

Conflict Peace & Reconciliation: Lessons Learnt And The Way Forward For Sri Lanka



In his recent address at the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in Singapore, Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa, embodies the Sri Lankan experience in effectively eradicating terrorism ending a 30-year conflict. He elucidates the scope of the terrorist problem in Sri Lanka, the strategies adopted by the Government, the humanitarian challenges faced during and in the aftermath of the war while asserting lessons learnt, in particular, the pressing issues of recent times in the international arena.

Good afternoon.

I am honoured by the invitation extended to me by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue to share my thoughts on the topic of Conflict, Peace and Reconciliation and the lessons learnt from the Sri Lankan experience. A little over two years ago, Sri Lanka succeeded in overcoming a thirty-year long struggle against terrorism by defeating the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, commonly known as the LTTE. There is much that can be learnt from this success, both during and after the war. I am confident that the many lessons learnt by the Government of Sri Lanka in defeating the LTTE and in dealing with issues such as providing humanitarian assistance during conflict, looking after the internally displaced, demining, resettlement, and rehabilitation of ex-combatants, which I believe will be of interest to this illustrious audience.

In the first part of my presentation, I will briefly outline the scope of the terrorist problem Sri Lanka faced during the last three decades, and the strategies that were used by the Government in eradicating it and bringing peace to Sri Lanka. The second section will cover the many humanitarian challenges that we faced during the course of the operation and in its aftermath, and the ways in which the Government of Sri Lanka negotiated them to ensure the welfare of the long-suffering people in former LTTE controlled areas. In the final part of the presentation, I will touch on some developments that have impacted Sri Lanka in more recent times, particularly in the international arena.

At the outset, however, it is important to provide some context for the magnitude of the victory achieved against the LTTE terrorists in May 2009. When the people elected His Excellency Mahinda Rajapaksa to the Presidency in November 2005, Sri Lanka had been suffering from terrorism for nearly three decades. Successive Governments and four previous Presidents had attempted various solutions to the problem over the years without success. These attempts had included peace talks, military engagement, and international mediation. In 2005, Sri Lanka was officially in a ceasefire facilitated by the Norwegian Government and supported by the United States, the European Union and Japan. The LTTE, however, had no genuine interest in peace. Because of its attitude, the talks were stalled well before President Rajapaksa assumed office. Instead of engaging with the Government to bring about a peaceful solution, the LTTE was violating the ceasefire with increasing audacity. Its snipers had assassinated Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar just months before. The country was not mired in all out war, but it was certainly not in a state of peace.

Despite These Gains That It Had Made And The Undue Status It Enjoyed Under The Then-Prevailing Ceasefire Agreement, The LTTE Was Without Doubt One Of The Deadliest Terrorist Organisations In The World.

From the late 1970s onwards, the LTTE had grown from a small group of militants to a large, extremely sophisticated terrorist organisation. Assisted by a small but influential minority within the global Tamil Diaspora, the LTTE had at its disposal an extremely well organised and diverse international network. The LTTE used this network not only to carry out a vicious propaganda war to influence international opinion, but also to finance its terrorist activities within Sri Lanka. By 2005, the LTTE had more than 20,000 battle-hardened cadres in its ranks. It had access to large stockpiles of modern armaments, ammunition and equipment. Uniquely amongst terrorist organisations the world over, it possessed a very sophisticated naval wing as well as a fledgling air wing. By the time the peace process was initiated in 2001, the LTTE had influence over nearly two thirds of the country's coastline and controlled nearly a quarter of its landmass.

Despite these gains that it had made and the undue status it enjoyed under the then-prevailing ceasefire agreement, the LTTE was without doubt one of the deadliest terrorist organisations in the world. The LTTE perfected the tactic of suicide bombing long before any other group, and its suicide bombers assassinated a serving President of Sri Lanka as well as the former Prime Minister of India. The LTTE forcibly recruited children to its ranks and deployed them on the frontlines as well as in suicide missions. The LTTE engaged in ethnic cleansing, driving out thousands of civilians from their homes in an effort to create a mono-ethnic separate state. The LTTE ruthlessly attacked civilians all over Sri Lanka, carrying out massacres at vulnerable villages; setting off bombs in public places, including places of worship, and murdering all those who dared speak out against it, especially within the Tamil community it claimed to be fighting for.

The impact of the LTTE's atrocities throughout Sri Lanka resulted in untold suffering for the country's entire population for almost three decades. People throughout Sri Lanka lived in a state of fear. In the circumstances, rescuing Sri Lanka from the terrorism of the LTTE was the key priority of the President when he was elected. As a leader who is deeply committed to peace, his first step was to restart the peace-talks that had been stalled since early 2003. He invited the LTTE for direct talks, but typically, the LTTE intensified its campaign of provocation instead of responding positively. 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 a considerable period of time, even including the tragic massacre at Kabethigollawa that killed over sixty innocent children, women and men. The final straw, however, was the clear and present danger posed by the LTTE's shutting down of the sluice gates at Mavil Aru. This was a key irrigation canal for agriculture in the East of Sri Lanka, and its closure cut off water to thousands of acres of farmland and over five thousand households, threatening a major humanitarian disaster. 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 in August 2006, the LTTE launched attacks on military positions around the critical Trincomalee harbour in the East. A few days later, it launched attacks on military positions in the North. It was clear that the closure of the Mavil Aru sluice gate had only been the LTTE's opening tactic, and that it was the first move in a well-planned out offensive. In the circumstances, considering the immediate threat posed to strategic locations and the long history of aggression and atrocities by the LTTE, the Government decided to launch a Humanitarian Operation to rid the country once and for all of the LTTE menace.

In taking the military option, the Government knew that history was not on its side. Over the years, there had been many attempts at militarily defeating the LTTE, but none of these campaigns had met with lasting success. The most distinctive feature of the Humanitarian Operation launched in 2006 was the clear aim and commitment of the President to rescue the country from terrorism once and for all. It was a commitment that was well communicated not just to the defence hierarchy and the armed services personnel but to the entire country as a whole. The people knew that the Humanitarian Operation would be the solution to the terrorist problem, and they supported it wholeheartedly. The military knew that this would be a battle fought to the end, and that gave them the confidence they needed to finish the job.

For The Duration Of The Humanitarian Operation, For Over Three And A Half Years, The President Chaired The Weekly Security Council Meetings And Constantly Kept In Touch With The Unfolding Situation. As Commander In Chief, He Was Fully Aware Of The Great Progress Being Made On The Battlefront.

For the duration of the Humanitarian Operation, for over three and a half years, the President chaired the weekly Security Council meetings and constantly kept in touch with the unfolding situation. As Commander in Chief, he was fully aware of the great progress being made on the battlefield. When there were setbacks, as there can be in any military operation, he understood that they were only temporary. During the critical stages, in the face of increasing military casualties and mounting international criticism, no matter how unfounded, the President stood firm and absorbed all these pressures. His resolute stance gave our personnel the strength to press ahead with their operations. He never faltered from the ultimate goal.

There were many key factors that led to the success of the Humanitarian Operation. Perhaps the most critical was the President's decision to expand the Armed Forces. One of the first lessons we learnt from studying previous military campaigns was that the Sri Lankan military was always superior to the LTTE. Our talented commanders and dedicated personnel most often succeeded in their encounters with the enemy. However, one of the major weaknesses was the lack of adequate strength in numbers.

It needs to be understood that the LTTE was active in a very large extent of land: they controlled nearly a third of the Eastern Province; they were active in the Jaffna Peninsular, the islands and the Muhamalai Forward Defence Line; and they dominated the vast jungle terrain of the Wanni. Given the LTTE's history of launching terrorist attacks throughout Sri Lanka to distract on-going military operations, attention also had to be paid to the rest of the country.

The challenge facing us when the Humanitarian Operation was launched was not only to engage and defeat LTTE cadres in battles for territory, but to hold and dominate that territory once it was liberated. Fighting the LTTE in the Wanni required a large operation on a number of different axes and on a wider frontage. During past operations, a major LTTE tactic had been to penetrate the front line of the military, infiltrate our territory and attack from the rear. It was necessary to strongly hold the rear and maintain several counter penetration lines to guard against this threat. Further, it was necessary to secure key infrastructure in and around Colombo, as well as safeguard vulnerable villages that were likely to be attacked by the LTTE as a means of distracting the on-going military operations.

All of these issues dictated a very large expansion in the Armed Forces if the LTTE was to be defeated. The President understood that the combined strength of the

Armed Forces in 2005 was nowhere near the number required, and he took the critical decision to expand the military to the appropriate size. Because the entire country knew the President's commitment to end the conflict once and for all, and because the Government projected its intentions very clearly to the public, a lot of young people throughout Sri Lanka stepped forward to join the military.

Apart From Strengthening The Military To The Required Size, Protecting The Rest Of The Country From The LTTE's Provocations And Maintaining Political Stability As Well As Popular Support, Another Key Factor... Was The Management Of International Pressures By The Political Leadership.

Between the end of 2005 and the end of 2009, the Army's 9 Divisions were increased to 20; its 44 Brigades expanded to 71 and its 149 Battalions increased to 284. This increased the number of Army personnel from 120,000 in 2005 to 220,000 by the end of the Humanitarian Operation. The Navy and the Air Force were also expanded significantly, and they were also given tasks beyond their classic role. Many of their personnel were entrusted with holding ground even in jungles, and also given the responsibility of securing Main Supply Routes. Encouraged by the clear determination of the President and the Government, and the great public support increasingly visible throughout the country, members of the expanded Armed Forces worked with incredible discipline and commitment to fulfil its tasks throughout the Humanitarian Operation.

Supporting the military by upholding the security of vulnerable villages was the Civil Defence Force. This was initially a loose organisation of civilians who had been given only shotguns to protect the villages under threat from the LTTE. This was also expanded significantly. 42,000 able bodied men were recruited from the villages and given proper training and equipment. This strengthening of the paramilitary forces enabled the Government to ensure that the rest of the country would be safe from the atrocities of the LTTE while the military campaign was underway. Although there were isolated incidents of violence caused by the LTTE during this period, the strengthening of the Civil Defence Force and the deployment of the Special Task Force of the Police to increase security throughout the country paid dividends. The military did not have to be diverted from its engagements at any point during the Humanitarian Operation.

Another factor enabling the success of the Humanitarian Operation was political stability. This was a particular issue at the time, because the then Government comprised a coalition that had only a tenuous majority in parliament. If the

Government had collapsed at any point during the military campaign, all our efforts would have been in vain. The President managed this issue by keeping his party's coalition partners together and persuading opposition figures to support him and consolidate the party's position in parliament. For this reason, the cabinet had to be expanded to a historic size, and various portfolios were handed over to notable party members within the coalition. There was a great deal of criticism for this at the time, but it was an absolutely necessary step in maintaining the Government's stability and political stability.

It was equally important to ensure that the people would not suffer unduly even though the Government was in the middle of a large military campaign. This is why the Government invested so much on welfare efforts throughout Sri Lanka, even at a time when it could hardly afford to because of the large war budget. A sterling example of the thought given to the well being of ordinary people was the fertiliser subsidy granted at a time when international prices were skyrocketing. This eased the heavy burden felt by the farmers, and kept food prices affordable to the general population. It was also important to ensure that the rebuilding efforts for the tsunami-affected parts of the country continued unabated, and that infrastructure development work continued apace. These were essential factors in ensuring that economic growth would take place and that ordinary Sri Lankans would not feel the brunt of the war effort.

Apart from strengthening the military to the required size, protecting the rest of the country from the LTTE's provocations and maintaining political stability as well as popular support, another key factor underpinning the success of the Humanitarian Operation was the management of international pressures by the political leadership. Although international pressures increased, mostly fuelled by the LTTE's international propaganda network and certain misguided elements in the international community, President Rajapaksa was able to absorb the pressures that were brought to bear in order for the Humanitarian Operation to continue unhindered.

This was very much in contrast to past experience. In 1987, the enormously successful Vadamarachchi Operation had pushed the LTTE to the brink of defeat. However, this operation could not be sustained because the Indian Government intervened. The primary problem in 1987 was that the relationship between the two countries had not been managed effectively. However, there was no such problem this time around, as President Rajapaksa went out of his way to keep New Delhi briefed about all the new developments taking place in Sri Lanka. He understood

that while other countries could mount pressure on us, only India could practically influence the military campaign.

From very early in the military campaign, the relationship between Sri Lanka and India was managed through the maintaining of clear communications at the very highest level. A special committee was established to engage in constant dialogue. The Sri Lankan side comprised of the then Senior Advisor to the President Basil Rajapaksa, Secretary to the President Lalith Weeratunga, and myself, as Defence Secretary. The Indian side comprised of former National Security Advisor M K Narayan, then Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon and the then Defence Secretary Vijay Singh. This troika had continuous discussions and ensured immediate solutions to any sensitive issues that arose. Although this model wasn't replicated with any other country, Sri Lanka's relationships with other important regional allies were also well maintained through diplomatic channels and regular dialogue.

Unfortunately, because Sri Lanka is a small country with limited resources, it was not possible for us to give the management of non-critical foreign opinion the same level of attention we gave India and other key nations. As such, the many misconceptions promoted by the LTTE's propaganda wing in certain foreign capitals remained largely intact. Even more sadly, a number of influential figures in the international community formed very strong opinions—or should I say jumped to very hasty conclusions—about our conduct of the war. This is deeply disappointing to the Government because one of the most notable facets of the Sri Lankan war against terrorism was the immense care with which it was conducted.

Minimising civilian casualties was an overriding priority for everyone involved in the Humanitarian Operation, from the political leadership to the military personnel on the field of battle. Training on human rights, international humanitarian law and the law of armed conflict as well as highlighting the necessity to protect civilians has been integral to the training of the Armed Forces for many years. Moreover, when the campaign started, strict orders were given to the military at Security Council meetings to avoid civilian losses and minimise the destruction of civilian property. These orders were included in the operational orders handed down through the chain of command, and all our military personnel on the ground were very conscious of the fact that civilian casualties would not be acceptable.

The professionalism inculcated in the Sri Lankan Armed Forces needs to be mentioned in this context. A very large number of officers, particularly those senior

officers holding positions of great responsibility, have participated in training courses and seminars in many countries, including India, Pakistan, China, Malaysia, Indonesia, Israel, the United Kingdom and the United States. In addition to the officers, quite a few Non Commissioned Officers have also had such opportunities. It is also important to remember that Sri Lanka consistently provided soldiers for UN peacekeeping missions, even during the height of the Humanitarian Operation. Through all these means, the Sri Lankan Armed Forces have had a lot of exposure to international military norms and practices. Their professionalism is one of the critical reasons why they were able to minimise civilian casualties during the course of the Humanitarian Operations.

Of course, in keeping with its brutal nature, the LTTE did its best to complicate the situation and put civilians at risk. Historically, the LTTE has made sure that its leaders, operational centres, and gun positions are all located within areas populated by civilians. As our operations progressed, and the LTTE lost battle after battle, they started to withdraw from these entrenched positions in the towns and villages. Instead of withdrawing their cadres alone however, they herded the civilians who lived in those areas alongside them as they retreated.

A couple of hundred thousand civilians were taken out of their homes and driven from their villages as the military campaign progressed. The LTTE also mined the villages and towns left behind very heavily, making sure no one could safely go back. These civilians were to serve as a human shield for the LTTE, which was beginning to realise it was outmatched in the field of battle. Humanitarian aid that was being organised for these civilians by the Government with assistance from various organisations, including the World Food Programme, the ICRC and other international agencies, was also blatantly appropriated by the LTTE. This forced migration of civilians posed a significant obstacle to the Humanitarian Operation.

The Sri Lankan military responded by taking the utmost care in all its offensives. Small group warfare was extensively employed, even though it meant placing our troops at greater risk of harm by the enemy. A great deal of effort was put into intelligence gathering through the penetration of Special Forces into enemy territory and the comprehensive use of technology. The establishment of No Fire Zones and Safe Corridors gave civilians an opportunity to escape into areas that had already been cleared. Of course, the LTTE did its best to prevent their escape by shooting at civilians whenever they attempted to flee. The LTTE also established their artillery positions at places such as hospitals and within civilian encampments in order to limit the Army's ability to retaliate. As a result, especially towards the

end of the campaign, the use of heavy weaponry was significantly curtailed and then stopped outright.

The extensive use of technology by all of the Sri Lankan Armed Forces during the Humanitarian Operation did a great deal to minimise civilian losses. Footage from Unmanned Aerial Vehicles was studied to enable the acquisition of legitimate enemy targets, which were destroyed using precision-guided munitions. Air Force pilots were specially trained to identify and target enemy positions with great accuracy. The minimum amount of necessary force was always used in munitions to ensure that the damage dealt was localised so that minimal harm would come to civilians and civilian property in the vicinity. Through these measures, the Sri Lankan Armed Services ensured that collateral damage was kept to an absolute minimum during the course of the entire campaign.

Above and beyond containing incidental harm to civilians, the military did a lot to try and ensure that humanitarian aid was reaching the civilians trapped in the LTTE's clutches. The Navy protected Sea Lines of Communication to facilitate delivery of humanitarian assistance to trapped civilians. It also protected safe corridors along the coast for escapees to cross through to Government controlled areas. The Air Force airlifted humanitarian aid to civilians, and provided emergency evacuation to civilians who managed to escape LTTE imprisonment at great risk to their lives. These escapees were very often shot at, and those who managed to cross over to cleared areas bore the marks of their captivity under the LTTE.

In Keeping With Its Brutal Nature, The LTTE Did Its Best To Complicate The Situation And Put Civilians At Risk... Instead Of Withdrawing Their Cadres Alone They Herded The Civilians Who Lived In Those Areas Alongside Them As They Retreated.

The Government was well aware that the civilians liberated by the Armed Forces from the LTTE's clutches would require medical attention as well as subsequent care. A great deal of planning went into ensure that systems and facilities were in place to cope with this large influx of internally displaced persons. In addition to the gearing up of the Government health network, medical facilities were set up with assistance from India and France. Indian military doctors manned a field hospital in Pulmoddai, and all IDPs escaping through the sea were given treatment at that hospital. Doctors Without Borders initially worked through the Government health network to provide treatment to incoming IDPs, and later set up a 160-bed referral hospital outside the largest IDP centre to look after the health of the inmates.

This IDP centre, known as Manik Farm, has been unduly criticised by many outside Sri Lanka, who, despite having no perspective on the problems being faced, felt free to air their ungrounded criticisms. As I mentioned earlier, the LTTE had made sure that the towns and villages it forced civilians to leave were unsafe for them to go back to. The LTTE mined those towns and villages very heavily. It was absolutely impossible for the internally displaced to return to their hometowns until they had been made completely safe for human habitation. This was not something that could be done overnight. In the interim, the Government did the best it could. Medical assistance, food, shelter, clothing, and all other basic necessities were provided, and a great deal of effort was taken to ensure that these victims of LTTE brutality would live with dignity despite the ordeal they had suffered. Taking care of nearly 300,000 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. It was not something that could have been undertaken by individual good samaritans.

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, and several foreign governments and international organisations provided invaluable assistance. As demining progressed, the internally displaced were resettled in their places of origin. Today, less than 8,000 internally displaced people remain to be resettled, and only 4,500 remain in camps. Most of them come from the areas that were caught up in heavy fighting at the end of the war; 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.

In addition to the internally displaced civilians who had to be resettled, more than eleven thousand LTTE cadres surrendered or were detained by the military during the course of its operations. These detainees were processed and sorted according to their level of involvement in the LTTE's activities. Separate attention was given to the 595 Child Soldiers who surrendered; they were rehabilitated under a programme assisted by UNICEF, and they were sent back to their families within one year. I am happy to note that several former child soldiers successfully sat for

their Advanced Level examinations and a few have qualified to attend medical school. More than 7,500 adult cadres have been rehabilitated and reintegrated into society to date, while approximately 2,700 cadres are still undergoing rehabilitation.

The rehabilitation process was carried out under the Commissioner General of Rehabilitation, and the rehabilitation programmes were geared towards making sure that the rehabilitated former cadres will have no difficulty in readjusting to normal life and reintegrating into society. Adult cadres have been given vocational training and have acquired useful skills to help them become productive citizens. Extensive spiritual and religious programmes were also provided to the former cadres, and psychological care was extended through various means, including counselling and drama, dance and music therapy. It must be noted that similar care has been extended even to the cadres who have been identified for prosecution through the legal system. They are not being treated as regular offenders and kept in prisons, but are being looked after separately.

In addition to the resettlement, rehabilitation and development activities that were carried out in the aftermath of the conflict, the restoration of normalcy in the areas formerly under the heel of the LTTE should also be stressed. The intention of the Government was to bring back normalcy to these long-suffering areas as soon as possible. The Eastern Province, which was liberated fairly early on in the Humanitarian Operation, was brought back to normalcy within a remarkably short span of time. One of the key issues in that Province was the number of armed groups active in it. These groups had stood in opposition to the LTTE and had needed weapons to protect themselves from the terrorist threat. Once the LTTE was expelled from the East, the Government took swift steps to disarm them and encourage them to join the political mainstream. In a very short span of time, the former armed groups gave up arms and set up political offices.

The President's decision to hold elections in the East as early as May 2008, while the Humanitarian Operation was still going on in the Northern Province, clearly highlighted the Government's intentions to restore democracy to the North and East as soon as possible. It did so in a systematic manner, starting with several Local Authority elections for Jaffna and Vavuniya in the Northern Province, which took place only three months after the end of the Humanitarian Operation. Elections for the next level of Government came next, with the remaining Provincial Council elections being held throughout 2009, followed by the Presidential Election in January 2010 and the General election in April of the same year.

With the near completion of the resettlement process in 2011, local authority elections were held throughout the Northern Province a few weeks ago. For the first time in thirty years, people in these areas went to the polling booth freely and without fear, and exercised their franchise. These elections had a fairly predictable result, with the Tamil National Alliance winning first in most electorates. However, it is truly noteworthy that the Government party came a close second in many of them, sometimes winning as much as 48% of the votes cast.⁶⁷ representatives from the Government party were elected to the local authorities in the North, and they will work together with the other elected members to uplift the lives of the people in these areas.

One of the most heartening aspects of the restoration of peace has been the speed at which the military has adapted to the prevailing circumstances. Despite having engaged in full scale operations for over three years, and after being on a war footing for the best part of three decades, the Armed Forces have undergone a seamless transition to a peace-time role. They have engaged in demining and reconstruction activities, and the personnel of the Armed Forces have often gone much beyond the call of duty in helping civilians regain normalcy. During a recent visit to the North, I spoke with many military officers who have assisted the civilians by conducting health camps, helping farmers plough their fields and revive agriculture, and helping individuals rebuild their houses. Through these personal initiatives, the military personnel have done a great deal to win the hearts and minds of the people in the areas formerly dominated by the LTTE.

With the restoration of peace, the involvement of the military in law and order activities is also being gradually phased out and more and more responsibilities are being handed over to the police. A significant number of Tamil speaking policemen have been recruited, and additional training in the Tamil language is being provided to police officers of other ethnicities who will serve in these areas. In addition, all the restrictions that had to be in place due to security concerns, including restrictions on travel and restrictions on fishing, have now been completely removed. Through such means, the Government is rapidly restoring normalcy to the former conflict zone.

The Government's deep and abiding commitment has always been to the welfare of all its citizens. Nowhere is this more apparent than in its efforts to restore economic freedom and prosperity to the long-suffering people of the North. During the entire period of the conflict, the Government did its best to look after the people in these areas by continuing to supply them with services such as healthcare, education and

basic utilities. Unfortunately, because the LTTE did not allow these resources to be used properly, and because the non-governmental organisations supposed to be engaging in development work in these areas were largely ineffective, virtually no economic progress took place there. As a result, the infrastructure of this region, including its road networks, electricity grids, telecommunication networks, irrigation channels, were underdeveloped. With the conclusion of the Humanitarian Operation, the Government has focused very heavily on the development of this infrastructure.

The President's Decision To Hold Elections In The East As Early As May 2008, While The Humanitarian Operation Was Still Going On In The Northern Province, Clearly Highlighted The Government's Intentions To Restore Democracy To The North And East As Soon As Possible.

Major programmes are underway to develop the road network, the railway track, electricity grid, and irrigation infrastructure in these areas. Under a loan from the Chinese Government, the main highway to the North, the A-9 Road, is being developed into a highway. Indian assistance has been received for the restoration of the railway track that was destroyed by the LTTE in the 1980s. A major programme for electrification is in progress, so that even the rural hamlets in the North will be connected to the national grid for the first time ever. 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 in 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. Similarly, a lot of trading is now taking place between the North and the South. All Sri Lankans have benefitted from this economic reintegration, and Sri Lanka today is a country that is truly reaping the rewards of a just peace.

It is extremely disappointing in this context to note that the view of some in the international community has been grossly distorted by the lies that continue to be spun by the rump of the LTTE organisation. It is important to remember that although the armed wing of the LTTE was defeated in May 2009, its vast global network remains virtually intact. This network is working together with some in the Tamil Diaspora to tarnish the image of Sri Lanka, sow discord amongst our people, and set back the peace that was achieved two years ago. Instead of focusing on the lessons that can be learnt from the defeat of terrorism in Sri Lanka, the narrative on Sri Lanka has been hijacked and diverted by the rump of the LTTE to focus on various absurd allegations against the Government.

The most obvious of the allegations concerns the occurrence of civilian casualties despite the zero-casualty policy adopted by the Government. The fundamental nature of that policy has been terribly misunderstood or wilfully misinterpreted by those who oppose the Government. They take it to mean that the Government believed collateral damage could be comprehensively avoided. This is not true. The zero-casualty policy was something the President insisted upon because he wanted the entire military, from the commanders down to the field commanders and the soldiers on the battlefield, to avoid taking any action that could put civilians at risk. The military absorbed this message in its planning, often putting its own personnel at risk in an effort to minimise the danger to civilian lives. For two and a half years, the policy bore great dividends and civilian casualties were kept to a near zero level.

Unfortunately, the Government was dealing with an opponent that did not share its commitment to the safety of civilian lives. When the LTTE realised that it was severely outmatched on the field of battle, it decided to create a human shield for its own protection. Civilians were desperate to escape the clutches of the LTTE and come to the sanctuary offered by the Government but the LTTE ruthlessly prevented their leaving and often shot at them while they tried to escape. Knowing that the LTTE would never allow the civilians to leave voluntarily, the Government declared territory with large civilian concentrations as No Fire Zones. At great risk to its own personnel, the military did not fire into those areas even when the LTTE set up its artillery positions within them. As a result of all the precautions taken to safeguard civilian lives, progress during the final stages of the Humanitarian Operation was extremely slow, but countless civilian lives were saved which might otherwise have been lost. The Government is absolutely confident that civilian casualties overall were kept to a minimum.

That is one of the reasons why the accusation that up to 40,000 civilians were killed during the Humanitarian Operation is so outrageous. This vague accusation has absolutely no substance but keeps getting parroted without any critical analysis by people who really should know better. At various times during the Humanitarian Operation, various estimates emerged from a variety of sources regarding the overall population figure in the North. According to the Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies, the number was between 75,000 and 150,000. According to the UN Resident Coordinator, the number was between 120,000 and 180,000. According to the World Food Programme, the number was 210,000. According to the Government Agent in Mullaitivu, the number was 305,000. The largest estimate given is that last

one. The registered number of IDPs at the end of the Humanitarian Operation was 294,000. Technical sources as well as other evidence shows that a fair number of LTTE cadres were killed in combat. Given these numbers, you can see for yourself how flawed the arithmetic behind the allegation of 40,000 civilian casualties is.

It Seems Very Easy For Genuine Concerns About Humanitarian Issues To Be Hijacked By Those With Malicious Agendas. It Is Incumbent Upon The International Community To Guard Against This By Obtaining Proper Information Instead Of Being Swayed By Propaganda.

Estimating the number of people who lived in the North is a very complex task. A large number of people left Sri Lanka without going through legal channels during the conflict. Approximately 100,000 people went to India by boat, including many LTTE cadres, and live there in camps. However, we do not have enough information to identify these people. Similarly, there are large numbers residing as refugees in places such as Indonesia, the Christmas Islands, Australia and Canada. Their names are unknown to us, and these countries do not release that information. As a result, there is no accurate estimate at this time of how many people were in the North to begin with. The Government has launched a comprehensive statistical analysis to tackle this issue. It is only once this is complete that this subject can be discussed with any accuracy.

In the meantime, the Government has other sources it can turn to. In December 2009, the Government together with UNICEF launched a programme to trace the missing in the Northern Province. The Vavuniya Government Agent and the Probation and Childcare Commissioner in the Northern Province jointly established a Family Tracing and Reunification Unit with UNICEF assistance. This Unit undertook a comprehensive programme to catalogue all those who were missing, adults as well as children. Families were encouraged to report missing persons to a hotline, and any information available with the Government Agent, District Secretaries, Divisional Secretariats, hospital staff and police officers was also collected. As of June 30, 2011, 2,564 reports have been received. These relate to 1,888 adults and 676 children. It is important to note that the reports made by the parents of these missing children confirm that at least 64 percent of them were recruited by the LTTE. In this context, it is clear that the accusations levelled against Sri Lanka have little foundation.

The fact that these baseless allegations are believed by certain figures in the international community has disturbing ramifications not just for Sri Lanka but for

any country that is at risk from terrorism. The LTTE was one of the world's worst terrorist organisations, which engaged in ethnic cleansing, forcibly recruited children as soldiers, perfected the tactic of suicide bombing and ruthlessly massacred innocent civilians. Its international network is complicit in these crimes. Yet, instead of being prosecuted or at least being kept at arms length by influential figures in the international community, this network and the vicious lies and unsubstantiated allegations it spins are being taken at face value.

This is not just disappointing, but dangerous. It seems very easy for genuine concerns about humanitarian issues to be hijacked by those with malicious agendas. It is incumbent upon the international community to guard against this by obtaining proper information instead of being swayed by propaganda. Sadly, it seems that this does not happen with sufficient rigour, and that falsehoods gain currency if they are persuasively presented while the truth remains unheard. This is a sobering thought for any nation at risk from terrorism, and it's perhaps the hardest of the lessons to be learnt from the Sri Lankan experience.

Despite this, the Sri Lankan Government is confident that the truth will eventually triumph over the lies being spread by the rump of the LTTE. In this regard, the Government has recently released a comprehensive analysis on the Humanitarian Operation together with a companion report on Sri Lanka's Humanitarian Effort. In addition, the President has appointed an independent Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission to study and report on events from the time of the signing of the ceasefire agreement in 2002 to the end of the Humanitarian Operation in 2009. This operation liberated an entire nation from the clutches of terror. It should not be tarnished by unfounded lies. At a time when the Government of Sri Lanka is looking to build a future of peace and prosperity for all its people on the platform provided by the defeat of terrorism, all it asks is that the truth be heeded.

Thank you.

