

Hon. Speaker,

I am sure that Hon. Members are closely following developments in the country, especially the ongoing operations by our security forces in the North, to disarm the LTTE, and restore democracy, peace and stability to the region. In this context, our close and regular interaction with India, whose friendship and goodwill which we greatly value, has assumed critical significance in recent times.

Of particular importance has been the recent visit of Hon. Basil Rajapaksa MP., Senior Advisor to the President, as the Special Envoy of the President to New Delhi. The successful outcome of his discussions with the Indian leadership is most reassuring for the peoples of India and Sri Lanka and all those friends and well wishers who desire lasting peace in Sri Lanka. Of course, it goes without saying that the enemies of peace and the prophets of doom, who had predicted otherwise, are naturally disappointed!

In this context, I believe it is my duty to keep the Hon. Members apprised of the ongoing dialogue with India, in so far as we address the concerns expressed by India regarding the current situation in Sri Lanka. In doing so and making this Statement, I would also attempt to provide a reply to the matters raised by Hon. Joseph Michael Perera, on 30th October under Standing Order 23.2. Hence, I feel it is appropriate that I table the two official communiqués issued jointly by India and Sri Lanka in New Delhi on 26 October 2008, at the conclusion of Hon. Basil Rajapaksa's visit. These are the:

- (a) India-Sri Lanka Joint Press Release
- (b) India-Sri Lanka Joint Statement on Fishing Arrangements

The visit of Hon. Basil Rajapaksa to New Delhi must be viewed in the backdrop of the strong bonds of friendship and trust that the Government of President Mahinda Rajapaksa has forged with the political leadership of India, as a manifestation of the longstanding historical ties between India and Sri Lanka. Hon. Members would recall that I alluded to this aspect of our bilateral relations with India in my Statement to this House on 21st October.

This visit, therefore took place as part and parcel of the high level political dialogue between the two countries, which President Mahinda Rajapaksa and Indian Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh had agreed to maintain.

Hon. Members will be aware that President Rajapaksa telephoned Dr. Manmohan Singh on

18th October to keep him abreast of the current situation, during which he informed the Indian leader that the Government of Sri Lanka has taken utmost precautions to ensure the safety and well being of civilians who have been displaced.

The Government attaches the highest importance to the humanitarian needs of not only the internally displaced persons (IDPs), but also all civilians trapped in the conflict affected areas of the Wanni in the Kilinchchi and Mullaitivu districts. I wish to categorically state that there is absolutely no shortage of food or essential items in the Wanni. The Commissioner General of Essential Services has received confirmation to this effect from the Government Agents of Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu.

Hon Speaker,

The question then naturally arises as to why the Sri Lankan Government has agreed to accept the 800 tonnes of relief material from India, for the affected civilians in the North, as per the Indo-Sri Lanka Joint Press Release. The answer is quite simple, and it lies in the self-same Press Release. Since Hon. Joseph Michael Perera is attempting to stir up an unnecessary controversy on this matter, I feel it would be useful to quote the relevant extract from the Press Release, and I quote, “As a gesture of goodwill, India has decided to send around 800 tonnes of relief material to Sri Lanka for the affected civilians in the North. The Government of Sri Lanka will facilitate the delivery. Both sides agreed to consult and cooperate with each other in addressing these humanitarian issues.”

A plain reading of the above extract makes it abundantly clear that the envisaged humanitarian assistance is to be provided to the civilians in the conflict affected areas in the North, as a “gesture of goodwill” by India towards Sri Lanka. This aid is, after all a manifestation of the friendship and good neighbourliness between our two countries.

It is in this same spirit of friendship and goodwill that Sri Lanka extended a token financial grant of US\$ 25,000/- as immediate relief to the Government of the Union of Myanmar in the wake of the devastating cyclone Nargis which hit the country on 02nd May. We also offered to send a team of doctors and nurses to provide medical assistance to the victims of the cyclone.

Similarly, when a massive earthquake struck the Sichuan Province in China on 12th May, Sri Lanka was one of the first countries to come forward and provide immediate humanitarian relief to assist the survivors of this terrible tragedy. On President Rajapaksa’s personal instructions, I organized the despatch of relief material worth US\$ 1.5 million, which included tents, pharmaceuticals and medical equipment to the Sichuan Province. We arranged a special A-340 SriLankan Airlines flight on 25th May to the regional capital Chengdu. Chinese President Hu Jintao and the entire political leadership of China have expressed their gratitude and appreciation to President Rajapaksa for his deep personal concern for the people of China.

When torrential floods hit Nepal in August, Sri Lanka once again showed its solidarity with the Nepalese people by making a token contribution of US\$25,000/- to the Nepalese Government as relief assistance for the victims.

This is not all. When heavy rains caused major flooding in the Indian State of Bihar in September, which displaced over 2 million people, the Government of Sri Lanka, in keeping with its policy of friendship and goodwill, that is deeply rooted in our culture and national ethos, offered humanitarian relief for the flood victims in the form of a cash donation of US\$ 50,000/- . The cheque for this amount was handed over by our High Commissioner to the Resident Commissioner of Bihar on 12th September in New Delhi.

On that occasion, High Commissioner Romesh Jayasinghe had referred to the letter that President Mahinda Rajapaksa had sent the Indian Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh the previous week, in which the President had recalled that the State of Bihar has a special place in the hearts of Sri Lankan Buddhists, since every year tens of thousands of Buddhist pilgrims visit the State to pay homage to the sacred land, where the Lord Buddha attained enlightenment. I feel it would be in the fitness of things to table the media release that our Foreign Ministry issued in this connection.

I drew the attention of this august House to these matters, in order to disabuse the minds of the general public of Sri Lanka of any ulterior motive that certain interested parties are trying to impute to the Government of India for the humanitarian assistance that it has offered for the civilians in the North who have been affected by the conflict. Hence, the people of Sri Lanka should not be misled by those who are attempting to give a mischievous construction to this noble gesture of goodwill by India.

We are open to receiving humanitarian assistance and relief from any other friendly country, which wishes to contribute towards the Government's efforts to keep an uninterrupted supply of goods and essential services to the civilians in the conflict affected areas of the Wanni. Hon. Members would recall that in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami disaster which struck Sri Lanka in December 2004, there was a worldwide spontaneous outpouring of sympathy for the victims, which soon translated itself into massive consignments of emergency relief items being sent to Sri Lanka from several countries.

I must emphasize that it is the Government of Sri Lanka that has carried the major burden of feeding and providing essential services, including medical aid and educational facilities to the people in the uncleared areas of the Wanni, without any interruption, since the onset of the conflict, and despite several attempts by the LTTE to disrupt the smooth transport of these goods. Since August 2006, the Government through the Commissioner General of Essential Services has despatched 37,000 tons of food items to Kilinochchi and 35,000 tons to Mullaitivu.

The Government deeply regrets the temporary inconvenience and the hardship that our people in the Wanni are experiencing, which will be over soon. The Government will never abandon them and will continue to take care of their needs and welfare, despite many obstacles.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa is personally monitoring the situation. Addressing Sri Lankan media heads and editors at Temple Trees on 21st October, he said, "Our primary responsibility as a government is to look after all our citizens. I carry out this responsibility to the fullest especially with regard to the people who are temporarily displaced in the North, due to the ongoing military operations to defeat terrorism. There is a wrong impression created in Tamil

Nadu that this not been done. This is furthest from the correct position. All these are our citizens and we take every measure to look after and provide for them."

Let me reiterate to this House that our Government has not been subject to pressure from any quarter, to halt the ongoing military operations to defeat terrorism. On the contrary, we have received the unstinted support and co-operation of our friends in the international community to pursue this goal. In fact, the Indo-Sri Lanka Joint Press Release of 26th October explicitly endorses the common position shared by both countries that "terrorism should be countered with resolve". India's stand on this matter could not have been expressed in a more unambiguous and candid manner.

The political leadership of India fully understands and appreciates the imperative and urgent need to rid Sri Lanka of the scourge of terrorism, which has cost us dearly in terms of the many thousands of lives lost, the huge economic losses suffered, consequent to vital national assets being destroyed by the terrorists, apart from the climate of fear and insecurity that grips the ordinary civilians, who agonize whether they would be caught up in the next train or bus bomb planted by the terrorists.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa's administration from its inception is firm in its resolve to defeat terrorism and provide a durable political solution to address the genuine grievances of the minority communities. Even today, the President's commitment to peace remains undiminished. He has categorically rejected the notion that the Government is pursuing a military solution.

Addressing the All Party Conference on 11th October, President Rajapaksa declared, "However difficult it may be, it is my belief that the efforts to find political solutions to political issues should be continued. It is my belief that there are no military solutions to political questions. The people have elected us to realize their aims and aspirations. It is our duty to ensure to the Tamil people of the North the same democratic rights as enjoyed by the people in all other parts of the country. Military operations have become necessary to eradicate terrorism from the country and enthrone democracy throughout the land."

For any political solution to be feasible, disarmament of the LTTE is an essential pre-requisite. As long as the LTTE remains armed and possessing the capacity to kill innocent civilians and destabilise public order, whatever political solution that may be proposed will simply not be viable.

I must remind Hon. Members of the House that President Rajapaksa has taken the lead in restoring democracy and civil administration to the Eastern Province, which was until last year, a hotbed of terrorism and violence. Today, the political landscape in the Province has undergone a dramatic transformation, which one could scarcely have contemplated a year ago. Following the holding of local government elections in the Batticaloa district and the subsequent Provincial Council elections, we have today an elected Chief Minister with a Board of Ministers, functioning within the democratic institutional framework. It is the sincere desire of our Government to further enhance the democratic process in the Eastern Province and replicate the success of this model in the Northern Province too, once we eliminate the menace of terrorism from that region. Hon. Members would note that the President's sentiments have been

reflected in the Joint Press Release.

I want to assure Hon. Members of the House that contrary to media speculation and comments of arm chair pundits, there are no secret deals with India. The excellent understanding that our Government has with the Indian Government in our efforts to defeat terrorism and restore democracy to the North, is reflected in the Joint Press Release of 26th October, which is self-explanatory.

As President Rajapaksa has repeatedly said, the solution we seek is one which secures peace with honour and dignity. It cannot be peace at any cost, since any such settlement is bound to fail. Unlike in war, where there is a victor and a vanquished, in a peace process, all stakeholders are winners. I want to again emphasize that the Government is firmly and irreversibly committed to the peace process, since the ultimate winners are the people of Sri Lanka.