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The Ceylon Chamber of Commerce – Sri Lanka Economic Summit 2009

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by Yasushi Akashi

Former Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations

I am deeply honoured to be invited to address the 10th Sri Lanka Economic Summit, organized by the prestigious Ceylon Chamber of Commerce. I cannot think of a more appropriate subject for discussion in Sri Lanka at this time, than the title of this Summit, namely “Dawning of a New Era – Opportunities and Challenges?” Today, allow me to speak on this theme in my personal, rather than official, capacity.

I have been to many countries in the world, but it is very rare indeed to find a more beautiful country, endowed with rich resources, and inhabited by more warmhearted, more talented people than Sri Lanka. But this country had to endure in the last two decades and half a very violent conflict which resulted over the years in tens of thousands of civilian victims, including numerous women and children as well as a great number of untimely deaths of too many young officers and soldiers.

Three weeks after the end of the conflict in May, I visited once again an enormous village, containing hastily built several camps with many tents at Manic Farm in Vavuniya, accommodating an enormous crowd of internally displaced persons - men and women, young and old. I saw dedicated workers from the Government, both its civilian as well as

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military parts, starting with the Minister for Resettlement, the Major General in charge and the Government Agent, who had been working extremely hard day and night to deal with such a massive flow of IDPs, numbering close to 300,000. A huge effort was mobilized by the Government, led and coordinated ably by Hon. Basil Rajapaksa, to cope with the most complex task of providing food, water, shelter, medicine and other essential services on an urgent basis, with the help of the United Nations, other international organizations and non-governmental organizations, national as well as international.

I am not aware of any other developing country which has confronted such a tremendous challenge and made such a significant progress in a short time. Many people are caring for the sick and tired, wives looking for their husbands, students wanting to return to their colleges, and many others with different needs and requirements. It was impressive that these unprecedented, even overwhelming, challenges were being met by the total dedication, spontaneous sympathy and the feeling of solidarity on the part of the supporting staff, irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds. I was moved to see many gifts were pouring in from the Sinhala and other communities in the South.

Looking at these huge humanitarian problems which arose from the military conflict from another perspective, however, I believe that Sri Lanka is now faced with a unique and non-recurrent opportunity to build a truly united country where people of all backgrounds will be finally

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reconciled to each other and decide to live and work together to build a truly democratic and pluralistic country, based on universal human rights and buttressed by mutual respect and friendship. I have heard that the legendary goddess of fortune has only front hair. Therefore, if we fail to seize her front hair, the opportunity may slip and never come back. In this endeavour of historic proportion, I am confident that the people of this country will be joined by their many friends and supporters abroad in the international community, including Japan.

Allow me here to refer to a recent article published by a retired Indian General and perceptive commentator, whom I know and respect. This is General V. R. Raghavan. He describes the former LTTE leader Prabhakaran with great insight. I quote: “In one instance of a quiet chat with Velupillai Prabhakaran, I asked him for his vision of a settlement with the Sri Lankan state. His face imperturbable and his pupils fixing me in an unblinking stare, he answered in polite Tamil that a settlement was out of the question and that Eelam was not a negotiable idea. The inflexible man – a consummate guerrilla tactician, and an inspiring leader to his cadres – showed till the end his limited grasp of strategic purpose. In the process, he assassinated not just foes, but friends and well wishers, loyal colleagues, moderate Tamils and innumerable innocents. That the good of the Tamil people can be obtained within the Sri Lankan state remained beyond his mindset.” (end of quote) I completely agree with this assessment of the LTTE leader whom I also met once and had an extensive discussion.

General Raghavan continues, and, with his permission I quote him

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again: “As the military pincers closed in on him, Prabhakaran could have accepted the offer to lay down arms, then negotiate an outcome, stretch out the talks, work the global Tamil opinion and exploit the Indian Tamil sympathy to his advantage. He was, simply put, incapable of such thinking. This led to holding the Tamil population as hostage for his safety, with untold suffering to hundreds of thousands of people for whose well-being he had waged the three-decade-long campaign.” (end of quote) It seems clear to me that due to the lack of political vision and imagination on the part of one man and his failed leadership, the tragic fate and suffering for such a large number of people in the North, as well as in the East earlier, became unavoidable. All these victims deserve our undivided sympathy and solidarity.

Indeed, even in the most recent period between 2002 and 2009 in which I was involved in the search for peace, the LTTE leader closed down windows of opportunity for himself and his group, one by one. These opportunities and options included:

- (a) Norway-sponsored discussion on possible shapes of a system based on devolution of powers,
- (b) establishing a transitional regional development structure,
- (c) an invitation to participate in a major Tokyo conference on rehabilitation and development of Sri Lanka in 2003, with 51 countries and 21 international organizations attending,
- (d) a post-Tsunami joint rehabilitation mechanism, laboriously negotiated but struck down finally by the Supreme Court.

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(e) The final misjudgment came with the leader's directive to the Tamil people not to participate in the Presidential election in November 2005.

I am not a fatalist, but it would seem that at some point in time during this process, a military showdown with its horrendous human cost and material damage became inescapable. This points to the heavy responsibility of the LTTE for the unspeakable outcome of last month. On the other hand, the government, led brilliantly by H.E. President Mahinda Rajapaksa has demonstrated its competence and efficiency in war as well as in rehabilitation.

I have heard a great deal of discussion about an alleged responsibility of the international community for the failure to achieve peace in this country. Some people also attribute a degree of responsibility to the Norwegian facilitators of negotiation with the LTTE. But as someone associated with United Nations efforts for settling conflicts in different parts of the world over some decades, I can testify that the ultimate responsibility for war and peace in any conflict must rest with the leadership of the parties in conflict. Mediators and facilitators can only offer some needed assistance and encouragement. In other words, they can bring the horse to water, but cannot make it drink.

In its checkered history, Sri Lanka was under different colonial rules which influenced the relationship and shifted the balance between different ethnic communities. Acts of cruelty were committed by all sides.

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However, after six decades of attaining independence, it is perhaps not helpful to attribute all blame to the colonial legacy of “divide and rule”. In the course of many years people of different ethnic backgrounds have met, mixed and have sometimes married each other. Business deals were made, and friendships were formed, constituting the basis of a unified Sri Lanka. It seems to me that now is the time to accelerate this trend and further develop Sri Lanka as an integrated, multilingual and multi-ethnic democracy, accepting diversity within unity, or unity with diversity.

This country is one of the oldest democracies in Asia. It introduced women’s suffrage before the United Kingdom. It is a developing country with an unusually high literacy rate, educational achievements and high medical standard, although its attainment in the realm of the rule of law and good governance leaves something to be desired. It is in this last respect that we wish further effort will be exerted by all Sri Lankans. Foreigners should speak on this matter with some restraint.

On the occasion of 60th anniversary of the establishment of the United Nations in 2005, a world summit was held in New York, which reiterated universality of human rights, more specifically the “responsibility to protect” innocent civilians in wars and other emergencies. Among Asian countries, however, there is still smoldering debate on the relationship between national sovereignty and the non-interference principle in the U.N. Charter on the one hand, and the responsibility of all governments to protect their people and their inherent human rights, on the other. While all

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U.N. Member States subscribe to the high principles of the Charter, including its more recent human rights treaties and proclamations, the actual application and implementation of these principles and attendant procedures are subject to considerable debate and varied practices on a case-by-case basis. For policy makers, it is not easy to strike a judicious balance between the adherence to universal concepts and values and the concrete decisions which are taken on the basis of infinite circumstances. It is hoped that a more open-minded and sincere dialogue will take place between people holding different points of view with equal passion. In doing so, it is important to avoid the extremes of naive cosmopolitanism and excessive nationalism.

I am glad to state that Japan has always been one of the privileged and steadfast friends of Sri Lanka. “A friend in need is a friend in deed.” At the time of the San Francisco Peace Conference with Japan, a most distinguished Sri Lankan statesman who later became its President, H.E. Mr. J. R. Jayewardene referred to the spirit of magnanimity in Buddhist philosophy and called for exempting the vanquished Japan from reparation payments. Grateful Japan never forgot this noble gesture and responded to it with gratitude and friendship towards this country and has remained its leading donor country.

That is why we try on every occasion to contribute our due share to promoting development and prosperity in Sri Lanka and work with its government towards sustainable peace. That is also why Japan wishes to be

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a reliable partner at this time of great humanitarian needs in the North, rushing needed supplies and cash to ameliorate the lives of IDPs and to enable their early resettlement in their permanent homes. To bring about this outcome as soon as possible, Japan wants to offer some assistance for effective removal of landmines, obviously one of the prerequisites for safe resettlement.

In the medium to longer term, Japan would like to offer assistance for the improvement of basic infrastructure in this country in such areas as electricity, water, roadways, public transport and administration as well as building schools and hospitals. We would also like to be helpful in vocational training for agriculture and fishery and the environment – an urgent new necessity. I hasten to add that in these fields the opportunity should exist not only for official development assistance on a government to government basis, but increasingly for active investment activities by private enterprises. In this regard it is ardently hoped that existing administrative red tapes and other procedural impediments be removed expeditiously in the cause of freer trade and more capital flows into this country.

With the foundation for durable peace and justice at hand at long last, Sri Lanka shows an immense potential for economic development. Fortunately, it has numerous possibilities and advantages. Its social indicators are among the tops in Asia, with a high literacy rate, a high sanitary standard, an enviable spread of the English language, a high

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quality of its labour force, a world's top natural harbour Trincomalee, many sightseeing resources, an easy access to the huge Indian market, and the free trade agreements with India and Pakistan, to name just a few.

It should be evident to all distinguished participants here today that a brilliant and most rewarding chapter is just opening before us for a quantum jump in the great revival and reinvigoration of Sri Lankan economy. I am firmly convinced that members of the international community, including Japan, will have the privilege of actively participating in this exciting process. Let us pledge to work together in order not to miss the front hair of our rather elusive legendary goddess.