



Permanent Mission of Sri Lanka to the UN, Geneva

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Address by H.E Ravinatha Aryasinha, Ambassador/Permanent Representative of Sri Lanka to the United Nations at the 65th Independence Day celebrations in Geneva - 2 February 2013

Ayubowam, Vannakam, Assalamu Alaikum, Good Evening

Ven. Sirs, Reverend Sirs, Ladies and Gentlemen, Sons and Daughters,

Together with colleagues of the Sri Lanka Mission in Geneva, I warmly welcome you to this 65th Independence Day celebrations of Sri Lanka.

I see members of the Sri Lankan community gathered here today as bringing together the ethnic, religious, cultural, and social diversity Sri Lanka as a people inherit. The bond that binds us all is our passion for Sri Lanka – whether acquired from birth, through marriage, through travel, cultural or business interaction with the country. Our common wish is to see Sri Lanka prosper.

Your presence here on this important day symbolizes the continuing gratitude you have for Sri Lanka. In my short time here in Geneva, one thing that has struck me, is the important role many of you play to bring credit to Sri Lanka and to make those organizations you work for more sensitive to the challenges Sri Lanka faces. I feel immense pride when heads of international organizations whom I interact with, speak in glowing terms of the contributions made by Sri Lankan nationals, both past and present, or when Ambassadors of countries tell me how enthusiastically some working in their Missions press Sri Lanka's case, through thick and thin.

I want to specially greet the children participating in this event. As a father of similarly aged children, I know well that it is not like you didn't have more exciting things to do on a not so cold Saturday evening. But that you chose to be here makes a point. I hope this event - the multi-religious observances, the commemorating of our forbearers who had to go through immense struggle to ensure Sri Lanka's continued freedom, listening to the thoughts of our present leaders on the way forward and watching the cultural performances that will follow, will provide you a glimpse of the best of Sri Lanka. It will leave you with a sense of history and something authentic to identify with as home.

As the statements of His Excellency the President, the Hon. Prime Minister and Hon. Foreign Minister made clear, Sri Lanka, having overcome long years of terrorism and its after effects, has made important strides in ensuring economic growth, social advancement and reconciliation for its people. But, as we celebrate our freedom, both from colonialism of the past, and terrorism of more recent origin, let us not forget that these continue to be challenging times for Sri Lanka.

After a 30 year long struggle with terrorism, not only do things not settle down over night, and there remains much to be done in finding consensus on a host of issues within the country, there are also some, particularly living outside the country, either mis-guided or with vested interests, who continue to seek to distort the image of Sri Lanka. As a result, the Sri Lanka which is projected out here, is considerably different from the Sri Lanka that is over there.

This is not a moment for any Sri Lankan or lover of Sri Lanka to be mere spectators. It is a time for all those who are genuinely interested in Sri Lanka's future, to join in shaping that destiny.

It is in such context that I request that you reflect on as to what more you can actively do to contribute from afar towards this endeavour:

- While doing so yourselves, I ask that you encourage your friends, to visit Sri Lanka, to invest in Sri Lanka, and to make available their expertise, even for short periods towards the development of our country;

- I also urge, that both as individuals, as well as organizations, that you make even greater effort to leverage the policy of your host government, employer countries and organizations, in ways that contribute to Sri Lanka's progress;

- I also appeal, to each and every one of you, to in your own ways, contribute towards moderating the negative narratives presently propagated against Sri Lanka – by clarifying genuine concerns and debunking the falsehoods.

I recognize that there may be differences of opinion amongst us on some issues, as it should be in any democracy. However, I think it is time that Sri Lankans both in Sri Lanka and abroad evolved a consensus and desisted from seeking to exploit domestic issues as foreign policy issues, which will result in Sri Lanka continuing to be vilified abroad. Let us not forget that great nations that have succeeded in forging ahead against many odds, are those that have been able to leave domestic issues at the water's edge.

This is why it is important for us to identify and “bracket” issues we disagree on, as ones where we need to work harder to reconcile our disagreements internally, but at the same time not allow them to adversely affect the image of our country abroad. Such bracketing is something we constantly do in our daily lives - within our homes, offices and communities, where we close ranks on issues, for a higher purpose.

My appeal is that we do so now, in order to protect the image of our country abroad.

Once again I thank you for your participation, and hope that you enjoy the evening.