



SRI LANKA

Address by

Her Excellency Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga
President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka

at

the High-level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly
of the United Nations

New York
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(Please check against delivery)

Mr. President,
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen

May I at the outset extend our sympathy and solidarity to the people and the Government of the United States of America as they begin reconstruction and rehabilitation, following the recent Hurricane disaster on the Gulf Coast. We do so while recalling the generous and spontaneous response of the people and the Government of the United States, and so many member States of the United Nations, the UN and other international agencies when the Tsunami waves hit Sri Lanka last December.

Mr. President,
I had the honour to deliver my first address to this august Assembly in my capacity as the President of Sri Lanka at the historic Session in 1995 when the United Nations celebrated its 50th Anniversary. It is a distinct pleasure therefore, to revisit this forum ten years later. More so because we commemorate this year, both the 50th Anniversary of Sri Lanka's UN Membership, and the 60th Anniversary of the United Nations. It is time to take stock, and remain focussed with a view to moving forward. We have a substantial unfinished agenda and new challenges to deal with.

Mr. President
The United Nations is the most representative universal body, that can legitimately seek common solutions to common problems, that are acceptable to our diverse membership. As recognized by the High Level Panel and the Secretary-General in his report "In larger freedom: towards development, security and human rights for all", the United Nations, despite its many achievements, and because of its great potential, has to do more to keep pace with the changes that have occurred in the world since its inception sixty years ago. Reform of the UN must be in the multilateral interest and embrace all facets of the UN's activities.

The vision that we will adopt at this summit should indeed be decisive. It should serve as a roadmap which would catalyse further change and reform. Reform must affect our entire agenda, the mechanisms we adopt to implement it and the resources we make available. It cannot be piecemeal and must benefit all member States equitably. The integrated approach to security, development and human rights is the key to this.

Mr. President,

Allow me to re-visit an issue of current significance — global terrorism — taken up both in 1995 and in the year 2000, where action remains pending internationally, even as we in Sri Lanka are trying out an integrated approach to resolve our problem in the midst of great challenge.

More than 10 years ago, my Government launched a bold policy of a negotiated settlement in place of conflict, and a federal solution as against a separate State. With the support of a broad multi-ethnic coalition of parties I proceeded to talk with the rebel armed group the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) about ending the conflict, and discuss with all the parties in parliament about a new more inclusive, political Constitution that would share power with all communities. This policy shift laid the ground work for a new approach to fighting terrorism and the peace process in my country, that simultaneously addressed Security, Development and Human Rights.

We engaged the rebels in a ceasefire that we hoped would save lives and allow people, particularly those living in the conflict-affected areas to live and work more freely. This we believed would have a positive influence on the overall climate for peace, thus improving security. We increased development work in conflict-affected areas because we believed that all of our citizens, irrespective of where they live, what ethnicity they belong to, or even who they are forced to live under, must have access to health, education and jobs. And we believed this would give the LTTE an opportunity to engage in useful and constructive work that may benefit the people directly, rather than preparing for conflict.

And we took a number of steps to improve the human rights of all the people of the country, with a special focus on the concerns of ethnic communities who have not been fully included in the past.

As part of the peace process, successive Governments have given the LTTE all facilities as a party to negotiations, including access to foreign entities and Governments, at times using the good offices of the facilitators — the Norwegian Government, who have made considerable efforts to move the process forward under difficult circumstances. However, this process of engagement and accommodation does not seem to have persuaded this Group to move away from terrorism, as is evidenced by their recent killing of my Foreign Minister, their continued recruitment of child soldiers and their killings of political rivals.

Such actions of an armed group engaged in a peace process tests the commitment of a vast majority of the people of the country, to pursuing a negotiated settlement. Although we had the option of a military response, we have rejected it. And instead are choosing a different approach — to reiterate our commitment to a ceasefire and to a political solution, whilst reviewing the previous approach towards negotiating with this Group. This review has begun with a call to the international community to help exert real pressure on the LTTE, in order that we can engage them in a process that will lead to a lasting peace, bringing about democracy and human rights.

Mr. President,

The challenge we face in Sri Lanka is not unique. Vulnerable democracies which have undertaken bold, political initiative to address the root causes of terrorism and seek political solutions by engaging ruthless armed groups find themselves in a genuine dilemma as to how to develop a credible and acceptable approach to such negotiations.

If a democratic State, which consistently conforms to international norms and laws and uses non-military means to address the problem of terrorism, weakens as a result of the activities of terrorists, chaos, and lawlessness will follow. Extremism, fundamentalism and tribalism will reign supreme. As a result, peace and security, within and among States, as well as universally accepted human rights norms and fundamental freedoms will suffer. It will also lead to weakening of the 'inter-Governmental system', which is the bedrock of this Organization. This 'inter-Governmental system' chain can only be as strong as its weakest link. It is therefore essential to strengthen collective ability of the system to combat and address terrorism.

In this regard, we must be absolutely clear that the engagement of armed non-state actors for peace making should not be done at the expense of the capability for democratic governance of a sovereign State that is conducting itself according to internationally accepted laws and norms. The UN and the international community can help in developing mechanisms that support States engaging in such peace process and sanction terrorist groups that undermine them.

Mr. President,

It is, therefore, timely for this Assembly to address the question of practical means to deny external access and support to such entities to sustain their military and fund raising activities that are detrimental to the ongoing peace processes. We hope that the mechanisms already put in place by the Security Council against such offending non-state actors will eventually represent an effective deterrent against such activities. In the absence of such measures, those groups may continue to engage in illicit financing and arms procurement whilst enjoying the political privileges gained through engagement in peace processes. This in turn will erode the credibility of all our peacemaking efforts including those of the United Nations, and years of work in codifying international legal and other measures against terrorism.

Even with rebel groups engaged in peace processes we must adopt procedures that reward genuine peace making on one hand, and impose sanctions on acts of terrorism on the other. Without this, vulnerable democracies will find it extremely difficult to launch and sustain effective negotiations with armed groups.

The Secretary General in his report to the current Summit has correctly observed that a small network of non-state actors and terrorists, have brought about new challenges before the international community. The forces of globalisation have aggravated this situation. Trans-national networks of terrorist groups have acquired global reach and made common cause in posing threats to democracy, peace and security within and amongst states.

Mr. President,

If we are to fight global terrorism, poverty and disease, we must take an integrated approach to security, human rights and development, both nationally and internationally. We must act together as a UN system to support and strengthen States that are addressing these challenges comprehensively. This would form an essential part of the mission of the UN for the next decade.