

SCOPP Monthly Bulletin

April 2009

Editorial

Foreign observers of the Sri Lankan conflict visited in unprecedented numbers this month. Hardly a day went by without the Government welcoming a minister from one country or another. It was Open Day, and the rest of the world was invited to come and see for themselves.

It would be nice to believe that their concern was for the civilians being held by the LTTE, rather than the escalating protests in their national capitals. These ongoing demonstrations, held unashamedly under the LTTE flag, are hardly well meaning, determined as the participants are to keep the civilians with the LTTE. This is despite the LTTE killing them in increasing numbers, whether shooting them in the back or blowing them up as they attempt to escape, or compelling them to fight a losing battle.

As Minister Douglas Devananda told a United Nations conference on racism, the civilians should have been uppermost in their minds a long time ago. The international community ought to have spoken out before the LTTE forced the civilians to move with its cadres in their retreat out of first Mannar, then Kilinochchi and finally Mullaitivu, into the strip of beach that many of them occupy now.

But words are one thing and deeds another, and the Government is thankful for the practical steps being taken by the international community to support our efforts to care for victims of the LTTE. In particular, we are grateful for the aid being delivered, largely through United Nations agencies, to the civilians who have escaped from the LTTE, because of their own ingenuity or with the assistance of the Security Forces. Almost 200,000 people are now accommodated in welfare centres in Vavuniya, and they need all the help they can get.

Many of the visitors went up to the Vavuniya welfare centres to speak to the civilians, which helped to correct a number of misconceptions about the situation there. They acknowledged the hard work of the Government, while noting areas in which there is room for improvement.

United Nations agencies are supporting many other initiatives by the Government. One programme in which the Peace Secretariat has been playing a leading role this month is the development of a national policy on the reintegration of LTTE cadres, which is backed by the ILO. This effort, being made in anticipation of the imminent end of military operations against the LTTE, will make a real contribution to establishing a lasting peace in Sri Lanka.

The Government hopes that the foreign observers it welcomed, having come and seen for themselves, returned home determined to provide the kind of assistance that is needed. The time for empty criticism is over.



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About this bulletin

The Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process, otherwise known as SCOPP, is the governmental body set up to build confidence in a negotiated settlement to the conflict in Sri Lanka. This is the third issue of the SCOPP Monthly, launched to keep interested parties informed about the work done by the institution.

More information can be found on our website at www.peaceinsrilanka.org.

ILO backing for a national framework Reintegrating ex-combatants



As military operations in the North draw to a close, the need to consider the next steps for the people involved becomes ever more acute. Thousands have been conscripted by the LTTE over the years, while many others have joined up in the belief that fighting the State was the best option available, for themselves personally and for the Tamils in general. Reintegrating people like this into society is going to be a massive challenge, but it is work that the Government will have to do well if a lasting peace is to be achieved.

Several projects have been launched already. The Commissioner General for Rehabilitation manages three centres in Ambepussa, Welikanda and Tellippalai, on which the Peace Secretariat reported a few months ago.

International agencies are supporting these efforts, providing funds and technical assistance. The Ministry of Defence has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the IOM, planning to rehabilitate some 1,000 ex-combatants from the Eastern Province. Meanwhile, the Government has been collaborating with UNICEF, particularly focusing on child soldiers.

However, it is clear that a far more systematic approach will be needed to deal with the numbers expected in the days to come. As more people are sent for rehabilitation, more centres will be needed, and therefore more funds and projects, leading to the possibility of less effectiveness. Beyond a certain point, the requirements will be as much at the level of society. Providing care and support for individuals will be insufficient to ensure success.

The Government, therefore, decided to initiate a process to develop a national framework on reintegration. The idea is to lay down guidelines, in consultation with a range of experts, for State and other institutions to follow in their own programmes. Ms Dayani Panagoda, Policy Director at the Peace Secretariat, was asked to serve as national process manager.

Although efforts to reintegrate former cadres in Sri Lanka date back to the JVP insurgency of 1971, it was thought useful to look at experience in other places and situations, drawing

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on the very best of international knowledge on the subject. Discussions with the ILO were initiated, with the objective of learning from similar programmes facilitated by the organisation elsewhere.

The ILO agreed to support a three month process of consultations, which began with a workshop in Colombo at the end of March. Under the chairmanship of the Minister for Disaster Management and Human Rights, Hon Mahinda Samarasinghe, this brought together representatives of Government departments, the Armed Forces, the Police, NGOs, the Chambers of Commerce, United Nations agencies, and other interested parties, including Tamil politicians.

The keynote speaker was an ILO consultant, Mr Jose Manuel Pinotes. Originally from Portugal, he told the Peace Secretariat in an interview following the workshop that he considered himself a citizen of the world, having lived abroad for 25 years, working in more than ten different countries, from Bosnia to Liberia and East Timor.

Pinotes spoke at length about his experience in Angola. Echoing what has been said so many times about the LTTE, he explained that it had been completely impossible to negotiate with UNITA. Reintegration had been attempted after the signing of first one peace agreement then another, but UNITA only ever put forward their injured cadres. The group never had any

intention of giving up their weapons, and their leader said he would rather die than implement these pacts with the Angolan state. In much the same way that people fear that the conflict here will never come to a full stop while Prabhakaran lives, Pinotes said that it was only when the UNITA leader was killed that there was a chance for peace in Angola.

This was one of the lessons he shared with Sri Lankan policymakers at the workshop, that reintegration has to be done at the right time. It needs a supportive environment of peace, but also must not lag too far behind the end of hostilities. Preparation for this kind of work is time consuming, and Pinotes expressed his appreciation of the effort to come up with a national framework at this juncture, while the conflict is still raging in part of the country.

In Angola, once the Government had won on the battlefield, it immediately called the remaining senior members of UNITA to discuss a settlement, and a Memorandum of Understanding was signed. Some 100,000 UNITA fighters were reintegrated subsequently and, by the end of the process, 99% were back living with their families, 98% considered themselves reintegrated, and two thirds had some kind of income generating activity. It was a genuine success.

Highlighting the scope of the intervention needed, Pinotes explained the two phases of the reintegration process in Angola. The Government spent more than \$150 million on immediate support for the ex-combatants. This paid for accommodation in newly set up encampments for six months, their food, medical care and so on.

They were settled later in areas of their choice, and given an allowance for some time, plus basic equipment to help them start agricultural work and a few items to set up home. Another \$100 million or so was then contributed by international donors, to fund a variety of programmes designed to complete the reintegration process. Hundreds of schools, irrigation schemes and so on were renovated through on the job training schemes, Pinotes noted, as an example of the interventions undertaken.

Pinotes was upbeat about the prospects of an equally successful process in Sri Lanka. He told the Peace Secretariat that obviously, after a long conflict, tensions would remain for some time, but that success was possible if the right dynamic could be established. In Sri Lanka, he said, he felt a willingness to promote reconciliation. The key players have an open mind and are ready to discuss the issues and work out a solution, Pinotes said. This would bring results in the end.

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After useful discussions in the Colombo workshop, several groups were formed to continue the thinking process and come up with a paper setting out the issues to be addressed. These focused on immediate term rehabilitation, and longer term reintegration, both economic and social.

These groups continued their work during April, and a further group to look into particular issues that might arise with hardcore cadres was established. The latter group was also asked to make recommendations on support for the Commissioner General of Rehabilitation and his office.

To inform their deliberations, another workshop is being organised in May for the groups to meet and interact with a selection of former cadres already participating in rehabilitation programmes in the Eastern Province, as well as Tamil representatives of former militant groups who have joined the democratic process.

The draft national framework on reintegration is expected to be completed in June, when full consultations will be held with all interested parties, including civil society organisations.



Building new infrastructure



Steady progress has been made in restoring normalcy to the Eastern Province in the two years since military operations ended. Infrastructure is a priority, because of the damage and neglect suffered during the conflict, and various projects in the road, power, irrigation and other sectors are underway.

One of the key needs identified, soon after the local elections, by the Municipal Council in Batticaloa, headed by the young and dynamic Mayoress Sivageetha Prabhakaran, was for more sports and recreation facilities for young people. They felt that giving back to the youth their opportunities for sports and recreation would be very important in helping them move on from the long years of fighting. This would contribute to building a really sustainable peace in the Eastern Province, the Municipal Council decided.

Weber Stadium has been chosen as a flagship development for the area. Set amidst the historic St. Michael's Boys' School and St. Vincent's Girls' School, the old Fort and Kachcheri, as well as the new Courts and Municipal Council complexes, and overlooking the picturesque Batticaloa lagoon, Weber Stadium is used for a variety of purposes, from the Inter-Provincial Sports Festival held there with the collaboration of the Peace Secretariat in January, to leisurely cricket matches on Sunday afternoons. It has a distinct community feel to it.

During the conflict, Weber Stadium was under military control, and was shelled by the LTTE many times. It was also the scene of an audacious strike on diplomats from Germany, Italy and France during the Ceasefire Agreement, when the LTTE fired mortars at the helicopter in which they were traveling to Batticaloa to meet local politicians. It is therefore only recently that the youth of the area have been able to reclaim Weber Stadium for their own use.

In developing the facility, the Municipal Council felt that it would be useful to involve young people from other parts of the country, to bring them together with their compatriots in the Eastern Province. It could be an opportunity for the youth of the West and South to come to understand the situation being faced by their contemporaries elsewhere, the Municipal Council thought.

The Peace Secretariat has been facilitating this initiative, bringing in both private and public sectors. As the first step, arrangements were made with Moratuwa University for students of the Level 4 Bachelor of Architecture course to submit design proposals for the renovation. The Department of Architecture has been very supportive, agreeing to take it on as a special project at the beginning of the current semester.

To that end, five students visited Weber Stadium in late April, accompanied by the Peace Secretariat, to conduct a site review.

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They were assisted by enthusiastic members of the Municipal Council planning and engineering units, and were given access to existing site development plans, town sheets, digital mapping of the area and other useful documents to assist in their work.

Having returned to Colombo, the young people are leading five teams of ten in preparing designs, which will be competitively judged by a team of renowned architects and planners, as well as the Mayoress of Batticaloa. Efforts will be made to engage with Batticaloa youth and other users of Weber Stadium, to ensure that their needs and ideas are incorporated. Later on, the winners will be partnered with the Chamber of Construction Industry or an individual firm to ensure designs are workable. Holcim Lanka have agreed to share with the young people their concept of 'Sustainable Construction', pioneered by Holcim in Sri Lanka, in order to incorporate cutting edge ideas in the final plan.

One of the main challenges will be finding the money to implement the project. The Municipal Council has been discussing the refurbishment of the pavillion with the Football Federation, but further investment will be needed to develop Weber Stadium into a truly competitive sports venue for the Eastern Province.

The road to Elephant Pass

I had just left a military wedding in Kandy when the news came through of the regaining of Elephant Pass. It was the second I had attended in a month. The first was that of a former student, and I had welcomed the opportunity to meet others amongst my students, most of them for the first time since they had passed out from the Military Academy in Diyatalawa.

On that occasion, I had been pleased that I have an excellent memory, for faces, and for details of personality, even if I could not remember all the names. And the names too had rung a bell when we spoke, so I could picture the different intakes and ask about those who had made a good impression as cadets.

The association had begun over a decade previously, when the Military Academy had asked Sabaragamuwa University to initiate a degree course. There was much opposition, academics thinking that soldiers were not worthy of degrees, and military men thinking that academic qualifications would be counterproductive in training effective officers. I believe I was able to bring the concept to fruition, largely because I had been impressed, in 1980, at the course followed by a cousin. I had been disappointed then by the quality of undergraduates I had at Peradeniya, sensing a lack of initiative and critical thinking. I hasten to add that my students there soon proved themselves when compelled to read on their own and write and discuss, but it was good to see that at Diyatalawa the course required individual work from the start.

Similarly, once we made it clear that Military Studies would be the main focus, and the University would not interfere except to suggest better methods, the staff demonstrated a comparatively enlightened grasp of what university education should consist of in the modern world. The soft skills that the

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university system only began to adopt later were welcomed, with basic courses for credit in subjects like English, Tamil, Computing, Mathematics, Current Affairs, Law and Management Studies. Some had been done before, but they readily agreed to increase the time available, and in the case of Law actually expanded the syllabus to include more Humanitarian Law.

Teaching the cadets was a pleasure. Though they fell asleep more often than students should, they were committed to their work and disciplined, and took readily to group work. Of course some were better than others, but it was heartening to find that in general those who did well in their academic work were also good at military subjects. Perhaps this was understandable, because we were not producing specialists, but simply developing initiative and problem solving and decision making skills, with the ability to absorb and process only necessary knowledge for a demanding career in which specialisation would follow later.

It took a while for the course to begin, with the Ministry of Defence bureaucracy proving even slower than the Higher Education system. Brig. Hettiarachchi, who initiated the idea, had been replaced by Brig. Fernando, who was able to finalise things only towards the very end of his tenure. He gave us a dinner to celebrate the inauguration of the course, just before he left. He was going to Elephant Pass.

I was at the University when news came of his death. That moment came back to me, years later, when I heard that the area had been retaken. We had known him only briefly, but the sense of loss was immense. He had been wonderful to work with, and I still remember the civilised selfconfidence he exuded.

Sorrow was made worse by the sense that the death had been unnecessary. It was not only that he had been offered air transport but had chosen to trek back with his men. It was also that it seemed retreat had been advocated earlier, but had been rejected for reasons of prestige. That may have been rumour. I heard that the advice had been given by Gen. Hettiarachchi, though he said nothing about this when we met in Trincomalee. But, when I got back to the Resthouse, I was told by the Keeper that Gen. Hettiarachchi was there on a punishment transfer for having not conformed to the official line on Elephant Pass. That was an exaggeration, but I suspect that there were some lapses at the top that contributed to the magnitude of the losses.

For some days even Jaffna was in danger, until what we gathered was brilliant work by Gen. Perera and Gen. Fonseka. I don't know how the balance of responsibility lay between them but, typically, both were transferred, and one was nervous. Over the next two years, I felt the situation was deteriorating. We seemed to be reacting, without a clear strategy as to regaining



lost ground, and when the attack on Katunayake came it seemed to confirm that our defence strategy too was lacking.

So I, like many others, welcomed the Peace Accord. I voted for the UNF in 2001 and, though I was surprised that Gamini Athukorale was not appointed Minister of Defence, I remember describing Tilak Marapana as a safe pair of hands.

It did not take me very long to realise that I was totally wrong. Working at Diyatalawa helped to enlighten me, for I gathered there how serious the betrayal at Athurugiriya had been. But even without that, the problems were obvious. The number of Tamils killed by the LTTE mounted, with no remedial action, and when the appalling incident of the ship bearing arms occurred - when President Kumaratunga held firm against both Prime Minister and Defence Minister until the weapons were discovered and the Tigers aboard destroyed themselves - it was clear that the Government was woefully incompetent.

That is the charitable explanation. But although I think there was no actual treachery involved, there seems to have been villainy. Certainly the feeling amongst the officers I knew was that arms purchases were not for the benefit of the Forces and, if anything more were needed to justify the appointment of Col. Rajapaksa, it is the universal conviction amongst all servicemen that he has nothing but the interests of the Forces at heart. The horrific stories about corruption, which go back to President

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Jayawardene's time, may not all be true, but it is a triumph that they are rarely heard now, and not credited at all amongst those who need the arms. In 2002 and 2003 the story was different, and the bitterness at what was seen as betrayal was palpable.

There was a silver lining in all this in that, when my first batch was commissioned, they were not in danger. And until 2006, with the exception of four officers killed in December 2004, there were no casualties from Diyatalawa. Then however they started coming thick and fast, from April 2006 on, when the LTTE tried to murder the Army Commander and made it clear that they wanted to fight - as if indeed that were not clear enough from the assaults they had launched from December 2005 onward, leading the Scandinavian Monitors to question whether there was indeed a Ceasefire Agreement still in place.

From 2006 I had heard of casualties, but the full extent of the sacrifices my students had made only hit me when, a few days before the Kandy wedding, I received a copy of the 2007 edition of the 'Torch', the journal of Diyatalawa. For some reason I had not received the 2006 edition, so it was a Roll of Honour for two years that confronted me. And it was then that I felt that a good memory could also be a curse, for I could see the faces of the boys I had taught, who were now no longer with us, I could recall something special about many of them - as with Rajakaruna, one of the first to die, in May 2006, who had kept



asking difficult questions, but who soon settled down and was taken into the Special Forces.

The first Intake I had worked with, 51, had made the greatest impression, for I had spent the most time, working with small groups in the first term when they were our only responsibility. Yet I do not think that is the only reason that I still think of them as the best we have had, and their record in battle gives some rationale to what might have seemed prejudiced predilection.

The first wedding was that of a Fernando, and he had told me that the other Fernando had died, a quieter character whose face in concentration I could recall. Five days later had died Kumara, whose father had died during the course. He was clumsy and not especially bright, but the dignified but clearly overwhelming grief when he came back after the funeral had stuck with me. Then there were Gunawardena and Anuranga, who died on the same day in October, with four others from later intakes. Neither had been very interested in academic work, but I remembered that Anuranga, having produced a preposterous project on the First World War, came back later with an impressive analysis and did extremely well in the viva.

The army obviously matured them, as I found when I talked to them at the weddings. The combination of assurance and modesty was heartening. This was most obvious with regard to their use of English, a language most had hardly known when they arrived. Some had still been weak when they left, but the foundation we had provided and the continuing attention to learning had clearly stood them in good stead.

One reason for the poor English was that we had very few cadets from Colombo. Awareness of this had intensified my feeling that the privileged amongst us were out of touch with the needs of the country. But there were exceptions, and I had been impressed with the few individuals who had enlisted.

However, such commitment had its drawbacks. Both the boys from Wesley whom I remembered were dead. Ratnayake had gone to Sandhurst and done remarkably well, and then worked hard when he got back to catch up on the subjects he had missed. He had got his degree, but in 2008 he had died, soon after going into the field. So too had Alagiyawanna, a more senior officer, who had not been impressive academically, but had won prizes for being the most fit and the best shot.

It was his case that made me understand the total commitment of the Army Commander, and why he has been able to inspire his men to such achievements. The boy had gone missing in Vavuniya and, when I mentioned the case to Gen. Fonseka, I found that he was fully aware of the incident.

That level of appreciation of developments at all levels would naturally prompt reciprocal devotion - and it gave me some consolation, to think that the sacrifice had not been in vain.

But of course it was not in vain. These boys knew what they were doing, and were proud of what they had achieved. I had no business indeed to think of them as boys. But it was their vulnerability that still haunted me, the bright eyed enthusiasm to learn, the admiration for authority along with the awareness that it could only take them so far, the toughening that made them realise how much they had to depend on themselves.

The officer from Intake 54 who had been at both weddings told me at the second that they had that very morning heard that yet another of the group had died. And then, when I was asking about the officers I had met at the previous wedding, he told me that he thought the bestman had died in the battles for Kilinochchi. I remembered him for an intensely concentrated gaze that made me think he was absorbing everything that was said. This was not so, and I think he did not come very high in the order of merit. But he had joined the Commandos, and though he still looked very young - this was Intake 58 - he had spoken a month previously with confident ease about his posting. My impression was that he had said Vavuniya, but to him it did not seem to matter a great deal.

It was his face I saw when I heard that Elephant Pass had been taken. And it was Gen. Fernando I remembered when I saw the Jaffna and Vavuniya Commanders, both Diyatalawa Commandants I had worked with, meeting at Elephant Pass. It was under one of them that the custom began of ending the Roll of Honour in the 'Torch' with the lines, 'When you go home, tell them of us and say, we gave our today for your tomorrow.'

All this was in January, when the Forces were moving fast. But then, in February, after the first large influx of civilians managed to escape, the LTTE made even more vicious use of those they had entrapped so successfully over the previous several months. And we reacted as they knew we would, by suspending the use of heavy weaponry, by exercising even greater caution than before about the civilians.

This is why we had been asking the world for so many months to request categorically that they let our people go. The answer was a deafening silence, broken occasionally by mealy mouthed appeals to both sides to cease fire, and hysteria when the LTTE (or Amnesty or the BBC) made claims that were later shown to be palpably false. And meanwhile our soldiers were dying in larger numbers, and I was losing more of my cadets.

In Geneva, dealing with lies and half-truths, I was told of the death of Priyaweera, from Intake 51, whom I remembered fondly

as once having expressed astonishment at the amount I knew. I was tempted to respond as my Dean at Oxford had done in a similar situation, by telling him that he would have far less occasion to feel astonished if he marveled at what I did not know. But I realised that such irony was unfair on a simple but extraordinarily honest and decent soul.

Such unnecessary suffering. And my anger was not so much with the LTTE, because its leadership had clearly toppled over the edge into madness. Hearing of their suicide bomb amongst those seeking refuge, seeing in the camps the evidence of their firing on those trying to escape, reading in the newspapers the story of a family being hunted down as they ran away at night, I could only marvel, not at their brutality, but at the brutality of those who still found excuses for them.

But what do they care? They need votes, and the expatriate groups that support the LTTE are well organised. Others want influence, and believe that destabilised countries will increase their own standing in the world. And others still cannot get over the belief that they know what is best, that they can judge when they should suspend rules because their lives are in danger, but unsophisticated third world countries need telling. It is not their boys who are dying. It is not their civilians who are held hostage. So they will go on making excuses for terror, while we, who live with it, but still temper our approach to spare the innocent as far as possible, lose so many lives unnecessarily.

As Sri Lankans, we have to regret the lives of civilians. We should also regret those who were forced to fight by the Tigers and, though the Forces have no alternative, when confronted by them in battle, we must remember how no one tried to stop the conscription, how the agencies functioning in the Vanni let this happen. They to my mind are more guilty than the poor Tamil youngsters who found no protection from those who could have done better, but who compromised shamefully and allowed these youngsters to be dragooned to their deaths.

But I make no apologies for feeling saddest of all about the boys I knew, whom I will never see again. I have heard apologists for the Tigers claiming there is some sort of difference between civilian victims of terrorism and military forces that terror destroys. That is a facile distinction. It may be valid as to deaths in battle, but the young men destroyed in the spate of bombs soon after this government took office were taken unawares, the largest massacre being of troops on leave.

And now they are dying because they are fighting with one hand tied behind their backs, precisely because the Tigers are using a human shield, and because our Forces are decent enough to respect those civilians. The world may forget all of this, but we must never.



Racism is our true enemy

Minister Douglas Devananda addresses the UN



Minister Douglas Devananda led the Sri Lankan delegation to the UN World Conference Against Racism in mid April. Excerpts of his speech are reproduced below:

I am a Sri Lankan who is also ethnically Tamil, representing the North, an area populated overwhelmingly by ethnic Tamils. It also had many Tamil speaking Muslims, such as my colleague Minister Rishad Bathiudeen who is with us today, after being internally displaced himself by LTTE terrorism.

Sri Lanka has four religions, three major communities, and three languages. This diversity has made for coexistence as well as conflict. The sources of conflict lie in factors related to our deliberations here. They are also related to colonialism. Though post-colonial Sri Lanka saw legislative changes that made Tamils feel they were being discriminated against, Sinhalese felt Tamils got disproportionate advantages under colonial rule. Redress was thought necessary, but Tamils felt those actions were discriminatory.

Tamils started agitating and demanded equality and power sharing in areas where they lived in substantial numbers. In the early period, these agitations were non-violent. However, the next generation reacted to the state machinery crushing the non-violent acts of Tamils. I was the leader of one of the militant organisations that sprang up.

The flames of conflict should have been doused by the Indo-Lanka accord of 1987, brokered by the Prime Minister of India at the time, Rajiv Gandhi, who was later murdered by the LTTE. It paved the way for a power sharing arrangement. The agreement also required the militants to lay down arms and join the democratic process, and almost all of us did so.

Due to the fanaticism of the LTTE, which rejected the Indo-Lanka Accord, the full implementation of the provincial council

system has been blocked. The LTTE has been waging war with the aim of creating a separate state. They are not only fighting against the state, they also annihilate any democratic Tamil forces that would not be subservient to them.

As a young man, I was a survivor of the massacre of Tamil political prisoners in Welikada jail in 1983 by a majority racist mob. However, I had not foreseen the evil of the racism and terrorism of the minority. When I gave up armed struggle and entered the democratic process in 1987, I was regarded as a traitor by the LTTE. The US State Department reports that the LTTE has tried to assassinate me eleven times. My sight is impaired in one eye due to a spike driven into my skull by LTTE detainees when I visited them in prison to improve their conditions. But my perspective is clear.

Our President moved to curb LTTE terrorism after his attempts at negotiation were rejected. Now the Security Forces have almost crushed it. However, the LTTE uses civilians as a human shield. These are my people, people to whom I belong, people to whom I am tied by common ancestry and place. Though many have succeeded in getting away, despite being shot at by the LTTE, there are still a large number held in captivity. If the international community can push the LTTE to surrender, or at least to release civilians unconditionally, that will go a long way in ending the suffering of Tamils.

Our President is committed to full implementation of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, which ensures substantive provincial autonomy. The political process has already started. Elections were conducted for the Eastern provincial council last year. A Task Force for the Development of the North under my Chairmanship was established to oversee activities until normalcy is established and elections held. In the meantime, an All Party Representative Committee is finalising proposals, including necessary constitutional amendments, to address grievances of Tamils. We call this '13th Amendment Plus', that is, deeper provincial autonomy than currently in the Constitution. This will include a Second Chamber based on Provinces.

This being the situation in my country, we entered wholeheartedly into commitments at the Durban conference. It was a landmark event in the struggle against racism. Sri Lanka is party to major international human rights instruments and has acceded to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. Since language rights are perhaps the most important problem in Sri Lanka, we have taken measures to enforce bilingualism in administration while improving training in this field. We have also taken steps to ensure recruitment of Tamil speaking persons into our Security Forces. I call on all member states to cooperate in implementing the Durban programme of action.

My experience with racism is real. In the struggle against this, I have been imprisoned, lost close family and friends, shed my blood, risked my life and had my sight damaged. But I have learned through struggle and sacrifice, that it is racism that is our enemy, not one another.