

Sri Lanka's renaissance and enduring challenges

Prof Rohan Gunaratna

International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, Singapore

ISRKGunaratna@ntu.edu.sg

Thank you very much Mr Weeratunga, Secretary Defence, Mr Gotabaya Rajapakse, Service Commanders, ladies and gentlemen. At the very beginning, let me pay a tribute to the Kotelawala Defence University because this Defence University both as an Academy and as a University produced some of the best and the finest war fighters. Not only war fighters did this university produce, but also it produced the men of quality that ensure the transition of Sri Lanka from a country that was affected by a 30 year protracted war into a country of tremendous stability and peace. And that transition ladies and gentlemen is what is crucial because if you look at Iraq, if you look at Afghanistan, in all those conflict zones, we saw that there was intervention, and the Americans declared victory in Iraq and in Afghanistan, but within a year violence returned. It is because in Sri Lanka the development platform that was created in the North East had a very robust security layer. In fact, the development platform had a security platform that was integrated with it. As we move forward I believe that it is paramount for Sri Lanka to ensure that the political platform that is going to be placed in the Northeast should have a similar security layer. If there is no security layer, certainly this country will once again suffer instability. It is because if you look at the recent history of Sri Lanka, going back to the last 30 years, extremism and terrorism emerged in Sri Lanka because the politicians in the North and the South, they ethnicized the Sri Lankan population, made Sinhalese think as Sinhalese the Tamils as Tamils. And a very virulent form of Tamil nationalism emerged in the North of Sri Lanka. In fact, I can share with you that for that emergence of that ethno-centric Tamil nationalism, it has its roots in Tamil Nadu. And to this date, there are extremist forces in Tamil Nadu that are very closely linked with the LTTE and increasingly with the TNA and other organizations that still maintain second homes in Tamil Nadu. So it is paramount as Sri Lanka moves forward from development towards political engagement that we ensure that that security and that stability remain.

I also want to share with you that there are two narratives about Sri Lanka. One is a narrative that we heard from Mr Weeratunga today – One of economic prosperity, of stability; one of being able to hold elections; one of being able to travel anywhere in Sri Lanka today. Sri Lanka is one of the safest countries in the world, and I want to tell you that certainly of the South Asian countries. Sri Lanka is perhaps one of the three countries that are not affected

by terrorism and extremism. If you look at Pakistan, if you look at India, if you look at even the Maldives, the forces of extremism are raising their heads and in Bangladesh, forces of terrorism. And I want to say that it is paramount to maintain that security layer. Without that security layer, without that eternal vigilance on the part of the law enforcement, security intelligence services and the military forces that are now playing a frontline role in the economic development of the Northeast, we may not be able to maintain that stability in the long-term. So I want to pay a tribute not only to those war fighters of Sri Lanka, those who are fortunate are alive with us, but there were many who passed away including very close friends, for example, the first military officer to die in the Sri Lankan conflict Lt. Vass Gunawardana, who led the 44 Bravo team, was my classmate; we grew up together for ten years at Ananda. So I want to share with you that many of those who were with us, they're not with us. So you're very fortunate. And also among you there are many who still have shrapnel injuries to your bodies, and I think that we are a very fortunate generation to have survived that thirty years. And it is so important in the next few years for us to ensure, as Sri Lanka moves from that phase of development to political engagement, that that security layer remains. Globally, I want to tell you that the western concept of security is that there must be the continuity of security in conflict zones after the conflicts have ended. But unfortunately in practice it has been very difficult for them to implement that, and that is why in Iraq and Afghanistan after victory was declared by the allied forces, insurgency and terrorism emerged. The Americans after having intervened in Iraq in 2003, they withdrew. To this date Iraq continues to burn. And Afghanistan, Americans will withdraw in 24 months leaving behind very small drawn Special Forces and training capability, but once again they have not been able to bring about that stability. So Sri Lanka was able to bring about that stability because of three principle reasons. And I want to share why that is. That is because those who created the concepts for defeating the LTTE, they remained in office after the end of the war. Of course the principal architect of the main strategy that defeated terrorism in Sri Lanka, Mr Gotabaya Rajapakse, the Secretary of Defence, he remained to ensure that vigilance was maintained. I still recall that he did not invite only the Army, Navy, Air Force; but he invited the Police, Civil Defence, Security Intelligence Services and also the developmental agencies, a number of agencies to

participate in that enterprise, so that there would be very rapid development, there would be rapid humanitarian assistance that was provided in May of 2009. I think it is because the military itself handled the transformation of Sri Lanka at the end of the war.

I want to say that Sri Lanka went through three phases. The first phase was very rapid humanitarian assistance. The humanitarian phase itself involved two very crucial components. One is the re-integration of 283,000 civilians that fled from the LTTE controlled area to the Sri Lankan security forces controlled area. Within two and a half years, everyone, each one of those 283,000 people were re-integrated. It is a remarkable achievement for a small country which is not a rich country, a county like Sri Lanka to do – If you look at similar cases we have seen those IDPs in those conflict zones, they still remain – And I think that there was very swift action. That is because the civilian agencies worked very closely with the military agencies.

The second aspect is about 12,000 LTTE cadres surrendered. Many of them were fighters. They had fought. They had gone to villages and conducted massacres. They had come to Colombo and placed bombs. We have forgotten a lot of these. But, I want to share with you that instead of prosecuting them, the Government decided to have a restorative justice model rather than a punitive model. Sri Lanka had a very Sri Lankan approach which is largely driven by the ideals of Buddhism and of Hinduism, and even of the form of Sri Lankan Christianity and Islam that we have in Sri Lanka, which is one not of revenge, one of compassion, one of unconditional compassion. And I want to share with you having interviewed probably almost all the senior leaders of the LTTE, of that 12,000 LTTE cadres, 11,600 have been released. None of them returned back to terrorism or extremism. Only about 4 or 5 went back to crime including one crime of passion. But they totally rejected the ideology and the philosophy of the LTTE. They realized that their lives have been wasted by extremism and terrorism. And I can share with you having interviewed many of them that they will not go back to terrorism. There may be some LTTE cadres not rehabilitated. Some LTTE cadres living overseas that may want to return to terrorism. But none of them will go back. That is because in those rehabilitation centers, they themselves realized what they had done is wrong. And Sri Lanka had a very humane approach. I remember USAID stopped giving the food to the LTTE cadres on Christmas day in 2009, and I was in Vavuniya in that rehabilitation centre to celebrate Christmas with those carders. Even though I am a Buddhist, I thought because there were many Christians there we must celebrate together, because this is the Sri Lankan spirit where we celebrate all religious festivals – and I remember General Daya Ratnayake was at that time the Commissioner General of Rehabilitation – Immediately, the Sri Lankan soldiers, the military provided the ration packs to those LTTE cadres. And I saw immediate connection where

one group that fought each other for so many years, they were giving food to each other and eating the same food. And there was this instant friendship. So I think that the humanitarian assistance component of rapid reintegration and of rehabilitation rather than punishment created the very first, the very essence of stability in Sri Lanka.

The third aspect is one of socio-economic development. Mr Weeratunga himself worked with Mr SB Divaratne and many other leaders including some of them who will speak today and tomorrow at this august symposium. They played a very important role in very rapid socio-economic development having travelled in Monaragala, in Badulla, in various parts in the South of Sri Lanka. I want to share with you that when I travelled in the North and the East, I think we have built our best roads in the Northeast, and that itself showed that Sri Lankan people had no problem. They recognize that we must develop those conflict affected areas. And today because of excellent transportation and communication systems, very little extremism is able to survive. If at all, ladies and gentlemen, extremism emerges in the Northeast, it is because some of the political parties and political leaders in the North will try to politicize, radicalize and mobilize a segment of the Sri Lankan people by virulent ethno-nationalism.

I believe that for future stability and security to be maintained, there needs to be greater interaction in the Northeast. As much as, we have a very significant percentage of the Sri Lankan Tamil community in the South, we need to ensure that the long term stability of this country depends that there are no specific ethno-linguistic regions in Sri Lanka, either in the South, either in the Centre, either in the East, either in the North. We must live as humans, as Sri Lankans. I think there are two or three things that we need to do for this. One is that we need to fix our education system. We cannot afford to have separate Muslim schools, Sinhala schools and Tamil schools. Because the moment we go to schools Sinhalese are taken to one side, the Tamils to another side and Muslim children to another side. So we have to integrate our communities to promote the Sri Lankan spirit. I think that if we do not create that Sri Lankan identity that we failed to create immediately after the independence. I still believe we did not create that platform and we should make use of the next few years to build that identity where extremism will not emerge.

Let me take one minute more of your time and share with you the challenges that Sri Lanka faces. One is to manage the threat of extremism. The threat of terrorism has gone away. Terrorism never takes root in this country. We can always suffer from one or two attacks. But sustained terrorism will never come to Sri Lanka because we built the security, the Intelligence, the law enforcement and the military agencies to such level, and such a level of alertness and vigilance. It will be impossible for terrorism to take

root at least as long as the current generation of leaders remains in significant positions. But, the challenge is largely coming from overseas. That is because the narrative we have needs to be changed. And I believe that we need to invest more time in Strategic Communications. We need to send the right signal, the right message out of Sri Lanka. I will just cite two instances. One is the most recent Asia Foundation study. They said something very interesting. They said that the Northeastern people, the Tamil people have a greater relationship, a friendship with the Police in Sri Lanka than even the Sinhalese. The

second is OCHA, one of the UN agencies in Sri Lanka. They issued a very significant study. In that they said that 76% of the Sri Lankan Tamils want the Sri Lankan Army, security forces to remain in the Northeast because of the pivotal role that they are playing in the economic development

and the maintenance of stability and security. So I believe that perhaps the greatest weakness of Sri Lanka at this point is to get our strategic communications right. And I would very much urge General Milinda Peiris to consider as his next new capability to create at KDU – a Strategic Communications Capability. He has the spirit of Sir John in him. When I watched the performance today or in the last symposium those beautiful cadets doing the rumba, samba, tango and the cha-cha-cha, and he is maintaining that spirit and ensuring the continuity of the tradition of Sir John, who had a zest for life and I hope that you will also consider this request.

I thank you very much, and let me once again thank the General, the Vice Chancellor and all of you for your contribution to create such a peaceful and such a beautiful Sri Lanka. Thank You.