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Regaining Sri Lanka -- The Risk for Peace **February 25, 2003**

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It is my pleasure to have this opportunity to meet with you today. Thank you for your warm welcome.

It is my privilege to serve as Canada's High Commissioner to Sri Lanka at a time of promise and hope. And it is this that I wish to speak about today -- the peace process now underway in Sri Lanka.

Few countries have had to deal with an ethnic conflict, civil war and terrorism on the scale which Sri Lanka has.

After almost 20 years of a brutal civil war that claimed the lives of some 65,000 people, and devastated the lives and property of thousands more, a Cease-Fire Agreement, signed almost exactly one year ago, has silenced both the guns and the suicide bombs.

In late November, I visited the Jaffna Peninsula and the Vanni for the first time. I traveled through both government-controlled and LTTE-controlled areas of the war-affected North-East region. The immensity of the devastation and destruction was overwhelming.

Virtually the entire infrastructure -- from roads to houses and commercial buildings, schools and temples -- is totally destroyed. Almost a million people have been displaced from their homes and villages. Now that the guns are silent, the peace process is beginning to assist these war-traumatized and poverty-stricken people to rebuild their shattered lives.

Throughout the South, the security barriers are mostly down, and people move around more freely. And while the absence of war over the past year hasn't yet brought a final peace settlement, there is a feeling of cautious optimism in the air.

But overcoming the long years of strife and mistrust will not be easy. For both parties to the peace process (the GOSL and the LTTE, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) -- the road to peace presents major risks. I have entitled my presentation "The Risks for Peace", as it is only through a willingness to accept such risks that peace will be finally achieved.

Norwegian facilitation has played a critical role in developing a "process" that both parties could trust, while overcoming years of mistrust of each other. Previous peace process attempts, which did not include a third party as facilitator, have all collapsed.

The signing of the Ceasefire Agreement in February 2002 has been successful in stopping the war and bringing the GOSL and the LTTE to the negotiating table.

The Government took a major risk in agreeing to lift the ban on the LTTE as a precursor to beginning peace talks.

Since September, there have been five rounds of peace talks, which have resulted in establishing government-LTTE sub-committees to address key issues related to immediate humanitarian and rehabilitation needs; de-escalation and normalization; and political affairs in the conflict-affected North-East region. In principle, these sub-committees meet between rounds of formal talks. While they haven't been problem-free, they represent an important forum for dialogue and partnership between the two parties that would have been unthinkable even a year ago.

In recognition of the pressing humanitarian needs, and the progress of the peace talks, a bilateral donor Conference in Oslo took place in late November. It raised approximately US \$70 million for short-term humanitarian needs in the war-affected areas.

As a further sign of confidence in the process, Sri Lanka's major bilateral donor, the Government of Japan, has announced it will convene a major international Conference in June to raise significant funds for the Reconstruction of the North-East as well as development in the South. The support and good will of the international community is vitally important to the success of the peace process.

One of the most important developments to date has been the agreement by both parties to explore a lasting political settlement based on a federal framework of governance within a united country (i.e. to explore a solution founded on the principle of internal self-determination in areas of historical habitation of the Tamil-speaking peoples, based on a federal structure within a united Sri Lanka).

Agreement to negotiate a federal solution early on in the peace process was heralded as a major breakthrough and marks a bold "risk for peace" decision by both sides. After 55 years as a unitary state, since gaining independence in 1948, the GOSL has accepted that ending the ethnic conflict is dependent on a new -- federal -- structure of governance. The LTTE has accepted federalism (and I stress federalism and not con-federalism) as a concrete alternative to its long struggle for an independent state.

This agreement may be the best opportunity for a negotiated political settlement to the long-running settlement in which the legitimate interests of all communities are met.

Another very important agreement was also reached at the last round of peace talks earlier this month. It was agreed that the former Head of Amnesty International would draw up a road map for human rights for discussion at the 6th round of talks in Japan in March.

The plan is to include substantive human rights activities and commitments to be implemented throughout the negotiation process; effective mechanisms for monitoring of human rights; training of LTTE cadres and GOSL officials in human rights and humanitarian law and training of police and prison officers.

Equally important, at the last round, and the LTTE also agreed to a complete cessation of recruitment of children (i.e. under 18) and to work with UNICEF to draw up an action plan for children affected by the conflict.

While promising, the process is far from assured. Let me outline some of the challenges facing the Government. First, the domestic political environment.

A peaceful resolution of the ethnic conflict is not possible without political stability. And political stability requires cooperation between the two main parties -- the governing UNP headed by PM Ranil Wickremesinghe, and the Opposition Peoples' Alliance (PA) headed by President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga.

The government, which has only a very slim majority, will require two-thirds majority in Parliament to change the country's constitution to reflect a new federal system of governance. To date, "co-habitation" between the Prime Minister and the President has proved exceedingly difficult, and it remains uncertain as to whether the President might call a snap election (which she is constitutionally entitled to do), or otherwise bring down the government. A change of government only a year into the mandate of the current government could have serious repercussions for the peace process.

The opposition has become increasingly vocal in its criticism of the government's handling of the negotiations, stating the government is giving too much to the LTTE with little in return, and turning a blind eye to LTTE violations of the Ceasefire agreement, for the sake of preserving the peace process.

Second, public discontent with the rising Cost of Living is also being used by opposition parties to stir up opinion against the peace process. The rising Cost of Living makes the government an easy target for accusations that the peace process is not producing an economic dividend in the South. Similarly, in the war-devastated North-East, both the Government and the LTTE need to be able to show the people that in addition to the peace dividend, there will be a tangible economic dividend.

The absence of government-opposition co-operation with regard to the peace process could emerge as a major threat to securing a lasting settlement. And there must be a guarantee that what one party signs today will not be undermined by a change of government tomorrow.

A third and major challenge will be to develop a federal system of governance that can be translated into a constitutional framework which will be acceptable to all communities and parties in Sri Lanka.

In addition to developing a political model acceptable to the GOSL and LTTE, it will be essential to secure broad support from the Sinhalese-dominated South for the peace process and a settlement based on a new federal system. The powerful and influential Buddhist clergy is critical to securing broad support among the people.

In a country where the word "federalism" has long been demonized as a first step to breaking up the country, the Sinhalese majority range from outrightly hostile to sceptical or at best uncertain about federalism. It will take a major public education campaign to de-mythologise federalism and to convince the Sinhalese majority that federalism offers the best option for holding the country together.

A fourth, and equally major challenge is how to address the legitimate interests and concerns of the Muslim community. Increasingly, some members of the Muslim community feel their interests are not being addressed in the current peace process. The majority of Muslims in the North-East war-affected region reside in the Eastern part. Despite assurances by the LTTE that their rights will be respected under whatever form of LTTE governance might emerge in the North-East, the Muslim community is fearful for its security, its rights, and its future. Whatever federal system of governance is ultimately agreed to, Muslim support will be critical.

A dissident group of Muslim MPs has begun pressing for a separate delegation to represent their interests at the peace talks, and advocating some form of separate administrative unit or even "province" for the Muslim community in the Eastern region. These demands will complicate the peace process negotiations. But the process cannot conclude successfully without an acceptable resolution of Muslim Concerns.

The LTTE, too, faces many challenges. The transition from a tightly controlled and highly disciplined military machine to a democratic political and administrative organization is a difficult one. Re-orienting its cadres from wartime to peacetime duties is also a very tall order. It will not happen overnight.

Canada and indeed the entire international community, has been heartened by LTTE lead negotiator Anton Balasingham's statements at the various rounds of peace talks. For example, commitments to explore a settlement based on a federal system; to join the political mainstream; to accept that the North-East constitutes a plural society. And of course, the important pledge made at the last round to end its practice of child recruitment and support the development of a human rights plan.

However, the continued gap between the LTTE's words and deeds, especially related to the human rights situation on the ground, is cause for concern.

Credible reports, including those of the Norwegian-led Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission, cite continuing child abductions and conscription, extortion, illegal taxation, and harassment of Muslims and rival Tamil parties. Such reports are destabilizing to the peace process and to the LTTE's quest for international legitimacy.

The LTTE undoubtedly wants to maintain control over territories it acquired militarily. But it also seems to be trying to consolidate its influence over the rest of the North and East where the government's security forces are present, prior to a final agreement being reached.

For the peace process to succeed, and while accepting that the LTTE lacks the capacity to quickly transform itself, it must begin demonstrating on the ground that it has the capacity to respect human rights and political rights as the foundation for a democratic society. The peace process depends on it.

The Tamil diaspora in Canada and other countries has an important role to play in supporting the peace process, and helping to bring it to a successful conclusion based on respect for the rights of all Sri Lankans. Canada strongly supports the peace process. Secretary of State for Asia-Pacific David Kilgour visited Sri Lanka last March to voice Canada's support. Foreign Minister Bill Graham will be visiting next month for high level talks in support of the peace process. We are hopeful that the peace process will lead to a lasting political settlement that satisfies the legitimate aspirations -- and reflects the rights -- of all Sri Lankans within a unified state.

We will do our utmost to assist in this important process. In addition to our ongoing development projects, we announced an additional \$2 million in funding at the November Oslo donor conference for immediate humanitarian needs in the war-affected North-East.

Our offer to provide technical assistance to all parties to the peace process on federal options of governance has been accepted. This assistance is being provided by the Forum of Federations, headed by former Ontario Premier Bob Rae. The Forum of Federations is now actively engaged in working with all parties in the peace process.

One year has passed since the signing of the Ceasefire Agreement. Sri Lanka has stopped waging war and begun building peace. During the last year, the value of life in Sri Lanka has increased. These are dramatic changes on the road to "Regaining Sri Lanka".

But there are many challenges and risks. human rights violations and extremists from various communities are a destabilizing factor. A lasting political settlement will only be achieved if all groups in the conflict recognize that their individual interests must be harmonized with all others; that differences must be resolved through dialogue and not violence.

The peace process may take a few years. But its success is critical if the old Sri Lanka, stuck in a vicious cycle of war and impeded development, is to transform itself into a new society based on a commitment to pluralism and democratic principles, tolerance, protection of the rights of all its people and as we often say in Canada, unity through diversity.

Thank you.