



Permanent Mission of Sri Lanka to the UN, Geneva

Tel : (+41) 022 919 12 50, Fax : (+41) 022 734 90 84

E-mail: mission@lankamission.org Web: www.lankamission.org

Statement by H.E. Ravinatha Aryasinha Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Sri Lanka at the International Dialogue on Migration 2013 - Diaspora Ministerial Conference, on the theme 'Diasporas and Development: Bridging between Societies and States' organized by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) - Geneva, 18 -19 June 2013

Sri Lanka welcomes the convening of the International Dialogue on Migration 2013 - Diaspora Ministerial Conference by IOM, on the theme 'Diasporas and Development: Bridging between Societies and States', which seeks to consider the various contributions that diaspora communities make both to their countries of origin and the countries where they reside, and to suggest some areas for maximizing the impact of diaspora engagement and to create an enabling environment towards achieving that goal.

Need for Conceptual Clarity

Given that this international forum convened by the IOM on the theme of diaspora is unprecedented, we must recognize that there is no widely accepted universal definition of the term 'diaspora' and in fact the term is today used to signify many different phenomena. The working definition of diasporas proposed by the International Organization for Migration/Migration Policy Institute in *Developing a Road Map for Engaging Diasporas in Development: A Handbook for Policymakers and Practitioners in Home and Host Countries* (2012) which guides this discussion, describes it as, **“Emigrants and their descendants, who live outside the country of their birth or ancestry, either on a temporary or permanent basis, yet still maintain affective (emotional) and material ties to their countries of origin”**. By this token, it is clear that once considered as an extraordinary group that fled persecution and longed to return to their original habitat, diaspora today includes all those who live away from their country of birth or origin, but continue to identify with it - be they naturalized foreign citizens, expatriate residents, students, migrant workers, exiles, and asylum seekers.

The background documentation for this conference recognizes that diaspora communities engage in development processes in multiple ways, very often through their own initiative, and it is therefore important to explore the strategies that may facilitate diaspora participation in both countries of origin and the countries they live. To do so, it has been suggested an approach based on three pillars: **Engage, Enable and Empower** as the framework for identifying the policy and programmatic options that aim to increase the possibilities offered to diaspora communities to participate in development processes of States. It would be pertinent that we consider adding a fourth pillar, one more 'E' if you like, that is to also **'Educate'** Diaspora, especially about the situational realities of their countries of origin and the changes that take place over time, without leaving them at the mercy of exaggerated or distorted versions of the reality. Such knowledge will not only enhance their understanding of their home countries, but will also make them more relevant in meaningfully engaging with it.

A cautionary note that must be struck in our discussion on diaspora, which unfortunately does not appear to be reflected in the background documentation of this conference, is the tendency to take for granted that in all its manifestations diasporas are autonomous and are necessarily a force for good. While generally diaspora members can play significant roles in the development of their country of origin, including through financial, human and social resources as well as political influence, whether they will all choose to do so is questionable. Particularly in assessing the role of diaspora from countries that remain conflict affected or have recently emerged from protracted conflict, the dynamics are clearly more complex and to view it simplistically would ignore the political realities on the ground.

The academic discourse relating to this issue, clearly demonstrates that diaspora are rarely autonomous actors, and are often compelled by organized networks to fund, arm, engage in propaganda and act as electoral vote blocks in host countries, thereby having the potential to act as 'spoilers' in conflict resolution and post-conflict reconciliation in their home states. Infact there are ample instances where even when home states might want to end a conflict or pursue reconciliation, diaspora resist such moves, for it is not their sons and daughters who die, and often keeping the pot boiling in the home states become opportune, so that they might retain greater leverage, particularly in their quest to seek to legally reside or gain citizenship in a chosen host country.

The academic literature is also replete with instances where the transnational political opportunity structures prevalent in host states have helped shape and sustain diaspora activism. This makes it clear that host states can play a critical role in order for engagement to succeed between a home state and its diaspora.

In such context, it is important that we recognize the complexity of the challenge we face, acknowledge the pre-disposition among some diaspora categories to make meaningful engagement not possible, and try to explore modalities through which both home states and host states could better influence diaspora in processes of conflict resolution, reconciliation and development in their home states.

The Sri Lankan Diaspora

While I have no doubt the concerns I have raised are common to many states which are embroiled in or emerging from separatist/irredentist/internal conflict, the experience of Sri Lanka which having overcome a largely Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora funded 30 year terrorist campaign by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) 4 years ago and is on the path to reconciliation, offers an instructive example, of both the scope as well as the complexities encountered in the nexus between diaspora, home states and host states.

Of its near 21 million population, 3 million Sri Lankans living as diaspora amount to nearly 15%. While a small share of these are traditional migrants living in the West, over 1.8 million represent what is essentially regarded as a migrant work force in many parts of the world, mainly the Middle East, East Asia and South East Asia. The rest of the Sri Lankan Diaspora, belonging to all ethnicities of Sri Lanka - Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim and Burghers, mainly reside in the Western hemisphere, Australia, New Zealand, India and the African continent. Of these, estimates suggest that Sri Lankan Tamils number over 1 million, of which a bulk are refugee claimants and constitute sizeable vote banks with considerable leverage within those political systems.

It is noteworthy that at present, excluding monies transferred to Sri Lanka through informal channels, the total remittances from the Sri Lankan Diaspora in 2012 was approximately \$ 6.0 billion, growing by nearly 17% over 2011. This amount is equivalent to about 10% of Sri Lanka's GDP, 25% of total government revenue and 33% of total foreign exchange earnings.

It is important to note that the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora, who during the height of the LTTE campaign were the victims of extortion, are today no monolith. A bulk of the Sri Lankan Tamil population living abroad have used the new found peace in Sri Lanka to eschew extremist ideas and to seek to re-engage with their roots in the North and the East of the country. Since 2009, considerable numbers of the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora have visited their home towns in the North after many decades, while some have also invested in Sri Lanka. But at the same time, within the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora there also continues to exist a small but vociferous group of activists intent on seeking to vilify Sri Lanka and prolong the struggle, who advocate mono-ethnic separatism in Sri Lanka while espousing the ideology of the LTTE, using its money and being manipulated by surviving political and military leaders of the LTTE who continue to live in Western countries. Among them are also some 2nd generation Tamil youth, who never experienced the real horror of the conflict suffered by all Sri Lankans over the past 30 years, but who see this opportunity as one to be exploited as ‘political entrepreneurs’, as many other diaspora communities have also sought to do over the years.

Sri Lanka's efforts at reaching-out

The Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) has already shown itself to be adept at differentiating between these two categories. While there are no holds barred in seeking to identify those within the Diaspora whose actions seek to perpetuate the legacy of terrorism and division of Sri Lanka, at the same time, GOSL has made it clear that it does not intend to demonize or isolate the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora, and that it understands that a majority among them had to act as they did through the conflict under duress from the LTTE. The GOSL has also shown keenness to engage in a dialogue with them in the changed atmosphere, with a view to harness their talents and resources towards the betterment of Sri Lanka, particularly the Northern and Eastern Provinces, which had seen little economic development during the 30 years of the conflict. This approach was most clearly articulated by President Mahinda Rajapaksa, shortly after the conclusion of the 30 year conflict, when during his address to the 65th Session of the UN General Assembly in New York on 23 September 2010, he observed;

“a great deal has been said by those beyond our borders about our Tamil community. Let me be clear, no nation on earth can wish Sri Lanka’s Tamil community more good fortune than Sri Lanka itself. To the misguided few, I say, do not allow yourselves to become an instrument of division, hate and violence, to be used as an enabler for hatred to be reborn in another form. Rather come, let us join hands and break the bonds of mistrust to rise to new horizons. Sri Lanka recognises the challenges we face, among the greatest of which is healing the wounds of the recent past.”

Following in this spirit, in addition to facilitating visits to the home towns of Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora members, and in resolving some of their long standing citizenship and land issues, GOSL has engaged in a structured dialogue with members of the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora from the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Norway, Germany, Switzerland, France among others, to enable them not only to see for themselves the significant socio-economic, political and cultural renewal taking place in the former conflict affected areas, but also to discuss with them proposals for further political empowerment of the people and economic development of these areas.

This process of involving the Sri Lankan Diaspora received added fillip in 2011 through the Report of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC), Sri Lanka's home-grown reconciliation mechanism. The Commission noted that;

"while some ‘Tamil diaspora groups’ seek to contribute constructively to broad based reconciliation efforts, some other diaspora groups, especially, those described by some

as supporting the LTTE, seem to adopt an adversarial approach. It is clear to the Commission that these 'hostile diaspora groups' can potentially undermine the genuine efforts in Sri Lanka towards reconciliation. The Commission therefore feels that the Government together with the relevant stakeholders, especially civil society, should develop a comprehensive approach to harness the potential of the expatriate community."

On the recommendation of the LLRC, the National Plan of Action towards the implementation of the recommendations of the LLRC has entrusted the Ministry of External Affairs the task of constituting "a Multi- Disciplinary Task Force that includes representatives from the Presidential Secretariat, External Affairs, Defence, Foreign Employment, the Private Sector, and Academia, to propose a programme of action to harness the untapped potential of the expatriate community, and to respond to the concerns of the so-called 'hostile Diaspora groups,' and to engage them constructively with the Government and other stakeholders involved in the reconciliation process". A programme is being formulated to harness the untapped potential of the expatriate community through Sri Lankan overseas Missions.

With a view to having greater engagement with the Sri Lankan Diaspora, a process has also been initiated to hold 'Diaspora Investor Forums' to guide those working abroad on investment opportunities in securities instruments such as equities and bonds, and also to provide sufficient information about the investment opportunities in Sri Lanka and economic growth prospects, so that diaspora can themselves invest and also help in attracting investment into the country.

Further, as part of a 'Brain Gain' initiative, 'WorkInSriLanka' has also developed a web portal that provides comprehensive information that links users with key industry bodies in Sri Lanka, and is building a worldwide network to create awareness of the site and its services amongst educated professionals, mainly Sri Lankans abroad. Efforts are also being made to avail of the expertise within the Sri Lankan Diaspora by encouraging 'professional mobility' and 'brain circulation' schemes involving Sri Lanka.

Additionally, efforts have also been made to engage young professionals in the Sri Lankan Diaspora, through initiatives such as the *What's Next!*, an independent forum comprising post-graduates and young professionals of Sri Lankan origin residing in France, who seek to promote a sustainable peace in Sri Lanka through intellectual exchange and multicultural dialogue.

The role of host countries

Some countries who in the past found the electoral clout wielded by Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora activists sufficient reason to bring pressure on Sri Lanka have realized that continuing to appease the extremist elements of the Tamil Diaspora is counter-productive and are encouraging them to build bridges with their home communities back in Sri Lanka. Others who continue to send the wrong signal by condoning with the hostility shown by a vociferous minority within the Sri Lanka Tamil Diaspora who through their politically mobilized LTTE front organizations and using global platforms act to sustain hatred and prevent reconciliation in Sri Lanka. In particular the trajectory this section of the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora hostile to GOSL takes in future, will to a large extent depend on the attitude shown by their respective host states.

Countries that host these communities will soon have to come to a conclusion as to who speaks for the Tamils of Sri Lanka ? - whether it is the minority in the Diaspora who are unrepentant, militant and continue to seek an independent 'Tamil Eelam', or whether it is those peace loving Tamils living both in Sri Lanka as well as abroad, who are ready to move

on with other communities that share the country in solidarity, with a willingness to work out whatever differences that remain through peaceful means. It would be fair to say that while the former continue to live the dream, the latter are the ones who are living the change.

The re-settlement of the displaced and steps towards reconciliation, actions of restorative justice including the rehabilitation and release of 95% of the former LTTE cadres, the ongoing rapid socio-economic development in the formerly conflict affected areas, and the restoration of Provincial administration in the Northern Province in September 2013, will help answer this question to any who wish to make an objective assessment as to the recovery achieved in Sri Lanka which ended a 30 year long terrorist conflict only 4 years ago.

Conclusion

Hence, even as we salute the numerous contributions that many diaspora communities make both to their countries of origin and in the countries where they reside, if we are to arrive at a truly comprehensive understanding of the linkage between diaspora, their home states and their host states, it is vital that we do so recognizing the full complexity of this phenomena, including diaspora's disruptive tendencies. It is only by doing so that we will be able to find ways of influencing diaspora towards processes of conflict resolution, reconciliation and development in their home states.