infrastructure and Fostering Social Services?

A newspaper article announced today that the reconstruction of schools in the East was nearing completion. His Excellency the President recently opened a school in Vakarai. My understanding was that the school was the best in the East but I was told by those who had visited that it is better than the schools in Colombo. It was built within 18 months. All tsunami damaged schools have been rebuilt along with new schools.

Then in the health sector also there are many new developments and we have established many good hospitals. There was a need in Trincomalee and we have allocated Rs 100 million with the assistance from ADB to build hospital there. The doctors are provided with quarters and other facilities. Recently the Minister and myself opened new doctors quarters for bachelors and there were about 100 rooms which was built under Nagenahira Navodhaya.

Looking at the environment we have created a special environment near the sea. Even the towns in Batticoloa and Trincomalee have beautiful beaches and tree planting programmes. Many Sri Lankans who visited these areas during the holidays enjoyed the beaches and the beauty of Trincomalee, Batticoloa and other places. We are hoping to open the Kumana Bird Sanctuary and such other wildlife sanctuaries in that area very soon. There are many beautiful places in the Eastern province and opportunities for sports and cultural activities.

The East is a very unique province. All three communities, Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim live in equal numbers in this province. They are living together. After the Provincial Council elections, there were times when mischievous elements tried to destabilise the Eastern province, but now everyone is working together. The ball is now in their court, they can now build their province. His Excellency the President and the Government and specially the Security Forces have done a tremendous task.

In Line With The Mahinda Chinthanaya Development Of The East Was Guided By Four Concepts; Demilitarisation, Democratisation, Development

And The Political Solution.

Have all the IDPs in the East been resettled or have they gone back home?

We have the best record of resettlement programme in the world because displacement is not a new thing to Sri Lanka. Displacement can happen due to natural disasters and also by man made disasters. There are people who have been displaced in the world for years. One good example is the Palestinian people, who were displaced almost in their entirety and still they are living in refugee camps. Then the Jewish community was displaced and they suffered immensely. These are man made activities disasters. More recently hurricane Katrina in USA and the earthquake in China have all resulted in displacement. Sri Lanka had to face displacement due to the tsunami and also by floods. Then many families were displaced from the terrorist threatened villages such as Kebethigollawa, Mahindapura, Namal Oya in Trincomalee, Morawewa, Polonnaruwa and Welikanda. All these people were displaced. They have been displaced since 1977. What about the people from Jaffna? It is not limited to one community, the Sinhalese. What about the Muslims in the North, they have been displaced for 19 years and are still living in camps in Puttalam. Then our Indian origin Tamil people who were displaced from the North and now living in Vavuniya for about 23 years. President Rajapaksa is resettling these people as well.

From the day President Rajapaksa came into power he has focused on resettling the people who were displaced from Dutuwewa, Kebethigollawa; Serunuwara, Trincomalee in which the entire village including the Divisional Secretary and all other Government officers left as the LTTE shelled the village from the LTTE controlled areas. The Muslim people from Muttur; about 40,000 people moved to Kantale area. We airlifted food items such as bread and dhal. Eight Muslim ministers went to Kantale to receive them and the then Honourable Transport Minister Fowzie sent buses from Colombo to transport the displaced persons to Government controlled areas. Then the IDPs from Sampur, Echchalampattu, Verugal , Vakarai, Batticoloa West to Thoppigala, all the people that were displaced during President Rajapaksa’s tenure have been resettled. There are a few who are not willing to go back home due to various reasons. The UN Charter says ‘voluntary resettlement’, therefore we cannot force anyone. We resettled 40, 000 people within 44 days. It was a world record. Those who left Vakarai had doubts; however the President emphasized and it is also the Government policy that when the displaced return all

facilities should be in place. There were no roads, electricity, buses, schools or livelihood opportunities when they left Vakarai but when they came back everything was in place. The road went up to Trincomalee through Echalampattu. Electricity was provided for the first time in Vakarai. Tanks were repaired, fishing was restored and now they have the best school in the Eastern province. I am proud to say the people who left to India have also returned.

There was an internet news item about the people who were affected by Hurricane Katrina and Rita. More than 2,600 Mississippi families continue to occupy is Federal Emergency Agency (FEMA) travel trailers and mobile homes. One person has said to the housing task force that 'nothing moves fast down here. I have learnt to become more patient than I ever thought I would be'. How many years has it been since the hurricane? This is the situation in other countries. They didn't have to demine, there was no security threat and they didn't have to screen people. The US had to only provide basic infrastructure like roads and shelter. The US is the wealthiest and biggest economy and the most powerful country in the world, still for years they have not been able to provide the necessities. In the case of Hurricane Katrina the numbers are not in 100,000s but 1,000s. We are a very good example for the whole world to come and learn how the resettlement programme can be done in any part of the world. In the North as well the President will follow a similar process as in the East.

We Have The Best Record Of Resettlement Programme In The World Because Displacement Is Not A New Thing To Sri Lanka. Displacement Can Happen Due To Natural Disasters And Also By Man Made Disasters.

What are the measures taken to revive tourism both in the North and East?

The most important factor for tourism is security and the Armed Forces have successfully established stability in the North and East. The investment made for the Humanitarian Operation on its own is an investment because the entire economy was revived on its success. The President and the Government have made the best possible investment for the tourism industry with the help of the Armed Forces. The Eastern province is now free. Tourism is not only for the foreigners, but also for the locals. The successful military operations have been a boost for tourism not only for the East but also for Colombo, the Dehiwela Zoo is one very good example, then Anuradhapura and also Madu Church where 600,000 devotees went

on pilgrimage; that is tourism. Therefore providing stability and security is the investment that we have done. For the other related areas of tourism the private sector needs to come forward. The other essential aspect is access and we have provided that by building an extensive road network. Relevant organisations and the private sector need to take the industry forward from there.

Another potential tourist attraction that we can develop identifies and preserves the landmark areas of the military operations for example Marvil Aru; many people would like to visit this place. The former Chief Justice Sarath N Silva and myself were the key people to visit Marvil Aru after Prime Minister D S Senenayake who built the anicut. Marvil Aru has the longest causeway with water diversion; it was badly damaged and we repaired the anicut, gates and canal.

Then another important place is Thoppigala. People must see the ammunition that was recovered from the LTTE, may be in the form of a war museum. My thinking is that we must forgive but not forget, because if we forget what happened then one day it will happen again.

With the end of the war, there are big players entering Arugam Bay and the Eastern coast. What measures have been taken to safeguard the interest of those people who continued business throughout the difficult times?

With the assistance of donors we conducted programmes for community tourism in the coastal areas. It is mainly for the locals. We have beautified the Trincomalee beach area and the Batticaloa lagoon and even conducted tree planting programmes. If you go to the Batticaloa lagoon, you will see that we have introduced attractions such as the pedal boats etc and we are maintaining some nice areas for people to walk. We are also planning to establish bird watching areas and information centres. We have already done that in Trincomalee. The Ministry and the Tourist Board must intervene and plan some of these areas.

There are three gazetted tourist zones: Arugam Bay, Nilaveli and Pasikuda. We have identified other areas and they already have community tourism. With regard to the three big areas that I mentioned, they have to be designed and upmarket tourism

has to be catered to. Both upmarket tourism and community tourism have to be addressed in these areas. The Tourist Board needs to look into upmarket tourism. If you go to Batticaloa in the night, even at 12 o'clock you find many people on the beaches and the shops are open.

We have introduced home stay programmes and with the help of Katubedda University we have planned credit facilities for them, so that they can build a small room with a good toilet. We have also created a website to book these rooms. The Government has taken steps to increase the room rates of certain types of rooms. Then, other room owners can also work out a programme and they have to compete because when you say 'private sector', it is competition. Our programme, Negenahira Navodaya has promoted community tourism and we continue to do that for the community and for the people of Sri Lanka. We want to give them peace of mind after all that they've been through.

We are building a Pottuvil lagoon visitors centre and a Vakarai eco resort – a concept that we designed. We also have Batticaloa lagoon environment learning centre – a place where children can go and learn and Palali beach where there is a special path to walk, Sattakonnan Natural Park, Pigeon Island Natural Park in Trincomalee, Kinniya hot wells, Pasikuda beach, Arugam Bay, Illankandi beach, whale watching in Trincomalee harbour, Kudumbigala forest in Kumana, Amadaragiri Viharaya in Pottuvil, Fort lagoon, Batticaloa lagoon, Tirukkovil, in Trincomalee – Welgamvehera, Thiriyaya temple which is the first Buddhist temple in Sri Lanka, Mamageswaram Pillayar temple, Lahugala National Park and Manthativu island. We have identified all these areas of importance for tourism and provided visitors and management access facilities. We have identified all the places and the key places of tourist attraction. We have not done this in an ad-hoc manner, we planned this as the "tourist development plan for the Eastern coast".

The Government has taken all these measures and we have provided facilities. Now the individual organisations have to do the rest. It is not only the responsibility of the Government. The governing bodies at the provincial level, local government and individual Pradeshiya Sabha should also do their job. The private sector and chambers in the area, the people's organisations such as INGOs and NGOs also have to do their part.

The Most Important Factor For Tourism Is Security And The Armed Forces Have Successfully Established Stability In The North And East. The Investment Made For The Humanitarian Operation On Its Own Is An Investment Because The Entire Economy Was Revived On Its Success.

There are concerns of land grabbing in the North and East. What are your thoughts on this and what measures are being taken to curb them?

I am not sure about land grabbing in the North because there is plenty of land for anybody to go and you don't have to grab land. There are special laws in Jaffna – Thesawalamei.

Everyone's talking about the development of the East. They see that all these projects are done by the Government. Since the private sector is supposed to be the engine of development, why have they not yet entered to help the people in these areas and what are your thoughts on that?

Even a small person who is doing a small tea shop or coffee shop is also an entrepreneur, the man who buys fish and sells is also an entrepreneur, I am not aware whether big investors have come but many regulations have to be complied with and many barriers have to be crossed before a person can even start a small activity.

Now there is more freedom and more organisations are coming in. When there is a Presidential Task Force involved, it works. We are using everything possible and we are using the executive power of the President to push our Government activities. If you take road construction, to run a Quarry what an agony they have to go through. When the tender is open and the contract is given to the contractor to do the first blasting, it takes at least nine months to get started. That means for the mobilisation to finally start even for a small existing road construction it takes a good nine months.

Therefore the President and the Government must seriously consider these and think these things out. I know of one Government project, where they are using the Quarry and every year they have to get permission to safeguard archaeological interests. Every year they have to go back to the Archaeology Department and say

it is not an archaeological site. This year it is not an archaeological site but next year it can be an archaeological site. Therefore when you get the permission from this end and go taking permission from all the other institutes the first permit it over, because it is only given for one year. This is what is faced by a Government organisations and the Task Force has to intervene in these small matters. Small businessmen can't come up to us. In this case we can intervene because it is a national project and we make time to do that.

I don't know about the other parts of the country but I know in this part that is how it is and to take some gravel to construct a road, even the RDA has to face many difficulties. It is the Government's money and the people's money and these are the areas where things have to be done. We have achieved much despite such difficulties.

My Thinking Is That We Must Forgive But Not Forget, Because If We Forget What Happened Then One Day It Will Happen Again.

Considering the size of these two national programmes, can you tell us about the funding and also about the donor community?

After President Rajapaksa came into power, for him there was no problem of funding. For any activity he started, be it for the Humanitarian Operation or for the Development Activities, he has a lot of friends in the world. He has proved that he can get assistance. This includes grants, loans, concessional loans and commercial loans. For each sector he approved, we got big investments. We have invested heavily in power and electricity. For another fifteen to twenty years there will be no power cuts because ample power generation has been established. Now the Oluwil harbour and Hambantota harbour are being built. Everyone was dreaming of the Colombo South harbour and you can go and see it being built and the reclamation of the sea is taking place. The Galle harbour will be especially for yachts, which is very good for tourism. We are also working on the Kankasanthurai harbour. There are also bridges and fly-overs being built and we are receiving funds for these programmes.

We have acquired IMF assistance and now we have more reserves. At a time when our Security Forces were advancing with many difficulties, the opposition went and

picketted not to give a loan to the Government. That time was like a family emergency so, from India to China to Korea to Japan and even Russia, Iran, Saudi, Kuwait and even countries like UK, Europe and every country helped us. I don't know any country that did not help us. We were very firm in our policy and even the World Bank, ADB, JICA and all bilateral and multilateral donors have come forward and given assistance. Of course their money has to be repaid and they have the confidence that we used it for a good purpose.

You can see the pace of the development projects and how it goes. So every dollar is accounted for and you can see that the dollars have gone for the benefit of projects and it is not for purchasing consumer goods; it was not for buying flour or wheat. There were periods when we obtained such loans and we are still paying for them after 30 years. We are still paying for the PLO 480 which we got those days to eat bread. Mahinda Rajapaksa's Government did not take loans for such activities.

Our Programme, Negenahira Navodaya Has Promoted Community Tourism And We Will Continue To Do That For The Community And For The People Of Sri Lanka. We Want To Give Them Peace Of Mind After All That They've Been Through.

Can you tell us about the Jathika Saviya and Gama Neguma projects and their progress?

For the last thirty years, various presidents and various governments have tried to eliminate terrorism by fighting and by various types of military operations. In all these operations, they have been stopped or fallen back in the middle for some reason. We studied why and there were several reasons. One is international community especially India, so we intervened.

Another related to how we managed the South. For example, when our military fights in Mullaitivu, people in the houses in the South don't see that, but if terrorists attack Katunayaka or Kolonnawa everybody can see it. That is what came to our mind. Whatever victory we have in Mullaitivu, when people see one attack in Kolonnawa, they get frightened and then they shout against the Government and put pressure on politicians to stop the operations.

Another factor related to the threatened villages. Even in Kebithigollewa, in Dutuwewa, where 50 odd people including children were killed, the President himself went there despite the security threats. There was agitation; tyre burning and black flags. That is the mood that they wanted to create. The President came back and discussed and the Defence Secretary highlighted these and looked at what is happening. If the people leave, the border will move further down, therefore we had to persuade them to remain. The Jathiya Saviya programme started from that.

When 9/11 happened in New York or 7/7 happened in London or when in Colombo bombs go off, people don't leave. Nobody left New York, they can't leave because they have schools, health, wealth and all the facilities are there. However in the terrorist threatened villages, there is nothing; they only have a small house and the only wealth they had was their lives. Therefore they left. We thought that we have to strengthen these villages by giving security and also by providing assistance and building schools, roads, electricity, water and providing irrigation facilities. Jathiya Saviya was designed to build and strengthen these villages.

We visited with politicians, ministers and members of the JVP to all these districts from Puttlam to Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Monaragala, Ampara and all these areas and we started the Jathiya Saviya programme.
Gama Neguma is a favourite programme of the President. Our Sri Lanka is not built on a platform of towns or states; it is a collection of thousands of villages. We have 36,000 villages and 14,000 Grama Sevaka divisions. So we thought that since the majority – more than 80% – of our population live, in villages and estates, we have to develop a 'Gama Neguma Programme' to cover three areas or fields. One is moral development, another is basic infrastructure such as roads and drinking water, electricity etc and other social facilities such as schools and the other is livelihood development to increase their income in the villages.

Now Gama Neguma is very popular and every village has concrete roads. When Mahinda Rajapaksa came into power there was not even a single concrete road in the country. Now every village has concrete roads and most of the villages have electricity and most districts have a high percentage of electricity coverage. There are a lot of small irrigation canals and village tanks that have been restored and home gardening programmes, backyard poultry and livestock programmes have

also been established.

Our moral standards have improved and some villages have completely stopped selling cigarettes in their village shops. They have stopped illicit liquor in some villages. Some villages have been made disable friendly and every school and building has a path providing access for the disable.
People participate and decide their own priorities and all these Gama Neguma programmes mobilise about 20% of required resources through the participation of the people. Today, Gama Neguma is very big that we can't even cope with.

This is the first time in the history of Sri Lanka that the Parliament made direct allocations in the national budget for Grama Sevaka divisions. Usually they allocate funds to ministries or departments and this time, President in his budget allocated an amount for every Grama Sevaka division. The Grama Sevaka divisions will get at least that amount, which is a first. Before this, budgetary allocations were made either district wise or ministry wise. This is a new thing. The Gama Neguma programme is a real power sharing mechanism to the lowest grass root level. People decide on their development and other activities and they get money for them and it goes with the Api Wawamu Rata Nagamu programme.

There is also Eka Bogayak, Eka Gamak (one crop, one village) programme spearheaded by Minister Maithreepala Sirisena. The Gamata Viduliya (electricity for villages) programme by Minister John Seneviratne and the Maga Neguma programme which was started by the President when he was Prime Minister and Minister of Highways and is now run by the Highways Ministry, under Minister T B Ekanayake and W B Ekanayaka. There are also rural water schemes, which are done by Minister Athaulla and Minister Mahinda Amaraweera and irrigation projects by the Irrigation Minister Chamal Rajapaksa and Jayatissa Ranawera. The Nation Building Ministry and Ministers have demarcated every province. For the estate sector we have another minister. They are co-ordinating all the activities. Samurdhi is handling 3,060 places and in the South the Southern Development Authority is handling about 300 villages, Udarata Development Authority is doing another, five AG divisions. Every Pradeshiya Sabha Member is handling three villages. Provincial Council MPs also have villages and the Provincial Council is also working very closely with the Gama Neguma programme. Much of the work under Gama Neguma comes under the scope of the Palath Sabha with which we have to work closely at

the Provincial level. Ministers and MPs, Provincial Chief Ministers, the Pradeshiya Sabha and even Jana Sabha level all are involved. In villages we have five key officers, the Grama Sevaka, Samurdhi Niyamaka, Agricultural Officer (Krushi Paryeshana Niladhari), Midwife, and the Principal of the school.

These five people are key Government officers in the village spearheading the Gama Neguma and the MP is giving the leadership and he is the representative of the people. The Chief Incumbent of the temple, the church or the mosque or the kovil will be giving the advice.

New Industries Are Also Coming And We Have Revived Some Industries Which Were Closed Down Or Those Which Were On The Verge Of Being Closed Down. There Will Be Many Industries In The Near Future In These Areas.

You spoke about the industries in the North and East and also recently the paper factory in the East was reinstated. Can you tell us when the other industries will start their work and if there are any investment opportunities in this sector?

There is a lot of potential in the industries. Globally, any investor who is coming here would look at it from a global perspective. For agriculture, fisheries or livestock, depending on the sector the domestic consumer will constitute the main market. But industrial products and plantation products have to compete in the global market. So industrial development cannot be planned with a purely district or provincial perspective though we can distribute industries to different locations.

The chemical factory has to be rebuilt. There is nothing that can be used there, only the land. There are plenty of lands that are more suitable than this location, so any investor coming and starting can go for a new land as well.
Regarding the cement factory, the Minister of Industries, Construction Minister as well as the Investment Minister are involved. When I visited, I could see that out of the two cement factories one could be repaired but the other one I don’t think so. It is a big investment and when there are a lot of state-of-the-art factories now, you have to build the best factory to compete in the global environment. However the enivironment is not yet conducive to resume these activities.

There are few other small factories, there is the tile factory in Oddusudan – that is a very old factory. It was earlier owned by the Government through the Ceramic Corporation. Then the LTTE was running it. Basically we believe that those type of factories should come from the private sector. The Government will invest on new factories.

Globally there are setbacks and many factories are closing down in the world. Many replacements are taking place in jobs and in such an environment we have a very good record as we are still managing our industries. New industries are also coming and we have revived some industries which were closed down or those which were on the verge of being closed down. There will be many industries in the near future in these areas.

What has been the response of the Diaspora?

I have very cordial relations with the Diaspora. From the beginning of this Vadakkin Wasantham programme I was in touch with them at various levels and the majority of the Tamil population abroad is very happy now. Recently one old Tamil lady had wanted to get a new passport as it had expired and she had said “I have never been to my village and my children don’t allow me to go and now I want to come back to Sri Lanka and die there, because now it is peaceful”. Then another personal experience, I was travelling through Singapore and I went to a famous eating house with the Ambassador and my family. While I was having lunch, two gentlemen walked to me and they said that they were two British Tamils from Sri Lanka and congratulated me and said that now we are happy and said we are behind you. Once I met some members of the Diaspora and they talked about the Vavuniya election and the result and they said that the TNA must thank the President and I asked why. They said that if the LTTE was there they can’t win, they can’t even contest. They could not contest in Eastern province, “you liberated not only the people of Jaffna but especially you liberated the TNA MPs”. They are now free to take a decision on their own and they can contest Jaffna and Vavuniya. They can meet the President and tell what they want and the grievances of the people. They are happy now.

Recently, the President met Tamil businessmen and they said that now they don’t have to pay ransoms and that earlier they were frightened of both sides and now

they are not frightened. This is the view of the Diaspora. Here we must not forget, even according to the Mahinda Chinthanaya it is not the final aim.

In My Family, The President Is The One Who Is Very Close To The People And I Am Learning From Him But When He Gives Me A Task I Always Try To Do It On Behalf Of The Country, The People And Especially For The President.

We have to do a lot, some people think that when Prabhakaran and the leaders die terrorism is over. No. It is only the land that was liberated. There was KP. The Government continued their activities on this. They went hunting for KP and went to international fora. What about the big leader Morris who was in Colombo and because of that they got hold of Cooray, the man who tried to assassinate General Fonseka. That is only after getting the key man in Colombo. The Diaspora must remember all these things. The people of Sri Lanka must also remember. This Government and the President is handling it in all ways. He knows that we have to win the Diaspora and and we have to develop the Northern Province and also have elections while getting all the democratic forces together. It is only then the problem will be over. To do that, you have to understand it and the only person who can understand that is very clearly, the President.

Some people don’t know what certain politicians do by asking about the death of people in Police custody. Sometimes there are those who bite cyanide and commit suicide and what happens is that charges of war crimes are brought against us. The JVP is helping them by asking these questions. When some political leaders say that the Boossa camp is better than the IDP camp and relief villages in Vauniya. That means they are helping our enemies, they are working in a different way with an ulterior motive. They have to be very careful and I feel that without their knowledge they are working for some vested interests.

When the President met the TNA MPs they were very careful when talking about Sampur because they knew the importance of this place for security. These were Government lands and we have satellite pictures before tsunami, after tsunami and after liberation. We did a survey and decided.

Do you think there should be a designated Minister for Diaspora affairs?

It is the President who decides whether a minister should be appointed for a specific sector, therefore I cannot say anything about that.

What are your thoughts on the defeat of the LTTE?

It is the victory of the people in Sri Lanka and all around the world who love peace. It is a victory for peace loving people.

You are known to be very diplomatic and your public relations is exceptional and just as the Defence Secretary was in charge of the Military operations the President undoubtedly had faith in you in reviving the North and the East and developing other parts of the country. What are your thoughts on it?

I am not sure whether I have good public relations. In my family, President is the one who is very close to people and I am learning from him but when he gives me a task I always try to do it on behalf of the country, the people and especially for the President.

What is your political strategy?

My political strategy is to support the President for him to develop the country and bring prosperity to the country and the people. That is my political strategy.

You have been able to rope in members of political parties and in the case of TNA you were able to gain the support of the entire group. How did you manage to do this?

That was purely the President himself. You can’t get MPs and you have very senior politicians and it is an insult to them to say that you can buy them or take them. They have come on their own.

There were a few TNA members who were working from the beginning and as I said earlier, they are free to meet the President or anybody and free to decide their political activities. They have the freedom of speech and movement and whom to

meet and not to meet because there is no LTTE.

With the President eliminating the LTTE, the TNA can now talk and meet and join hands with the President to build Sri Lanka and put an end to the suffering of the people, especially the people in the North and East. I remember someone saying “Excellency, I am helping you to help us, the people. So please help us to help you.”

It is the thinking of many that you were the missing component of the 1994 Government. What do you think about that?

No, I am happy about not being part of that Government. Not because of anybody else but because I am satisfied working under President Rajapaksa and working according to the Mahinda Chinthanaya, as I can accomplish more. If I was there at that time I might have been frustrated and not been able to work.

You Have Brought In A New Business Culture Into The Private Sector Through Your Magazine… If You Have Survived In That Difficult Environment, Your Future Will Be As Good As The Country’s Future.

What are your future plans?

There are no future plans for me as such, I am happily married. My children are well educated, they are all working, therefore I will work for the President and the country until the President and the country need me.

Any final thoughts?

I am a big fan of your magazines and I wish you well. You have done many things that nobody would have thought of doing at that time. Thus, if you have survived in that difficult environment, your future will be as good as the country’s future. I would like to thank your magazine.

You have brought in a new business culture into the private sector through your magazine. I am happy to see the high standard of the publication, you have done it well in every sphere. Normally I don’t tell these things to any magazine or paper but I am proud of your magazine.