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வெளிநாட்டு அமைச்சு  
FOREIGN MINISTRY

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## Speech by the Hon. Foreign Minister Prof. G. L. Peiris in Parliament, 5 October 2021

Mr. Speaker,

I rise today to inform this House of our efforts in the international sphere on behalf of Sri Lanka. While we, as a government, are combatting the current pandemic and dealing with the consequences of economic contraction due to its worst effects, I would like, with your permission, to highlight another aspect of our approach to governance and national wellbeing. At a policy level, we must stress our President's commitment to full, candid and open engagement with fellow nation states. Our vistas of prosperity and well-being cannot be achieved in isolation. We all share a common future and owe it to succeeding generations to do the best we can to secure and guarantee that brighter future.

In this vein, Mr Speaker, I would refer the attention of this House to recent international engagements with our international partners and friends. While we maintain a dialogue with diplomatic representatives in Sri Lanka and with bilateral partner-countries accredited to Sri Lanka, we also seek to engage at an international level - across geographical and other boundaries. We seek, Mr Speaker, to address the widest possible audience at every given opportunity. This is not only to counter or avoid critical comment, but also, to make our voice heard on the global stage. We do this with bilateral partners, organizations, regional groupings and especially at multilateral fora. We are also imbued with a sense of openness, a willingness to absorb and learn from others' perceptions and real-life experience in dealing with the myriad challenges we face - individually and collectively.

Mr. Speaker, we are a relatively small, Island state. However, we are also a nation with a proud history and complex background. We have much to learn from the world but, at the same time, much to share. Our multifaceted diversity is not a social experiment but one that we live with on a day-to-day basis. It causes tensions - from time to time - but we continue to coexist with a sense of fraternity and goodwill. We emphasized that during the three recent high level engagements in Italy, Geneva and New York by His Excellency the President, the Hon Prime Minister and myself. These events provided critical platforms for Sri Lanka to express solidarity with the international community on important global issues of common concern to all countries and also to project Sri Lanka's own perceptions in this regard. These recent exchanges enabled us to interact with leaders and policy-makers at the highest levels internationally.

These engagements provided an important opportunity to address different aspects of what the United Nations Secretary General called the "greatest cascade of crises of our times", after a long gap in physical connection due to the pandemic.

His Excellency President Gotabhaya Rajapaksa in his statement at the 76th UN General Assembly in New York, stated that Sri Lanka is fully engaged with international partners in order to combat the pandemic and the consequent economic fallout as well as existential crises

resulting from climate change. Our engagement is aimed at safeguarding our people from the worst effects of these global challenges.

Equally importantly for Sri Lanka, these visits provided us with the opportunity to address the international community at bilateral and multilateral levels regarding recent domestic developments and difficulties we have faced in Sri Lanka on critical national issues related to human rights and reconciliation and to correct any inaccurate or biased perceptions.

I concluded my statement to the Human Rights Council in Geneva by stating that:

"We are open in acknowledging our challenges and, as a responsible and democratic government, we are committed to achieving tangible progress on the entire range of issues relating to accountability, reconciliation, human rights, peace and sustainable development."

We have taken the position that we do recognise the need to address these challenges and, in that effort, we need to be open and responsive to constructive criticism and international overtures made in good faith. That being said, Mr Speaker, we do not need to compromise our independence, national sovereignty nor our self-respect as a nation.

I myself had the opportunity to personally discuss with Foreign Ministers of a number of key countries, as well as address gatherings which are of direct relevance in Sri Lanka such as the Commonwealth, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the Community of Democracies and the Human Rights Council in Geneva. Our continued and vigorous efforts to place on record our experience, perceptions and position demonstrates this approach of openness, candour and willingness to engage. We reaffirmed our commitment to democratic norms, ideals and commonly shared values from the standpoint of a nation consistently adhering to this system for nine decades; as one of the oldest representative democracies in Asia.

Of critical importance, Mr Speaker, is to make these efforts in the expectation that real and tangible benefits will accrue to our people. The main focus at this year's UN General Assembly was on matters that affect all countries of the world big and small, such as the pandemic, climate change, the global food situation, the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals and the need for transition to clean energy. It is very clear that these interconnected issues which are global in nature, affect the daily lives of all Sri Lankans.

Sri Lanka needs to participate in this dialogue with the international community in resolving these fundamental issues. What is also clear is that we need to reach out to a very broad range of stakeholders domestically and internationally such as scientists, economists, the private sector, leaders in technology, youth as well as primary producers of food. This represents a cross-section of the local and global community, at various levels and across diverse fields of endeavour. As His Excellency the President stated, "The economic impact of the pandemic has been especially severe on developing countries. This has placed the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals at considerable risk."

This, Mr Speaker, is the great challenge that faces us collectively. It is no empty nor idle boast to state that Sri Lanka has taken leadership in critical spheres and is at the helm of some key aspects of environmental activism. As a country vulnerable to extremes of climatic change, our forthcoming engagement at the COP26 in the United Kingdom will only underline our commitment to our common, interdependent future.

Regarding climate change, for instance, we owe it to ourselves, to the young and to the future generations of our people, to reverse the shortcomings of the past and to repair and rebuild a healthy planet. In this effort, we have joined hands in solidarity with the rest of the world and our President announced our position at the UN General Assembly as well as at the High-Level Dialogue on Energy.

His Excellency the President stated that for these many reasons Sri Lanka's engagement this year with the international community and the United Nations was timely and essential.

He stated that Sri Lanka has contributed to these global efforts through the Colombo Declaration on Sustainable Nitrogen Management and our recognition as a Commonwealth Blue Charter Champion. We have pledged to join global efforts to become a carbon neutral country by 2050 and to obtain 70% of our energy resources from renewable sources by 2030. Our domestic efforts to promote sustainable agriculture, increase forest cover and to combat water and plastic pollution were generally welcomed.

Our presence internationally and at the General Assembly was vital, because in order to reach these ambitious targets, in the years to come, we need to have significant access to technology, financial cooperation and assistance. We will reiterate these messages at COP 26 later this year.

Mr Speaker, the other great challenge we need to overcome is that of social cohesion and unity. In the absence of a truly integrated nation devoid of internecine strife, bitterness and rancour, we need to build bridges rather than walls. We need to reach out to all segments of society and repay the trust and confidence placed in the government at successive elections in 2019 and 2020. In my statement to the UN Human Rights Council in September I referred to our initiatives to reinvigorate and resuscitate national efforts to promote reconciliation - sorely needed after a protracted conflict. As President Rajapaksa said in New York:

"Fostering greater accountability, restorative justice, and meaningful reconciliation through domestic institutions is essential to achieve lasting peace."

I adverted to the several national institutions that we support in this effort to sustain and build upon the hard-won peace of 2009. In particular, Mr Speaker, I stressed the importance of The Office on Missing Persons (OMP) which, as its core function, is finalizing the list of missing persons in collaboration with other agencies with a view to granting and enabling closure for a number of grieving families. In tandem, the Office for Reparations (OR) has processed 3775 claims this year alone. We have supported the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR) in its effort to reenergize the implementation of its 8 point action plan. We have continued to support the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka in carrying out its mandate to protect and promote human rights in Sri Lanka. We pointed out that a national steering committee on SDG 16 is working towards enhancing peace, justice and strong institutions. Over and above this, His Excellency was pleased to empower a Commission to take stock of the various efforts aimed at reconciliation and accountability over the past several years and arrive at a conclusion and recommendations, which, we expect, will drive these processes going forward. We are doing all this with sincerity and seriousness of purpose to enable a brighter, more prosperous and peaceful Sri Lanka for succeeding generations of sons and daughters of our soil.

Our Prime Minister, the Hon. Mahinda Rajapaksa, in his address to the G20 Inter-Faith Dialogue recently concluded in Bologna, Italy, stressed the importance of transcending barriers based on religion and other socio-cultural differences. The Prime Minister's participation at the Interfaith Forum in Bologna further highlighted the important role of education and youth in fostering domestic peace and harmony. This Inter-faith forum was an appropriate moment to reflect on the diversity in our region, exemplified in Sri Lanka, and to reemphasize that this diversity is the bedrock of our strength as a nation. He stated that "rising above these differences, we have responded to the challenge of building a sense of mature nationhood, utilizing all the different communities".

Our message, through you, Mr Speaker, to the nation and the world is that we seek to celebrate our diversity while forging a sense of oneness - a Sri Lankan consciousness and identity - that will be a source of strength rather than weakness as we address the several local and global challenges.

As the Prime Minister said in his address in Bologna: "Reconciliation is a critical need of our time. Conflicts and escalating tensions are all too evident around us. Peace and stability come from healthy relationships with all who live in our countries, including those with whom we have deep disagreements. Here, again, our religion teaches us that hatred is not conquered by hatred but by love alone. Rather than dwell on grievances derived from the past, we must focus on the present, the need for harmony with points of view different from our own, and the inspiring new frontier which awaits us all if we forge the urgently needed links of brotherhood and understanding."

I wish, in passing, to stress the role of civil society in these efforts. Representatives of civil society are an integral part of the solutions we wish to devise. They are, Mr Speaker, not a manifestation of the problem but an essential component of the resolution of our problems. There have been concerns raised about the supposed government initiatives to stifle NGO activities in Sri Lanka. Nothing could be further from the truth. We are actively engaged with the community and are seeking to harness their capabilities and undoubted capacity in support of reconciliation and with regard to SDG16 processes. I stated this quite clearly in my address to the Human Rights Council in Geneva and I want to assure this House that we consider them a valuable and a valued partner in our efforts for the betterment of our people.

One of the principal challenges to this unified sense of purpose, Mr Speaker, is extremism and its progeny, terrorism. We as a representative government, are taking all measures in close collaboration with international partners to ensure human security in its widest sense. There are several considerations of collective national and international security that must be taken into account in this context. The guaranteeing of individual freedoms and liberties is not antithetical to the concept of national security. Indeed, it is a stable and secure international and domestic order that enables the enjoyment of individual rights. Like the many-headed Hydra of classic myth and legend, extremism and terrorism crop up elsewhere when one movement is defeated in one country or region. We have seen this in numerous instances. In an interconnected world, such movements and extremist ideologies make nonsense of previously impenetrable national boundaries. Our response, Mr Speaker, must be equally dynamic, adaptive and resilient. During my exchanges with ministerial colleagues from friendly countries in New York and elsewhere, we have placed a sharp focus on close cooperation, intelligence gathering and sharing and collective action to address issues of funding and interdiction of these criminal networks.

As President Rajapaksa stressed in his address to the UNGA:

"Terrorism is a global challenge that requires international cooperation, especially on matters such as intelligence sharing, if it is to be overcome. Violence robbed Sri Lanka of thousands of lives and decades of prosperity in the past half century.

My Government is committed to ensuring that such violence never takes place in Sri Lanka again.

We are therefore acting to address the core issues behind it."

In conclusion, Mr Speaker, I wish to reassure the people of Sri Lanka that we will not rest in our efforts to garner the best outcomes for the nation through continued, proactive engagement with the international community. I will endeavour, in the coming months, to regularly inform the Hon Members of the House and the nation at large of our endeavours in this regard.

I thank you, Mr Speaker.

