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## High Commissioner for Sri Lanka

‘Sri Lanka - Internal Conflict, Humanitarian Operation and Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Reconciliation’

*Australian Institute of International Affairs – ACT Branch*  
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The President of the AIIA, Excellencies, members of the media, other High Commission officials, ladies and gentlemen - thank you Ian for your gracious introduction. Let me, from the outset, welcome all of you and thank you for your presence in spite of your busy schedules and also thank the Australian Institute of International Affairs, including the president, and his staff, for the support you have extended to the Sri Lanka High Commission and to my country in organising this event.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is my privilege to stand in front of you and explain the humanitarian operation that took place between 2006-09 and the background to it, and how it was conducted and, having been conducted, resulted in the defeat of the most ruthless terrorist organisation militarily. From there we launched the reconciliation, reconstruction and rehabilitation program to take the country forward.

In my presentation I intend sharing with you a small video clip of about 10 minutes which will encapsulate my country, and also the conflict that propagated for many years. It will show how Sri Lanka is moving forward and, in fact, playing cricket with your great country. We just lost a game, but there are three to go. If you did watch the match you would have seen the number of Australians in the crowd. Let the reality on the ground give you the answers.

After the video I will be speaking to you in support of this and then I will be pleased to take some questions.

### PLAYS VIDEO

What you have just seen is exactly what my presentation is going to be about, in more detail. Sri Lanka faced many challenges over the long history that she is very proud of. In the contemporary history from 1970 she had to face challenges of terrorism, insurrection and violence. In 1971 the Government had to crush insurrection from the southern part of the country.

The year 1983 was a dark one in our country's history; in 1989 there was a further insurrection in a different form. After 1983 we were confronted with terrorism for almost the next 30 years.

This retarded the country's economic progress immensely as we were grappling with this menace of terrorism for such a long period. It deprived citizens of their most fundamental human rights and their democratic freedoms. It is not just in 2009 that freedoms and rights were deprived from our citizens.

His Excellency Ban Ki-moon, Secretary General of the United Nations, said in 2006: "Any form of terrorism that deprives fundamental human rights and democratic freedoms has to be tackled." Since 1983 the terrorists, having used the most destructive tactics, supported by acquired conventional military capability, massacred civilians, targeted places of worship and economic strength. More than 100 elected Members of Parliament and Ministers were killed.

Perhaps this is the only terrorist group that has killed the head of another country – this is leaving aside the Sri Lankan President who was killed. So as Sri Lankans grappled with this menace, consecutive Governments for many years gave the opportunity for this misled group of terrorists to come for negotiations.

Since 1985 many governments continued to try and settle this by peaceful means. There were many talks and the rest of the world supported this process. They hosted sessions, but Sri Lanka went for the talks and the other party was not present.

In 2002, the Government agreed to a ceasefire brokered by other countries. We were willing to have monitors, but unfortunately the terrorists capitalised on the Government's offer, using the ceasefire to build their military strength. Violations of the ceasefire were obvious but in spite of this the Government still went to Geneva for negotiations.

An incident at the Mavil Aru anicut which prevented the supply of water to the civilian population triggered this situation. The terrorists had a strategy to destabilise the north which at this time was connected only through the sea routes under the ceasefire agreement. There was a land route but it was blocked

In view of that situation, the heart of the northern peninsula was the Trincomalee Harbour in the east. It is one of the largest natural harbours and the home port of the navy.

On 1 August the terrorists attacked this when a passenger vessel, which was carrying 3000 services personnel, was targeted with artillery from across the harbour. They continued that offensive with an assault on the northern peninsula. They thought they could capture it with simultaneous attacks on the north

Fortunately our armed forces prevented this even though three terrorist boats came in and took a lot of lives. As a result of this the Government decided that the time had come to declare that the peace negotiations had failed. So they decided to take on a humanitarian operation to clear the east first and then go to the north.

Sri Lanka's sovereignty was never a marketable commodity. We had tried for peace, but our leadership decided to get everybody's support to launch the operation. It was a humanitarian operation, because it had a concept of zero civilian casualties.

Some people have misconstrued this concept. We were never going to attain zero casualties, but the aim was to instil a mindset in the military that the operation was to rescue people and that they should be trying to achieve, as much as possible, zero civilian casualties.

So the east was successfully taken and the north was then pursued. We succeeded because we staged a multi-theatre approach – block their support from outside and attack with our very well trained armed forces – army, navy air force and police.

If you go through the credentials of our country's military you will see its strong point was a solid foundation and a tested strategy put forward for the humanitarian operation. It was not some overnight decision, it was argued, as the military say “appreciation after appreciation after appreciation.”

This was an internal conflict. We were trying to save our own citizens. It was not an external conflict; it was not external aggression, so we had to find our own, home-grown solution. That was what was put into practice.

We began to achieve that and the terrorists were losing ground. We had good intelligence; we had countries supporting us with intelligence and we had well-trained, motivated and committed military and civilians. The logistics, the medical support, the finances, the economic support were all put together by the Government as we launched this humanitarian, military operation.

However, the terrorists took the innocent civilians as hostages and human shields, making our task very difficult. We were not facing a bunch of people with AK47s and a few hand grenades or hand-made explosive devices. We were facing artillery, surface-to-air missiles, aircraft whose pilots were on suicide missions. We were facing suicide boats moving at 45 to 50 knots, fitted with radar and there were semi-submersible devices which could not be detected on our radar.

That was the significance of the challenge we were facing. However, we countered this, and in the final stage of this conflict a concept disadvantageous to our military was nevertheless adapted for the sake of the civilians – no fire zones were established, these areas kept shifting as the enemy moved the people from place to place – 295,000 people were cornered.

Our effort was painstaking; we never used our full force. People think that there was no resistance to the armed forces. In fact there was significant resistance by terrorists using mortars, artillery and suicide bombers.

So we had to take every precaution. They had sown mines as they retreated. This was inflicting casualties on the civilians. It took time, during which the Sri Lankan armed forces took enormous casualties because this process was slow. We had to take every precaution to minimise the civilian casualties. The civilians were being held by terrorists, some wearing civilian clothes, some in the uniforms of our own armed forces. They got civilians to dig trenches in the final phases.

Without going into too much detail, the Navy, of which I was the Northern and Eastern commander from 2007-08, formed barriers around the coastline to save the civilians fleeing in whatever boat they could take – and to prevent the terrorist leadership escaping by sea. We had four layers of barriers that countered suicide threats. We matched the suicide boats with our own small boats.

We had large ships out at sea, so by a combination of all the Defence Force's technical ability, we were able to free the 290,000 civilians. The efforts taken by the Government to minimise the casualties were not only during that operation, it was a long-term effort, stopping what would otherwise have been a disastrous situation for our country.

We had to venture out to 2000 miles from our shores to look for the ships loaded with weapons - all the equipment that would have destroyed the north of our country. There were ships below the equator ready to replenish the terrorists' boats that would then have reached our shores.

Had we not taken the initiative; had our Government not invested in this type of operation, I leave it to you to imagine what would have happened had these weapons reached our shores.

We had the ability to detect vessels up to 300 miles away - the large ships that were ready to feed the terrorists. It was a very strategically planned operation. The entire coastline was covered to identify properly the difference between boats carrying refugee civilians and the suicide boats.

The suicide boats presented the biggest challenge. Imagine the psychology of a commander who goes into a suicide-infested area for a rescue operation. I just want to emphasise the pains the Government took in systematically, professionally, tactically conducting this humanitarian operation.

Having done that the Government forces rescued 290,000 people and they were treated in welfare centres and looked after. They had been kept without food for long periods by the terrorists and the country harnessed all its resources, it rallied round, supported by the Indian Medical Corps who came and established facilities and looked after the 290,000 innocent civilians who were rescued by the Sri Lankan armed forces.

The civilians were provided with food, health, education, recreation, religious activities, so that until they were resettled they had very good facilities. The indicators were judged by an independent panel including a doctor from Monash University who is doing a PhD. He found that the civilians were much better looked after than in previous conflicts. They proved the innocent population was looked after.

Having done this, the Government took all precautions to resettle the population as soon as possible. We had to clear the mines and reestablish ourselves in areas, but the direction from the top was that we should not take long; we should muster our resources, seek foreign assistance and train our own people for mine clearing.

The Reconstruction Ministry was ordered to get the required items as fast as possible and the instruction was that within one year 90 per cent of the people had to be resettled, and we achieved it, even though we had to work through the night. A Taskforce of Humanitarian Assistance was formed, essential services restored and countries, like Australia, gave millions of dollars for mine clearing.

In this short period all those displaced civilians are now resettled except for 10 to 15 per cent still remaining, not because the Government has no resources or plans but because the mines that the terrorists left have still to be cleared.

It is a painstaking job to clear mines, but roads are being repaired, hospitals are being built, houses constructed. It is all taking place.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have to have economic stability. The growth rate has been gradually increasing and in 2010 we are maintaining eight per cent growth. GDP has risen and unemployment has come down. The foreign remittance from our expatriates working round the world – there are large numbers in Australia – has supported the country's foreign exchange earnings, tourist arrivals are increasing and we intend to promote this to an extent that we will reach between two and three million by 2016.

Economic targets are set to achieve this and we have a strategic plan for further economic development. Export earnings show a 17 per cent increase; the stockmarket performance was unprecedented. It was the highest in the world.

The north and east which were neglected because of the terrorist occupation have shown gradual growth. The disparity between the south and the north is narrowing. The Government has devoted large sums of money to the development of the north and east.

Ladies and gentlemen, with economic stability, the country is moving forward. But we have a situation to face. I just want to take you back. The types of vessels that you saw have to be loaded with items purchased from outside Sri Lanka. None of the weapons used against our forces were made in Sri Lanka. These items were purchased with outside money and through outside networks.

There were people willing to sell these items and some willing to pay for them, and loading a ship of that size cannot be done in hiding. All this was done elsewhere. The foreign involvement, the money kept in various places, resulted from extortion, willing contributions, through smuggling and drug trafficking. Money was collected and much of it is still intact.

The terrorists could be re-grouping beyond our shores, using front organisations. The foreign soil is used for false propaganda. This is what is looming on the horizon. It is my humble assessment that we need the support of other countries not to permit these organisations to raise their heads again to divide a country like Sri Lanka.

We have a democracy that has been tried and tested for many years. Our Governments have changed democratically. Almost all the leaders that have been elected have served their full term. So our country's democracy is solid and will remain so.

It is the resilience of my country's leadership and that of every citizen that proved that terrorism could not win. It is our humble request to the rest of the world that it realise the good we have done by defeating one of the most ruthless terrorist organisations. Whatever the party or place they come from a terrorist is a terrorist, because he comes to kill you to achieve his aims.

In conclusion let me say that we thank the Australian Government for the help it has given Sri Lanka Government; the long standing friendship that we have. The Governor of NSW said Sri Lanka was in the inner circle of Australia. Our ties are so deep that even during the conflict your Government stood alongside us in supporting the Government that eradicated terrorism and then began the reconstruction.

Sri Lanka is a country which is trying to recover from what we have faced. We are now a middle income country and we have a long way to go, but it is our intention and the vision of the President to make Sri Lanka the wonder of Asia, such as it was in the 1970s when it was judged to be ahead of Singapore.

The wounds are healing. I request you to see what is happening on the ground. Our efforts are bearing fruit and we are going in the right direction. We are moving forward.

We have the Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission. Anyone who has any complaint can bring forward evidence. The Commission is open to everyone and the findings and the evidence is published online. We will look into all factors.

So the mechanisms are available to anyone who has a complaint. The Government is talking to all affected parties. They are represented in Parliament. Some former terrorists who were once in the forefront of the insurgency are now in Parliament; some are even Ministers in the Government – so reconciliation is taking place.

It is the support that we require for this to move forward. To see that our country does not regress.

Thank you.

The High Commissioner also read out two letters from the Head of International Committee of the Red Cross and the Deputy Head of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) sent in March 2009 and March 2007 respectively congratulating the Sri Lanka Navy for the exemplary conduct in combat and facilitating the provision of humanitarian assistance to civilians both on land and at sea.