

STATEMENT MADE BY HON. MANGALA SAMARAWEEA, MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS ON 12.06.2015 IN RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION BY OPPOSITION LEADER HON. NIMAL SIRIPALA DE SILVA UNDER THE STANDING ORDER 23/2 OF PARLIAMENT

Honourable Speaker,

I rise to respond to questions raised by the Honourable Leader of Opposition relating to the discussions that took place between the GTF and the TNA in London, and my presence there.

As the House is aware, the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission was appointed by President Mahinda Rajapaksa on the 15th of May 2010.

The Report of the Commission was handed over to President Rajapaksa on the 15th of November 2011 and it was tabled for the attention of all the Members of this House, on the 16th of December 2011.

Honourable Speaker,

The Commission, having held wide ranging consultations with all communities across the country, made a series of recommendations.

They said that,

“Terrorism and violence have ended. Time and space have been created for healing and building sustainable peace and security so that the fruits of democracy and citizenship can be equitably enjoyed by all Sri Lankans. To this end, the success of ending the armed conflict must be invested in an all-inclusive political process of dialogue and accommodation so that the conflict by other means will not continue...”

The Commission went on to say, that,

“Based on what it heard from the people, the Commission is confident that the citizens are ready and willing to support consensual approaches advancing national interest, national reconciliation, justice and equality for all citizens, so long as the political leaders take the lead in a spirit of tolerance, accommodation and compromise.”

Honourable Speaker,

In its recommendations, the Commission emphasized the vital need for the Government to constructively engage with diaspora groups, especially those who may harbour adversarial attitudes, to find space for them to contribute to the local reconciliation and development efforts.

The Commission recommended that “the Government must have more liberal policies and attitudes towards those expatriates who wish to invest and work in Sri Lanka, for instance, by making it easier to obtain dual nationality status, effect remittances and be able to travel throughout the country without undue restrictions.”

They went on to say that the “Government must take initiatives to constructively engage its development partners in Sri Lanka and abroad to develop a self-reliant, future oriented community in the Wannai, with open minds to build on and sustain reconciliatory community relationships. This is an area where the Sri Lankan ‘diaspora’ can support the Government of Sri Lanka, working in cooperation with the development partners in areas such as housing, schooling, healthcare and livelihood activities”.

The Commission further recommended that the Government “constitute a Multi-disciplinary Task Force to propose a programme of action to harness the untapped potential of the expatriate community and to engage them constructively with the Government and other stakeholders involved in the reconciliation process.”

The LLRC warned that if such an approach is not adopted urgently, the momentum towards creating a hostile atmosphere could grow, and those groups that advocate such a process would continue to promote polarization that will significantly impair the genuine efforts of others who espouse reconciliation back home in Sri Lanka.

This, Hon. Speaker, is a summary of the wise advice given by the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission during the previous administration with regard to dealing with the diaspora.

The Government at the time refused to heed that wise advice although this advice evolved through a process of internal consultations with the public of this country, reflecting their views, their needs, their observations and experiences.

Similarly, the Government at the time refused to heed the advice of many friendly nations overseas.

That unfortunate way of dealing with issues led to the polarisation of society within our country. And, Sri Lanka became isolated among the community of nations.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs which was tasked by the previous Government, with implementing the recommendations of the LLRC Report relating to engaging the diaspora, was unable, at that point, to implement those recommendations.

Hon. Speaker,

As this House is aware, the people of this country voiced their opinion loud and clear on the 8th of January and decided to initiate change. Over 81% of the registered voters in Sri Lanka from all parts of the country including the northern and eastern provinces exercised their franchise at the Presidential election held on the 8th of January.

People in the North of this country who previously boycotted Presidential elections, came out in large numbers to participate in this election. They did so, even as a few urged them not to vote. What better manifestation could one seek from the people of the North and the East, of their commitment to the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of this nation?

These people, who had suffered conflict for long years spoke very clearly when they walked out into the polling stations on the 8th of January, to stake their claim in choosing the President of this country. Their country as much as everyone else's. A united country, with one President.

It was the largest ever voter turnout in the country's history. Out of 66.28% of the total votes cast in the Jaffna District, 74.42% voted for President Maithripala Sirisena. In the Vanni District, out of the 72.57% votes cast, 78.47% voted for him. In the predominantly Muslim Eastern Province, President Sirisena polled 71.84% of votes in the Trincomalee District, 65.22% in the Digamadulla District and 81.62% in the Batticaloa District. 84.26% of the votes cast in his favour were from outside the Northern and Eastern Provinces reflecting that the people living in these areas also gave voice to the change of Government.

It could therefore be said that this is the first time in our country's history that we have a truly Sri Lankan leader, who has been elected through the votes of all Sri Lankans, irrespective of race, religion and language.

All communities united in electing President Maithripala Sirisena who promised them a united New Sri Lanka in which ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity is respected, celebrated and valued. They chose a leader who would fulfil their aspirations of strong and independent democratic institutions, freedom of expression, the rule of law, good governance and the promotion and protection of human rights.

This peaceful change of Government that the people of Sri Lanka achieved through the ballot was hailed as a triumph for democracy not only in Sri Lanka but all over the world.

Hon. Speaker,

It is based on this mandate given by the people to President Sirisena, to build a new, united, peaceful and prosperous Sri Lanka, in which ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity is respected, celebrated and valued, that I function as the Foreign Minister.

It is based on President Sirisena's policy of giving priority to engagement and dialogue and renewing partnerships that I have been carrying out my work as the Foreign Minister.

Our aim is to ensure that (a) this country and its people do not, once again, become isolated among the world community (b) this blessed nation does not plunge back into conflict and violence once again (c) that the people of this nation regain their lost dignity once again and stand with pride among the democracies of the world and (d) the people of this nation are able to benefit from the best in every field that the world has to offer and achieve sustainable progress and development.

I have been spending all my time since becoming the Minister of Foreign Affairs of President Sirisena's government, to build bridges that had been burnt during years of confrontation since the end of the conflict in 2009.

I have been working tirelessly with the staff of the Ministry and the Sri Lanka Missions overseas to re-establish ties with countries that had alienated us over the years and with sections of the Sri Lankan diaspora, who have left this country to live overseas. In this task, I am guided by the wisdom of the Recommendations of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been entrusted to implement as I said before, this task of dealing with the diaspora was assigned to the Ministry during the previous administration.

Hon. Speaker,

At different times in our history, the people of this country left our shores. These people belonged to all ethnic groups and religions. Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims and Burghers. They form the Sri Lankan diaspora overseas.

The Sri Lankan diaspora consists of over one-and-a-half million. They are hardworking, talented and responsible individuals in their respective countries. There are some, who are extremely skilled and have excelled, in their respective fields – sports, arts, music, literature, drama, academia, medicine, science, and a variety of other fields.

In fact, according to the OECD, in 2006, one in three members of the Sri Lankan diaspora living in OECD countries is an educated professional. They have also estimated that the OECD consists of over 8000 legislators, senior officials and managers of Sri Lankan origin.

Can we, at a time when this country has undertaken this important journey of "reconciliation and development" to build an inclusive society, as the President stressed on the 19th of May, leave out from this journey, those who want to join us and help us after many years of trauma and conflict?

Should we not make this the moment to shun from our minds, the feelings of hatred, and narrow parochialism which engulfed us in violent conflict for over 30 years? Should we not make this the moment in our history, to show, that we remain true to the words of the Buddha, whose message was brought to us by the children of the great Emperor Ashoka, who, having fought many a battle, and realized through experience that no true victory can be achieved through hatred and violence, chose to embrace non-violence and compassion? Should we not embrace this moment to demonstrate by our actions that "hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world"? Should we let another opportunity at true

reconciliation slip through our fingers and deprive generations to come of enjoying true peace, stability, progress and development that they deserve?

Hon. Speaker,

Our aim should be to embrace all diaspora, the Sri Lankan diaspora, irrespective of ethnicity or religion, who are committed to support our reconciliation efforts, capacity-building, development and welfare of the people while pledging to uphold the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of our nation.

In order to encourage diaspora members to engage and contribute to efforts in Sri Lanka, my Ministry is keen to organize a diaspora festival later this year. Such an event, depending on how it progresses, could even take the form of a regular annual event, to connect Sri Lanka to its diaspora. This will enable the communities in the country to benefit from the knowledge, capacity, expertise and skills of the Sri Lankan diaspora. Several countries in the world including India and Ireland to name a few, have benefitted from such organized events.

Since we announced this idea, we have already started receiving many expressions of support and interest from several Sri Lankans overseas, across ethnicities.

Hon. Speaker,

This is a unique moment in our nation's history and we should use this opportunity to reach out to the Sri Lankan communities overseas who have the potential to help us in this journey of peace, reconciliation and development.

In fact, Hon. Speaker, as a result of our discussions and our efforts, it is most likely that the diaspora groups who were previously hostile to Sri Lanka would issue a declaration renouncing violence and committing themselves to work towards a united, undivided Sri Lanka.

Hon. Speaker,

Answers to the specific questions raised by the Hon. Leader of Opposition:

Can the Minister state the objective of the discussions that he held in London with the Global Tamil Forum for which the media gave immense publicity? What was the objective of these discussions. What were the decisions reached? What were the issues discussed?

(1) As the Press Statement issued by the Member of Parliament from the TNA (Mr. M.A. Sumanthiran) and the Director of Strategic Initiatives of the GTF (Mr. Suren Surendiran) indicated, very clearly, what was discussed were:

-the needs of the displaced people, providing for their housing, providing basic facilities so that they could resettle in the lands that have been returned to them,

-the release of prisoners held under the PTA and the process that is currently underway,

-the annual review of the persons listed under gazetted regulations 1758/19 dated 15th May 2012 and 1760 of 31st May 2012 (by the previous Government) to give effect to UN Resolutions 1373 and 1267. This annual review is mandatory as per the regulations that have been gazetted by the previous Government.

I table the statement.

The persons and organisations that took part in this discussion

(2) The persons who were present at the discussions:

- Member of Parliament from the TNA
- Representative of the GTF Mr. Suren Surendiran
- A representative of the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation – Mr. M.S. Jayasinghe

The following representatives were present on the basis of the large diaspora communities living in those countries and to share the experiences they have of dealing with the different Sri Lankan diaspora communities and members present in those respective countries:

- A representative from the South African Government -who initiated a dialogue with the diaspora & senior members of the Rajapaksa regime in 2013.
- A representative from the Swiss Government
- Former Norwegian Ambassador to Sri Lanka, Mr. Tore Hattrem.
- Mr. Eric Solheim participated briefly on the 1st day to share his experiences in engaging the diaspora.

In order to have such a discussion, did the Minister obtain the approval of the Cabinet of Ministers and the President or the Prime Minister?

(3) All details of discussions at all times are reported back to the President and the Prime Minister

During the discussions, was the lifting of the ban on the LTTE or withdrawal of the gazette notification which banned the organisations that aided and assisted the banned LTTE and/or organisations which supported the LTTE, discussed?

(4) There was no discussion of lifting the proscription of the LTTE.

- The annual review of the persons listed under gazetted regulations 1758/19 dated 15th May 2012 and 1760 of 31st May 2012 (by the previous Government) to give effect to UN Resolutions 1373 and 1267 was discussed.
- This annual review is mandatory as per the regulations that have been gazetted by the previous Government.
- When this review is being conducted, the Competent Authority will take into account the distinction between those advocating separatism and those who have been voicing concerns regarding the rights of the Tamil people.

Was the subject of war crimes discussed at the discussions?

(5) No.

Were views exchanged with the Global Tamil Forum or with the other local or foreign representatives who participated in the discussions regarding the process of preparing a domestic mechanism to examine war crimes?

(6) No.

Will the Minister of Foreign Affairs make a full statement regarding this discussion to this House? If not, why?

(7) I have explained to the House the background, reasons and details and will also share a copy of the Press Statement issued by the GTF's Director of Strategic Initiatives and the Member of Parliament of the TNA.

Finally, I would also like to inform the House that we discussed about a public declaration renouncing violence as a means of achieving political objectives and a public commitment to a united and undivided Sri Lanka. The recent statement by Rev. Fr. S.J. Emmanuel, President of the GTF and Mr. Suren Surendiran reflect this welcome shift in attitude. I now table some of these recent statements.