

**Address by
Hon. Mangala Samaraweera, MP
Minister of Foreign Affairs of Sri Lanka**

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Advancing Reconciliation and Development in Sri Lanka

Last February, soon after the election of President Maithripala Sirisena at the Presidential Election held on 8 January 2015, I stood before a similar audience in this great city and outlined our plans and our vision for Sri Lanka.

It has been just a year. But, looking back, it seems as if several years have passed since then. A year on, much has happened and much has been achieved.

The relationship between our two countries alone has experienced a veritable renaissance since the visit of Assistant Secretary Biswal in early February 2015 weeks after the Presidential elections and after my visit to Washington exactly a year ago. In such a short period of time, our relations have been strengthened to unprecedented heights. In fact, although our countries have maintained cordial ties since Independence, we can be proud that this cordiality has now blossomed into a very special friendship.

In addition to Assistant Secretary Biswal's four visits this year, we have had the honour of hosting a number of very senior US leaders this year. May 2015 saw Secretary Kerry visit Colombo, the first official visit by a US Secretary of State in over four decades. His visit was followed by a visit by Ambassador Samantha Power. Her visit in November, marked by her trademark style of interacting actively and freely with all whom she encountered, infused US – Sri Lanka relations with renewed energy. Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Rights and Labour, Tom Malinowski, also visited us and has remained consistently engaged with our progress. Finally, Ambassador Thomas Shannon's visit in December saw us firm up the details of the Partnership Dialogue between our two countries which is what brings me back to this wonderful city for its inaugural meeting tomorrow.

My topic today is '***Advancing Reconciliation and Development in Sri Lanka***'. I will not attempt to list the many steps that have been undertaken to foster reconciliation, strengthen good governance, the rule of law, accountability and human rights since January 2015. This audience is an informed audience and I am sure you all follow Sri Lanka with a keen eye. Therefore, I will try to focus more on the specific topic.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

'Reconciliation and Development', as you would agree, are intertwined. It is difficult, almost impossible, to have one without the other.

At the time we gained Independence, in February 1948, Sri Lanka, then Ceylon, was in a unique position among the countries in the developing world as she had experience of representative government and development indicators that were unparalleled in the developing world. In fact, An editorial published in London on the day of Sri Lanka's independence predicted that in a short space of time Ceylon would become the Switzerland of the East.

The different communities in the country showed promise of being able to live and work towards common national goals in peace, harmony and unity. They had worked together in the past, to gain independence from the British despite the fact that they followed different faiths, spoke different languages and followed different customs.

However, what followed is something that the world knows only too well. We made mistakes which saw our country plunge into torment and conflict for well over three decades.

The failure to manage such justifiable grievances led to conflict and violence. Sri Lanka's post-independence leadership was unable to terms with her diversity as a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-lingual country. As a result these grievances were transformed into inter-communal resentment and feelings of discrimination and unfair treatment. Our post-Independence leaders, who were acutely aware of the diverse character of our island, sadly faltered at decisive moments and failed to stand up to extremists.

As a result, unmet grievances led to violence and ultimately created the conditions necessary for terrorism, which then transformed into a brutal war. By the time the war ended there were serious allegations of violations of human rights and war crimes hurled against both parties to the conflict and Sri Lanka was facing virtual isolation internationally.

Nonetheless, there was a collective sigh of relief across the entire country too and many hoped that it would be the beginning of a new era of democracy and reconciliation in Sri Lanka. An unprecedented window of opportunity to win the hearts and minds of the suffering people of the North and East suddenly opened.

However, that was not to be. The Rajapaksa regime, emboldened by their military victory over the LTTE, went on a rampage of triumphalism alienating the Tamil people even further. Instead of using the good will generated in the war victory for healing, that historic opportunity was cruelly squandered to further the dynastic ambitions of the ruling family at the time and establish a one-party state.

However, the victory of President Sirisena in 2015 and the victory of the United National Front for Good Governance at the Parliamentary Election in August last year enabled the formation of a National Unity Government, unexpectedly heralding a new era for Sri Lanka. Traditional rivals in Sri Lankan politics – the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) came together to form a grand coalition for the first time since Independence, heralding a new culture of consensual politics with the determination to create much needed political and policy stability. One has to only look at Sri Lanka's modern history with its countless missed opportunities to realise that what held us back, what plunged us into cycles of conflict, and what prevented the many attempts of saving our nation from such adversity was the nature of adversarial politics that was followed in the past. Whenever one side tried to find a solution, the other side got in the way.

Today, for the first time in our country's history, under President Sirisena and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe, this myopia that plagued our nation since independence has been set aside: the temptation of political parties to follow a path of confrontation in order to achieve short-term political gains over the long-term interests of the people is now over. We also have in our Leader of Opposition, the Hon. R. Sampanthan, a wise, committed and respected politician with the resolve to work together to ensure that we do not let our country lose yet another opportunity.

Fortunately, today, with the demise of the LTTE, no one in our country believes that violence is a solution to our problems. The desire for peace, the desire to ensure non-recurrence is clear. The people of our country, in every walk of life, the rich and the poor, those living in the North, South, East, West and Centre, desperately want peace to last. They have all suffered too much bloodshed and unimaginable agony.

The National Unity Government therefore, is focused on fostering a national consensus around the "never again" principle which everyone in our country relates to.

The National Unity Government has not wasted any time in making the fullest use of this historic opportunity. In September last year, the Government made a commitment in the form of co-sponsoring a resolution at the Human Rights Council in Geneva to strengthen good governance, foster reconciliation, promote human rights, establish accountability under the rule of law and ensure non-recurrence.

Our government is totally committed to the successful implementation of this resolution, not because of any desire to appease international opinion, but because of our conviction that Sri Lanka must come to terms the past in order to forge ahead and secure the future the Sri Lankan people truly deserve. As President Sirisena said in his Independence Day message on the 4th of February this year,

"It is now time for us to seize the current opportunity that is before us to implement the provisions of the Resolution, not because of international pressure, but because, as a nation, we must implement these provisions for the sake of restoring the dignity of our nation, our people, and our military, in order for Sri Lanka to regain her due position as a strong democracy among the community of nations."

In that resolution we outlined a four-pillared strategy based on the principles of truth-seeking, accountability, reparations and non-recurrence. This strategy resulted in a commitment to form a Commission for Truth, Reconciliation, Justice and Non-recurrence; an Office on Missing Persons; a Judicial Mechanism; and an Office for Reparations which will be set up by Statute.

We also said that the design of mechanisms will be preceded by a process of Consultations involving all stakeholders, including victims on all sides, which will inform the design of the mechanisms. A Consultation Task Force consisting of 11 eminent public figures has been appointed by the Government to carry out the public consultations. The Task Force is currently working on consulting experts in finalizing the questions for the process and will be appointing Provincial and District Task Forces to conduct face-to-face consultations.

In the meantime, with the assistance of the UN Peacebuilding Fund, the Office of National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR) and the Ministry of Resettlement are carrying out reconciliation related projects including programmes aimed at creating understanding among communities, psychosocial and livelihood support.

Another important and essential component to ensure non-recurrence, we said, is the introduction of a new Constitution – a Constitution that guarantees, among other democratic reforms, the rights of minorities. This process is vital for our country's future. On the first anniversary of President Sirisena's election, on the 9th of January this year, a Special Session of Parliament was convened where a Resolution was tabled to enable the Parliament to sit as a Constitutional Assembly for the purpose of adopting a new Constitution. Public Consultations on the drafting of the Constitution are currently underway.

Addressing Parliament on the 9th of January, the President urged all Members of Parliament to extend their support to the adoption of a new Constitution, and to those who argued that the Executive Presidency should be retained because that was the only means by which Sri Lanka was able to combat terrorism successfully, he responded Sri Lanka rather than continuing with the Executive Presidency anticipating a war in future Sri Lanka should to complete the reforms that are necessary to ensure that war and violence will never occur again.

The Government's resolve to secure reconciliation, win the peace and ensure reoccurrence is firm. But in order to win the peace, development and rising living standards for each and every Sri Lankan are a *sine qua non*.

All good intentions and political will not succeed unless all stakeholders feel that their development is being cared for and their lives are improving. Therefore, winning the peace is just as much about jobs, education, healthcare and infrastructure for all Sri Lankans as it is about political reforms. The peace dividend must be felt in economic terms by all sections of Sri Lankan society; the peace dividend for the unemployed youth must be greater and better job opportunities, for the housewives better living standards, for the farmers a higher prices and access to markets, for the students more schools, technical colleges and universities with better-trained teachers and lecturers, for the elderly greater access to hospitals and medicine.

The government of Sri Lanka has no doubt that as the necessary political and economic reforms take place, investments and trade and ultimately jobs, growth and economic development will follow. But as the relationship between peace and development is holistic and dynamic, the faster the peace dividend the greater and faster the likelihood and durability of peace. In a nutshell, the people's purses must feel the benefits of the reconciliation, peace and ethnic harmony. And they must feel them fast.

Just as the world rallied around Sri Lanka with advice and support for our reconciliation process, at this critical time of transition it also imperative that the world rallies around us to kick-start the economy and catalyze our development journey.

The government is working hard on this front too. We are putting in place the framework to sustain and accelerate Sri Lanka's six percent plus growth rate, create a million jobs and improve living standards through an ambitious economic development drive.

The government's economic strategy is based on attracting foreign direct investment, making Sri Lanka's exports more competitive, promoting tourism and improving productivity through education and knowledge transfer.

Sri Lanka is at the centre of the rapidly growing Indian Ocean region, astride the main East-West shipping route and next to one of the world's largest markets, India. We are leveraging this unique geo-economic location to accelerate growth: negotiations are already underway to deepen our existing free trade agreement with India, which we hope to complete by the middle of this year. We plan to do the same with Pakistan with whom we also have a free trade agreement. These agreements - combined with our excellent air and sea connectivity to the sub-continent - will help cement our position as a Gateway to the sub-continent.

We are also improving our market access further abroad. Due to the previous government's human rights violations we lost GSP+ concessions to the EU. Following the successful visit of the EU Working Group on Human Rights to Sri Lanka we are now finalizing our formal application for GSP+ reapplication and we hope to regain the facility by the end of the year. We are also already in discussions to sign a free trade agreement with China.

The United States is our single largest export market accounting for a quarter of Sri Lanka's exports. Sri Lanka has some concessionary access to the US market through the GSP facility and has also signed a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement. Upgrading these ties by signing a free trade agreement will go a long way in propelling Sri Lanka to achieving its economic and development.

In addition, the Government is very seriously exploring the possibility of applying to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership. A leading government think tank is preparing a feasibility study and we will be continuously evaluating developments on this front.

A concerted effort is also underway to improve the business climate domestically. Far-reaching governance reforms that are creating a rules based have structurally made investment and business more secure and certain. Sri Lanka is taking measures to increase investor's ease of doing business and

confidence more directly. For example, we are bringing a number of government agencies together to create a one-stop investment and trade-facilitation shop under the Agency for Development. We are reviewing our laws and regulations to create a simple rules based business environment: including those related to land ownership, as well as tariffs and para-tariffs. We have adopted policies that enable private enterprise to thrive: for example, Sri Lanka has one of the lowest income tax rates in the world – at 15 percent. Together these reforms – alongside our educated workforce and solid infrastructure - are making Sri Lanka the most attractive, secure and competitive investment destination in the region.

As a result, during meetings with investors and businesses over the last few months, such as Prime Minister Wickremasinghe's meetings at the World Economic Forum at Davos and during President Sirisena's state visit to Berlin and Vienna we have seen extraordinary and unprecedented interest in Sri Lanka. The interest was well beyond our own expectations and we are confident that interest will quickly materialize into tangible commitments over the coming year. Sri Lanka is also experiencing a tourism boom, with arrivals last year growing by nearly 20 percent compared to 2014, which also saw double digit growth.

But we also need to rapidly improve living standards across the board, especially the most vulnerable, perhaps faster than the time-lags that inevitably accompany investment and trade led growth. At this critical time of transition demonstrating that there is a peace dividend is of fundamental importance. We are working closely with the Millennium Challenge Corporation, USAID and other US partners in this effort. We are also working closely with other bilateral and multilateral partners including the World Bank and Asian Development Bank. But we need further and faster support in poverty alleviation, urban development, infrastructure development, education – particularly vocational, technical and English language training - and agricultural productivity improvements.

As we in Sri Lanka strive to create a better tomorrow for all our people, we value the partnership with this great country with which we share democratic values. We look to the United States to assist us in our efforts in reconciliation and development and we are keen to work together with the US to promote peace, security, tranquility and economic and social progress, not only in Sri Lanka, but in the Indian Ocean region and beyond.

Ladies and Gentlemen, our aim is to succeed for the sake of all our people, vindicating the faith reposed on us by our friends in the international community but more than anything else, to do right by the people of our nation and future generations, and secure for them the destiny that we were unable to achieve 68 years ago at Independence.

I believe that the Government and people of Sri Lanka will, with the help of friends in the international community, including the United States, finally succeed in creating a country where each individual can live and work with dignity, with self-esteem and confidence in the future.

Allow me to conclude by quoting from speech at the Human Rights Council in September:

"Therefore, I say to the sceptics: don't judge us by the broken promises, experiences and u-turns of the past. Let us design, define and create our future by our hopes and aspirations, and not be held back by the fears and prejudices of the past. Let us not be afraid to dream. Let us not be afraid to engage in meaningful dialogue aimed at finding solutions to problems as opposed to pointing fingers, heaping blame and scoring political points at the expense of future generations.

My plea to you Ladies and Gentlemen, is: trust us and join us to work together and create the momentum required to move forward and take progressive, meaningful and transformative steps to create a new Sri Lanka."