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by Gotabaya RAJAPAKSA

Security, reconciliation and development:

## Future challenges facing Sri Lanka

Secretary to the Ministry of Defence, Public Security, Law and Order, Gotabaya Rajapaksa delivering the Olcott Oration

The Olcott Oration is one of the annual events organised to commemorate the founder of Ananda College, Colonel Henry Steele Olcott. As a result of Col. Olcott's vision to promote the English medium of instructions for Buddhist students, Ananda College began its historic journey as the Buddhist English School in Maliban Street, in 1886, under the able stewardship of C.W. Leadbeater. The founding of this school can be considered a key milestone in the nationalist revival that introduced our cultural values into the formal education system despite colonial rule. This revival was influential in our struggle for independence, and, considering the role of Ananda in moulding many of the key individuals in recent events, one could even say that it was instrumental in the recent national victory over terrorism.

As a result of this victory, I stand before you today at a pivotal stage in our country's history. Sri Lanka is emerging from the shadow of a terrorist war that affected every part of our lives for decades. During those years, a deep-seated sense of uncertainty affected our prosperity, our economy, and even our social and cultural values. There was an inescapable veil of fear cast over our day-to-day lives. Following the defeat of the LTTE and the elimination of its core leadership during our historic military success earlier this year, this sense of unease and this veil of fear have finally begun to lift.

With the dawn of peace, Sri Lanka has a historic opportunity to consolidate the security of the nation; to heal old wounds and strengthen ties between the communities; and to revive our economy and recapture the decades of lost opportunities. When we reflect on the years when terrorism plagued our nation, it's important to realise that the true victory is not just in defeating the LTTE, but in regaining what we had lost, passing down the benefits of peace to our citizens,

and guiding our nation to its proper place in the world. Instead of falling into the traps of complacency, petty rivalry, and divisive politics that have so often been our downfall, we must unite as a nation and build a better future together. It is only then that the true reward of our victory over terrorism will be fully realised.

We have several challenges ahead of us today. We need to ensure that our country is secure from all future threats. Consolidating the peace that was achieved after so much sacrifice has to be a key priority. Similarly, we must use the window of opportunity granted by the end of terrorism to ensure reconciliation between our communities. Together with these goals, we must also engineer an economic revival that uplifts the standard of living of all our people. These challenges of security, reconciliation and development must be our focus from now on.

Although the LTTE has been defeated, it is important to note that it is mainly the military wing that has been dismantled. Their vast international network of sympathisers and criminal associates who funded and facilitated their separatist ambitions, as well as some of their military cadres, are still operating outside Sri Lanka. It is only when these elements have also been defeated that we can claim to have truly secured our nation. To prevent the LTTE raising its head again, we should act now and act decisively to bring about their defeat.

Bringing about the permanent defeat of separatism remains a top priority of the President and the Government of Sri Lanka. Several initiatives have been taken in this regard. These include the strengthening of relationships with key foreign nations and the collaboration of our intelligence services with their counterparts in other parts of the world.

These efforts enabled us to capture Kumaran Pathmanadan, the newly appointed leader of the LTTE, within two months of the defeat of the terrorists in Sri Lanka.

We need to continue these initiatives if we are to destroy the LTTE's international network and ensure the confiscation of their assets.

From the very beginning, strengthening relationships with our key allies remained a top priority of the President. The relationship developed over the past four years with our closest ally, India helped us in many ways in our war against terrorism. Having their support greatly helped reduce the pressure mounted by other nations, which allowed us to proceed with our humanitarian operations unhindered. It is very important that we strengthen this key relationship even further in the years to come.

Significant support was also received from other key allies due to the efforts of President and the Government to strengthen our long-standing bilateral ties. They, too, helped us withstand the pressure being directed by the international community to leave the war unfinished.

These countries also provided us vital material assistance towards the war effort, when barriers were put in place that prevented our obtaining military hardware from our Western allies.

Although it had been virtually ignored in the past, South East Asia was another region we focused on. The close ties we developed with this important region helped us counter and obstruct the LTTE's activities there.

However, there is still a lot more to be done, and developing these relationships even further will be vital to our efforts to permanently dismantle the LTTE's international network.

If this task is to be achieved successfully, we also need to focus on countering the propaganda offensives still being launched by LTTE sympathisers around the world. This propaganda effort, together with the petty electoral politics of key Western States, have distorted the view some countries have of our war against terrorism.

It is essential that the West understands that Sri Lanka's war against terrorism is a little different from theirs; the LTTE used many of the same networks as other international terrorist groups; they perfected the use of suicide attacks as a tactical tool; they operated extortion networks in other nations to fund their separatist ambitions.

When taken together with their complete disregard for the lives of innocent civilians, it should be clear that there is little philosophical difference between terrorist groups the world over. Instead of accepting the propaganda offensive of terrorist sympathisers in their corridors of power, the countries that are still mounting pressure on Sri Lanka should understand that we all face similar challenges. Instead of criticising our success, they should learn from it.

### **Strengthening relationships**

Strengthening our relationships with these countries and countering the efforts of the pro-terrorist lobbies there are significant challenges facing our nation today.

The financial network of the LTTE was allowed to operate in some of these countries for far too long, and the funds they raised allowed the terrorists to equip themselves with large stockpiles of sophisticated weaponry - stockpiles that are still being discovered in our clearing operations today. Although we will make sure that the LTTE cannot raise its head again in Sri Lanka, the continued existence of these financial networks is a danger to our country. Persuading western countries that they must help Sri Lanka more meaningfully to combat this threat requires us to unite as a nation and speak with one voice, instead of being weakened and divided by petty considerations.

In addition to taking care of the external threats that could arise from the LTTE's international network, the challenge of ensuring our security includes our taking preventative measures within Sri Lanka.

The capabilities of our Defence Forces need to be further strengthened by maintaining high standards of professionalism and sophistication so that our service personnel can carry out their duties even more effectively. The surveillance and rapid response capabilities of the Sri Lanka Navy have to be enhanced to protect our entire coastline and make sure that no arms or personnel can infiltrate our territory.

A key area that needed attention during the course of our operations, our intelligence services, needs to be further strengthened as we seek out and dismantle the LTTE's network within Sri Lanka. It is also very important that the terrorist cadres who surrendered or were detained are rehabilitated so that their thinking changes and they see the propaganda they were fed by the LTTE for the lies they were. This rehabilitation will allow them to re-enter society as productive citizens in the long term.

Finally, we need to make sure that the unsafe areas in the North are cleared swiftly, and that the former victims of the LTTE's regime are resettled in their villages as soon as possible. Once normality returns, and these people see the far higher quality of life and opportunities available to them following the LTTE's

defeat, we will be able to win their hearts and minds.

This is a critical challenge that needs to be successfully met if we are to fully secure the peace we have won. Reconciliation between the communities is vital, as is the establishment of a democratic framework and institutions in areas formerly under the LTTE's occupation.

There is a lot of agitation in the international community as well as within Sri Lanka regarding the situation of the internally displaced. This range from well-meaning concern to absurd conspiracy theories directed against the Government by pro-LTTE lobbyists in the West. I want to make it very clear that we are doing the best we can to speed up the processes involved.

However, it would be an irresponsible act to resettle the IDPs in unsafe areas. When the LTTE was defeated, they strewed landmines over vast areas, hoping to make them unsafe for years if not decades.

Through the concentrated effort of the Government together with assistance from allied nations, we are confident that these areas can be de-mined and made safe for people much sooner than that. As more areas are cleared, the displaced will be resettled in their towns and villages; already almost half the IDPs have been sent back.

There are other responsibilities of the Government involved here, apart from mine clearing and resettlement.

During the last three decades, although the Government continued to provide normal services including electricity, water, health and education to the North, there was not enough development there. The LTTE did not use these resources properly, and the Non Governmental Organisations that were supposed to be engaged in development work were ineffective. As a result, the infrastructure of this region, including its road networks, electricity grids, telecommunication networks, irrigation channels etc. are underdeveloped. A lot of attention needs to be paid to upgrading this infrastructure if the region is to prosper.

#### Agriculture sector

Agriculture, which has been ignored for so long despite its high potential, is another area that needs a great deal of work. Therefore, together with our de-mining programs, these efforts to develop infrastructure, facilitate economic growth and raise the standard of living in this region are of the utmost importance.

There is another pressing requirement that needs to be discussed as far as the liberated areas are concerned, and that is the return of democracy.

Under the LTTE's occupation, the people in these areas lived under a brutal fascist dictatorship. Their lives were not their own. They had no freedom. Their children - often as young as thirteen or fourteen - were abducted from their classrooms, conscripted as soldiers, and robbed of their innocence. No one had the ability to protest. The people could not speak freely, and they had no one to speak up on their behalf. Over the years, most of the moderate Tamil voices, most of the progressives people and the humanists, had been silenced by the LTTE. The parallel state that it tried so hard to display, with its so-called judicial system and its so-called police force, was an illusion designed to hide the brutality of their de facto rule. To usher the victims of the LTTE to a true democracy is another critical challenge for the Government today. Facing it successfully will be essential as far as both reconciliation and national security are concerned.

Some of those looking at the present situation in Sri Lanka are quick to criticise the Government for not acting quickly enough. They expect change to happen overnight, and they ignore the hard facts of reality that have always shown us that true change is only possible with wise planning, diligence, hard work, and time.

A good example of what is possible is the Eastern Province. At the time it was liberated, despite the clear intention of the Government to return it to normality as soon as possible, there were complaints by the diaspora and the international community that not enough was being done soon enough. There were over a 150,000 internally displaced people waiting to be resettled. There were armed paramilitary groups on the streets and there was talk of children being conscripted by them. There were complaints regarding restrictions on fishing, and complaints about restrictions on movement. There were allegations of abductions and human rights violations.

There was criticism that there weren't enough policemen who could speak Tamil in the region. All this was just two years ago. But if you go to the Eastern Province today, as thousands of local and foreign tourists do on a daily basis, you will see that each and every one of these problems have been overcome.

All paramilitary groups carrying weapons have been disarmed; they no longer have military offices in the towns or armed personnel on the streets.

Instead, encouraged by the President's determination to restore democracy as soon as possible, they are working towards a better tomorrow through peaceful, democratic means. Their military offices have become political offices; several former cadres are representatives of various local political organisations; and there is representation through the offices of the Chief Minister, the Provincial Council, Local Government and Municipal authorities. The child conscripts have been handed over to UNICEF and are now being rehabilitated. There are no more complaints of abductions or human rights violations; the Sri Lanka Police and the Defence Forces have restored law and order. Tamil speaking policemen have been recruited, trained, and are now active in the police stations. Freedom of movement has been established; people go about their day-to-day lives without fear. Even the security checkpoints and roadblocks have been reduced to a minimum level.

In addition to overcoming the problems that existed, the Government has worked very hard to bring about economic development in the East. The infrastructure has improved tremendously: there are brand new roads, bridges and communication networks; there is proper electricity, water supply, drainage and sewerage. The Government has helped the fisheries industry, even assisting the fishermen to buy boats; it has launched important initiatives to develop agriculture. Very recently, the President opened a large school in Vakarai, built with the help of UNICEF.

### **Eastern province**

Normalisation has not only set in, but the Eastern Province has transformed into a vibrant part of Sri Lanka, rich with the promise of future growth. All of this was achieved in just two years. That is the track record of our Government, and examining this, instead of engaging in wild speculation should be the order of the day.

We are confident that the same result can be obtained in the North, and that reconciliation and national unity will be achieved in due course. Admittedly, there is still a lot that needs to be done to heal the wounds of the past and regain the trust that has been shaken, and we are aware that progress will not always be

smooth. But we can be encouraged by the progress made in terms of national reconciliation in the South over the last several years; particularly in the Western Province and in Colombo, which is a shining example of communal harmony. Despite all the propaganda to the contrary, by the LTTE and the separatist forces, the majority of Tamils in Sri Lanka live outside the North and East.

Colombo is a thriving multicultural commercial hub where all communities live in harmony; it has a large Tamil population that has produced many of Sri Lanka's leading professionals and businessmen. They lead lives of distinction in a supportive multicultural environment where there is no communal tension. We are very confident that this multicultural harmony can be achieved throughout all of Sri Lanka. As our nation emerges from the shadow of terrorism into the bright light of peace and prosperity, this is the reality that will prevail.

Another very important step remains to be taken as we embark on this journey. That is the revival of our economy on a scale that enables our prosperity through rapid growth and development; a resurgence that uplifts the standards of living of each and every Sri Lankan. It is vital that the rural masses as well as the urban populace reap the full benefit of the peace we have achieved; economic development must reach every city, town and village. The Government is doing its part by developing the infrastructure and the facilities that are needed for this resurgence to take place. It is also investing in areas where the private sector has not yet ventured. The domestic private sector, from small businesses and entrepreneurs to large diversified groups, must invest in all sectors of our economy.

The recent instructions of the President for the State Banks to lower interest rates is another step towards encouraging investment and facilitating this revival. We also need to invite the tourists back and bring in foreign investment. We need our educated expatriates, who left Sri Lanka years ago to seek prosperity elsewhere, to return and work for the betterment of their motherland. For these things to happen, it is essential that we all unite at this pivotal stage in our history, and speak with one voice to say that the uncertainty is no more; to say that we are safe; to say that we are ready to create a bright and prosperous future for all our people, irrespective of race, religion or politics.

Making maximum use of peace to unite as a nation, to bring about the development and prosperity that this country richly deserves, and to reap the rewards of peace, is the responsibility of all our citizens. That is why, in closing, I wish to invite all patriotic Sri Lankans to come together, to put their differences aside, and work towards this resurgence as one people. This is our duty to our motherland, and we must not let her down."