Progress with Peace

Mr. Minister, you as the Foreign Minister of this government have been given considerable eredit for the changes in international attitudes towards Sri Lanka. What are the main aspects of this change as you would perceive them?

When we came to office in August 1994 we found that the perceptions of Sri Lanka abroad, its image abroad, were in rather poor shape. I think the reason for that was perhaps primarily our Human Rights record up to that point of time and for some years preceding had been greatly disapproved of among influential quarters, particularly in the West.

This government set about very quickly doing what it could do to improve the situation, and we ad- dressed Human Rights questions very early in our tenure of office. The reason for our doing that was not, and I repeat not, for the purpose of effecting any cosmetic change of our image abroad, because I am a firm believer in the proposition that one’s image abroad actually does reflect domestic politics. We cannot artificially seek to project an image abroad which is different to the reality at home. If you try to do that, you are very quickly caught out. Because, in this technologically advanced age, specially in communications, the world is very well aware of what is going on in each country.



This government is absolutely, totally committed to going ahead with these proposals. We will not be deterred by adverse propaganda, we will not be deterred by threats, and in fact when necessary to the people.

So, I start by saying that there are a sufficient number of persons in this government, headed by Her Excellency herself first, and I am certainly one of them, and there are other ministers and others who are fundamentally deep believers. in the importance of Human Rights. In other words, we brought to our offices a pre-existing state of mind, where in our own way we were advocates of Human Rights. So, it did not become difficult for us to start very quickly down the road of putting our Human Rights fully. I am advised by a group of record in order.

To achieve this, we took the following steps. First, (not in any order of priority either in terms of importance or of time), commissions of inquiry were appointed to go into the very sad disappearances of our citizens by the thousands in the preceding years. The President herself during her election campaign had showed much interest in this tragic question. Embilipitiya, for instance, where there was a very large number of bodies found. So, we set up com- missions of inquiry to probe these disappearances. We also set up a Human Rights Task Force, to try to sort out some of the practical questions in the area of Human Rights on the ground. Then we

passed legislation in Parliament to outlaw torture. That was in November 1994, and that was a step taken to bring our domestic legislation, which at that time did not even exist, in line with the international convention on torture, which Sri Lanka had ratified a year or two before.

Then we began work in earnest in establishing a National Human Rights Commission. This Commission is important, because it will comprise five commissioners who are responsible only to Parliament. They can be removed only by Parliament; they have the standing of Supreme Court Judges; and this Commission will provide the over- arching umbrella for all the Human Rights activities and concerns in the country. I myself started work in my ministry on the question of ratifying the optional protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political rights. This protocol will enable Sri Lankan citizens to take Human Rights grievances all the way to the Human Rights Commission in Geneva, after exhausting domestic legal remedies. It took some time to study this question very carefully. I am advised by a group of Human Rights advisors to my ministry on this matter. They comprise some of the most eminent Human Rights experts and advocates in Sri Lanka. They advised me on the many aspects of this matter, and after about two years of study, the Cabinet decided to ratify this protocol which is a very important landmark in the Human Rights of any country, because not many countries have ratified this protocol.

By the time it came to the sitting of the Human Rights Commission in Geneva in March 1995, we were to show that we had made some significant progress on the Human Rights front, in the first five or six months of government. This was undoubtedly appreciated to a large extent by the international community, who were convinced that we were serious about our approach to Human Rights. I would say that this approach to Human Rights greatly helped to enhance our image and eradicate some of the bad impressions of the past.

The second major concern was the opening of talks with the LTTE. That went on for about four to five months, there was a cessation of hostilities, and until this cessation was broken by the LTTE unilaterally in April 1995, there was some evidence of a possibility of a breakthrough in the situation with the LTTE, although many people at that time said that the LTTE could not be trusted, these peace talks would not go very far, and so on. The President decided that at the very least we must give it a try. So, that also showed that we were serious about trying to resolve our terrible ethnic problem.

Thirdly, and very importantly, there are the proposals of this government for the devolution of power. Work went on these proposals and in August 1995, they were presented to the people and a national debate began countrywide. Some time later the proposals were put into draft legal form, and discussions are taking place in a Parliamentary Select Committee. This government is absolutely, totally committed to going ahead with these proposals. We will not be deterred by adverse propaganda, we will not be deterred by threats, we are definitely going to put these proposals to parliament, and in fact when necessary to the people, and we have been canvassing support among the people up and down the country for well over a year, and this approach to the solution of our ethnic problem has also won commendation from the international community.

Now that you mentioned the Devolution Proposals, although the government today says it lays emphasis on its Devolution Proposals, it appears to many that it is following a policy of both war and peace, war and peace in tandem as it were. How has the international community so far reacted to this attitude or policy of the government?

I find that everywhere in the international community, I can say with every single sovereign government in the world and I have now contacted well over 100 governments in this connection, there is a very clear understanding of the enormous threat that this country faces to its national and territorial integrity as a result of the LTTE's demand for a separate state pursued by force of arms. Not one single government has indicated to me that we should not resist the LTTE militarily. Every single government understands. that we must do so and we have their support in that approach. Therefore, we have to resist the LTTE militarily as long as it is necessary to do so, and until such time as the LTTE gives up its demand for a separate state, and is prepared to renounce arms as a means of solving this problem. They also understand, and we have said this over and over again, that the ultimate, permanent, durable solution to this problem will not come from force of arms alone. It will not come from conquest or our vanquishing the LTTE. It has to come by acceptance of the people in their entirety, by the Sinhala and the Tamil people. That is a political settlement. And, a political settlement that is perceived by the communities, by the majority and the minorities, to be fair and just. It must be a settlement that is enshrined in law, and it must be enshrined in the hearts of people. In the hearts and minds of all our people. Therefore, nobody in the world, so far as I am aware, sees any contradiction in these two approaches being conducted at the same time.



The effort to reach the expatriate Tamil community abroad directly, even by mail for instance, is a very complex operation, because we don't know the names and addresses of people, and many people won't want their names and addresses known.

You did mention the LTTE and the question of terrorism. Are there any other factors, apart from the policies of this government vis-a-vis Sri Lanka's own problem, which have now led to governments of Western and other important countries to think of taking stronger measures against terrorism?

The answer is yes. Over the last two years, I have been ceaselessly advocating, informing, various countries, particularly Western countries, that terrorism is a problem that cannot be fought alone by a besieged country. The fact that we have a lonely struggle against terrorism on our hands is evident to the whole world. I kept on saying to them that they must help us. Because, even from purely pragmatic and selfish reasons, if they don't, they will very soon find our own terrorist problem in their countries as well. Because they have large congregations of expatriate Tamils in many of these countries in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Scandinavia, and Australia, for example. Communities of very large numbers, running cumulatively to many hundreds of thousands. Money is coming from there to fund the terrorist cause in Sri Lanka.

I told them that soon they would find narcotics smuggling. the smuggling of human beings, gun running emanating from their countries, they would have a cancer in their own societies. One of the phrases I used to them was, “you are nursing a little monster, and you will find soon that this monster will grow and grow, and give you a lot of difficulty.”

The response in those early days from these governments, all friendly governments, was: “Well, we don’t think the problem is as serious as you make it out to be. But, of course, you are a friendly country, we will do whatever we can. But, it is not much we can do because our laws, in most cases don’t permit criminal action to be brought against people who are not offending our own laws on our side. As long as they are doing something outside our countries we have no control over them”. This used to be the stock answer I was getting.

I found that in one country, in Switzerland, very shortly after I told them what I am telling you now, indeed what I predicted happened. Fighting broke out in the streets of a city in Switzerland, and then they decided to arrest the leading fund raiser in Switzerland, a man called Muralidharan. They are conducting investigations as a prelude to charging him. He was released on bail after six months according to Swiss law. But it became very clear to the Swiss authorities, that the kind of problem I predicted unfortunately came about.

A similar situation also arose in Malaysia, where fund raising is going on, and the Malaysian government initially thought it was not a serious problem. But, it soon found out that it was indeed a very serious problem, and the Malaysian government, to its credit, took very drastic and very quick action against the LTTE there.

In Australia, the Australian Foreign Minister of the new government told me that he had stated publicly that he will not entertain any representation from the Tamil expatriate community in Australia regarding LTTE matters, unless and until they publicly renounce violence. In Canada, there is a very important case going on. There is a man called Suresh who is the leading fund raiser for the LTTE who has been arrested. He is in custody, a long case is going on, where the argument of the Canadian Government is that he represents a terrorist organization, and the argument of the LTTE is that it is a National Liberation Organization. The outcome of that case is eagerly looked forward to.

Similarly, I understand that countries such as France and Germany, are getting

much more concerned about the activities of these groups, and so is the United States.

But, I think what finally tipped the scales in favour of this development on anti-terrorism measures, is the fact that various terrorist acts, not LTTE, occurred in many of those countries. In the United States there was the Oklahoma bombing, the suspected TWA sabotage, there was the Olympic Games incident. In Manchester, there were serious bombings. In Paris there are many bombings. In Tokyo there have been bombings. In Saudi Arabia there was the bombing of an American military base, and so on.

All this, I think, made it very clear to all these countries that they could no longer turn a blind eye to terrorism as being some- body else's problem. There is a very keen realization that terror- ism is indeed everybody's problem. That a terrorist act anywhere must become the permanent concern of everybody, everywhere. And that has led quite dramatically to a meeting at Lyons in France at Summit Level by Heads of State to enunciate principles on combating terrorism; then to the Paris declaration, shortly thereafter, actually enumerating in detail various provisions; then to action taken at the Sixth Committee UN General Assembly, last October, to draft a Convention of Terrorism, which was adopted and legal work on that is proceeding just now. So, I can say now that a number of these countries are bestirring themselves, and soon we will find domestic legislation being put in place in those countries, consistent with their international obligations under the various covenants and declarations.

So, I think we are all now in this boat together, and little Sri Lanka, having blown the whistle some time ago, I hope we are going to get even more co-operation and collaboration from our friendly countries.

One subject you mentioned in the midst of all these international covenants and agreements, was the matter of international fund raising by the LTTE. Do you have a feel about what the bulk of the expatriate Tamil community feels today, and how have you tried to reach them, with regard to the Devolution Proposals, and the dangers and all the horrors of terrorism in this country and else where. Have you tried to reach them, and if so what has been the result?

The effort to reach the expatriate Tamil community abroad directly, even by mail for instance, is a very complex operation, because we don't know the names. and

addresses of people, and many people won't want their names and addresses known. We can't approach the respective host governments to give us the names and addresses, we have to respect the privacy of all these people abroad. So we can only hope to reach them through the Internet, which we are now trying to build up, in order to counter the massive LTTE propaganda and disinformation that goes on, on a very professional scale worldwide. Our efforts to match them are not at all satisfactory at the moment. We are trying, there are constraints of money, personnel. It is very expensive to mount that kind of effective campaign in the Western countries, particularly. But we are trying. We have voice-casts in certain capital cities. We have a bulletin that goes out from this Ministry to our missions abroad. But, I must say that we can't really make contact with the individual members of the Tamil community abroad on any recognizable scale.



I am a strong believer in the concept of a Sri Lankan identity, and this is a concept that has been almost shattered during the last few decades. But I believe that it can be re-built.

Have you in your visits abroad or in statements made during your visits abroad, or in statements made by resident Tamils abroad, observed any change after the LTTE broke the talks and resumed fighting or after the Devolution Proposals were made the known?

I think during the period of the cessation of hostilities there was some evidence that sections of the Tamil community abroad, except those who were committed to the LTTE cause or diehards as it were, were wavering in their support for the LTTE, and also wavering in the quantum of subscriptions they were giving the LTTE at that

time. After the war resumed, it is difficult to make an accurate assessment, but I think there are fair grounds for believing that there are sections, perhaps sizable sections of the Tamil community abroad, who are disappointed that LTTE resorted to war again.

Because it is quite clear that the April 19, 1995 attack by the LTTE was totally unprovoked and a totally unilateral measure on their part, indicating that they were not interested in the talks going on at the time.

I believe that there are a large number of people in the Tamil community who feel that with the Devolution Proposals there is hope for a solution. But equally, I think many of them are waiting and watching to see what actually hap- pens because, as you know there is in the minds of many Tamil people a feeling that no Sinhala Government is actually going to deliver some meaningful political proposals in reality. From time to time there has been talk about it, going back over many decades. Now, there are many who believe that with this Government, and particularly with Her Excellency, there is a chance, perhaps the only chance, may be the final chance, but still they are waiting to see what actually happens. Therefore, if these proposals do go through, my feeling is that it will have a considerable impact on the Tamil community abroad, because at last it would be clear beyond any doubt that the Sinhala people led by the government of the day, and I hope very much with the cooperation of the Opposition, has finally decided that a just solution to this problem should be delivered.

How do you react to comments being made that you are in fact only a token Tamil in an almost near pan-Sinhala Government, which has been the practice in this country for a long time, and that as a token Tamil you cannot really speak on behalf of the Tamils?

I don’t claim to speak on behalf of the Tamils at all. Because in the first place I am not even an elected MP. So, I have absolutely no pretensions To spokesmanship on behalf of the Tamils. As to my being a token Tamil, that is perhaps an arguable point. I am at the moment the only Sri Lankan Tamil in the Cabinet. Mr Thondaman is an Indian Tamil. But I don’t look at it in that way. I look at it this way. That But I believe that it can be re-built. And, I have always believed that the time will come when we will have to look beyond ethnicity, sometimes I call it tribalism, and we have to forge a unity, under- standing and tolerance, in terms of which people of this country can live primarily as Sri Lankans. But that will never happen if there is a feeling of grievance on the part of sections of the people. This government accepts

the fact that Tamil people have had grievances over the decades, which have not been adequately addressed. Fitful starts have been made, but never completed. Sometimes, perceptions are very real. I think it is very wrong that it is only a perception, and is not well grounded. The perception is as real as anything else, and it behoves any government of the day, to see to it that all sections of the people who live in the country are made content, as best as it is humanly possible.

Mr Minister, to come to a subject that is of closer interest to "Business Today", the conditions of war have had a major, adverse impact on our economy. particularly, by frightening off foreign investors. How has the Foreign Ministry attempted to change this situation?

Well, the subject of attracting direct foreign investment is a matter that has many elements. Investors, naturally, will look for an environment that is conducive and congenial to their particular form of business. Investors are in business to make money. Investors are not charitable organizations. So, we have to try our best to create an internationally acceptable environment for business, and that we have set about doing in a variety of ways.

One is by giving a very attractive package of incentives, which I understand is as good as anything that is available in Asia. Then, we say that we have a very good work- force-literate, adaptable, ingenious, and many, many foreign investors have said so themselves. The main problems that they seem to have, unquestionably, are the fears and insecurity stemming from the ongoing war in certain parts of our country.

There are some investors who do not greatly worry about that. Just to give you one example, at random, take the Korean investors. Some of the Korean investors came here at the height of the JVP troubles. Literally, at the height of those troubles. Many of them have come now while this war is going on. Their philosophy is such that they are not particularly deterred by the security situation. They are quite adventurous as far as their overseas investments are concerned, they have their own domestic compulsions for relocating abroad, and so on. Other investors are more nervous. So, there is a constant effort being made, as best as we can, to assure, and reassure them that Sri Lanka is a safe place for investment.

One of the arguments that we use is that very soon, the whole of the South Asian market is going to open up, with a giant market in India in particular, and I for one take the view that our developments in SAARC are going well, and that our

preferential trade arrangement SAPTA, is moving quite well and that our move towards a free trade zone by the Year 2005 has gathered a certain degree of momentum. India's new good neighbour policy is going to produce good results. It has already brought good results for Sri Lanka and other neighbours, and India's own liberalization of her own economy is proceeding well, I think it is irreversible, all parties there seem to agree that it is the course for the future. And, I think therefore the whole climate in South Asia, the investment and economic environment is going to change. Sri Lanka will be a beneficiary of that.

So, these are the factors that count. The Foreign Ministry is constantly aware of these factors, and we try to do whatever we can. But, undoubtedly, until war is over and peace comes, we will have somewhat of a drag on our progress. Correspondingly, all foreign investors keep telling us that the moment we finish with the war and bring peace, there will be no holding Sri Lanka back.

Have you noticed any signs of boredom with regard to the situation in Sri Lanka, and the devolution or political solution pro- posed by the government, due to the long time it has taken for it to be passed into law. It is almost 2 years since it was presented. Do you see any decline of interest with this whole problem abroad, specially, among the countries that were initially supportive of the proposals?

No, I don't see any boredom abroad, particularly among the democratic countries, because they understand well that an important question like this has to be adequately debated throughout the country. You can't force solutions of this kind, particularly after so much acrimony, distrust between the communities, false starts made. many years ago, it is a problem be- devilled by all kinds of circumstances through the decades, and they do realize that this kind of thing has to be talked through; consensus has to emerge; there are lots of pockets of resistance, misunderstanding, lack of education so on. I don't notice any boredom at all there. But what they do say, not complain, is that it is a great pity that the main political parties, mainly the two major parties – the UNP and People's Alliance come together on this whole set of proposals and pass it jointly, because in any case a two-thirds majority is required in parliament, without the co-operation of the Opposition you won't get it, and why don't we somehow see to it that there is a bi-partisan approach. That point they constantly keep making.

It's a valid point. I for one would look forward very much to the day, I hope it's not far off, when the Opposition parties will see that this is a problem which must be

lifted out of the narrow compass of domestic, party or ideological political concerns. It is far too important for that. It is a chance that must be seized. Because, probably this is the first time in our post-independence his- tory, when any government has actually put proposals on the table.

There's been a lot of shadow boxing in the past with no results, but here's a government that has put the proposals and is prepared to back it.

I wish to make it absolutely clear that this government will not be deterred from proceeding with these proposals. Therefore, why can't everybody join and see them through, with whatever modifications that need to be agreed. Because my view is that there is enough credit to go around. I don't think any political party, I don't think the Opposition should feel that it's going to be done out of credit. That's not the way to look at it. There is enough credit to go around. And, the biggest credit for the Opposition is if they tell the people "yes, we are joining in this effort once and for all to solve this problem that has so ruined this country". And, they have an interest in doing it, because someday if they hope to come back to office, they must be able to say that we have cleared the decks of the biggest problem that this country ever faced. So I think it is a very narrow approach, an unnecessarily narrow approach not to see it like that. I think the broad approach has benefits for the Opposition itself on a purely pragmatic basis.



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