



Twenty-first (special) sitting

Friday, 15 June 2007, 11.05 a.m.

President: Mr. Sulka

**ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY MR. MAHINDA
RAJAPAKSA, PRESIDENT OF THE DEMOCRATIC
SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF SRI LANKA**

The PRESIDENT

The twenty-first (special) sitting of this session of the International Labour Conference is called to order. I pass the floor to Mr. Juan Somavia, Secretary-General of the Conference, to welcome our distinguished guest, His Excellency Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka.

The Secretary-General of the Conference

Dear friends, today we receive President Rajapaksa who served as Minister of Labour of Sri Lanka from 1994 to 1997. President Rajapaksa has long been part of this Conference.

In years past, you came to this hall and affirmed your commitment to our Organization and the values embodied in our Constitution, and you made the connections between social and economic policy, between productive employment and poverty reduction, between training and opportunity, but also hope for young people.

As Minister of Labour, your aim was to implement the Workers' Charter, as the anchor of social stability and economic progress, a great notion. As Minister of Fisheries, the well-being of fishers was on your agenda. It is most fitting that your visit coincides with the adoption of comprehensive standards on work in the fishing sector, which we just voted upon yesterday.

Mr. President, under your tenure a national policy for decent work has been formulated. We applaud the visions set out in that document. It speaks of "the future of peace and prosperity in which all Sri Lankans enjoy a better quality of life, free from poverty and deprivation, for the promotion of opportunities for women and men to obtain productive work in conditions of freedom, equity security and human dignity."

This is the challenge that all of us nationally and collectively are facing. The decade of development you have established in Sri Lanka, Mahinda Chinthana, is strongly marked by the decent work objectives your country has embraced: focusing on the rural poor, placing emphasis on building the infrastructure for your country to grow, enabling people to have access to electricity, irrigation and water, housing and livelihood assistance. Your country grew by more than 7 per cent in 2006, unemploy-

ment declined to 6 per cent, exports have increased by 8 per cent and foreign investment is expanding.

You are committed to bringing these results down to the daily lives of people. The Gama Neguma programme, developing 12,000 villages, is your flagship initiative. It recognizes the value of the local dimension of development, and of the voices of the people where they live. The compelling challenge is for all of this to flourish in terms of peace and stability across your country. You have expressed, your "determination and strong resolve to establish a political order that would work towards the common good of the country, shedding all differences." At a time of deep conflict, this is perhaps the supreme challenge, and you have insisted it is only with a stable political environment that sustainable development will be achieved. And you know only too well the toll of conflict and, whatever the course and the best solutions, there is always the unbearable human cost for families and communities.

We at the ILO are, of course, concerned about its impact on employers and workers, public sector, private sector, humanitarian workers and innocent people. Many of us know about the fear of living under the threat of insecurity, and about violence taking innocents lives and livelihoods. Suffering crosses boundaries.

Sri Lankan citizens no doubt, envision the day when Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslim and Burghers all join as one nation to overcome together and repair the damage of division and estrangement. You have connected with that aspiration, when you spoke of your goal of "a politics of brotherhood in place of the politics of enmity by the coming together of the high aspirations among the blue, red and green hues in politics."

Mr. President, let me assure you of our full support of all Sri Lankans in building the bridges to make this vision a reality. We are an institution that deeply believes in dialogue. Not only to resolve issues, but also in its healing power when the time of reconciliation comes around. Today, we invite you to share your perspectives on realizing this vision in the Sri Lanka of today, for the Sri Lanka of tomorrow. Thank you, Mr. President, for being with us.

The PRESIDENT

It is now my privilege to give the floor to His Excellency President Rajapaksa.

Mr. MAHINDA RAJAPAKSA (*President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka*)

It gives me great pleasure to be here today in this august assembly after a lapse of many years. I have

been here earlier, as Minister of Labour, and I have enjoyed my interaction over the years with the Organization and with the different delegations, whether they were Government or Workers' delegations or Employers' delegations.

Allow me to extend to you, Mr. President, our warmest congratulations on your election to the Presidency of the 96th Session of the International Labour Conference. I would also wish to extend our congratulations to the Director-General for his impressive and comprehensive Report in which he highlights the issues concerning the world of work.

My visits to the ILO from time to time have been a great learning experience and a particularly enriching influence on my political career, which has spanned over 36 years. My political life has been constantly influenced by the aspiration of the working classes of my country. Contacts with employers, too, have been quite extensive, and this has given me a well-rounded perspective on decent work. Indeed, the value system on which I have based my political life is anchored in the well-being of the working classes.

I have been impressed by the tripartite character of your Organization, and this concept has been close to my heart for a considerable period of time. It is my firm belief that social dialogue based on the concept of tripartism can make a positive and substantial contribution to a country's overall development. The value of the tripartite system was confirmed in 1944 in the Declaration of Philadelphia concerning the aims and purposes of the ILO, formally incorporated in its Constitution.

As far as Sri Lanka is concerned, it must be stated that in the case of minimum-wage fixing, tripartism began long years ago. In point of fact, tripartite wage-fixing machinery was first introduced into labour legislation by the enactment of the Minimum Wages (Indian Labour) Ordinance in 1927. The second experiment in tripartite wage-fixing machinery in Sri Lanka was in the year 1944, where wages boards were established to fix minimum rates of wages and other terms and conditions of employment for workers in various different trades.

Yet another example of tripartite consultative bodies operating in my country would be the National Labour Advisory Council, activated during my tenure as Minister of Labour, in which leading trade unionists, employee representatives and government officials are represented to discuss and determine labour policy. I firmly believe that the promotion of genuinely tripartite national consultations, in which employers' and workers' organizations make a significant contribution to the formulation of economic policies, would help bring about a social consensus on economy adjustment and foster partnership in development.

The ILO has been at the forefront of upgrading the life of the workers of all sectors. It has been clamouring and has spearheaded the movement to ensure equal pay for equal work for women. Undoubtedly, while it has made a tremendous improvement in the working conditions of women, it has also been a critical influence in work to eliminate child labour.

Sri Lanka has always ensured that women are provided with decent work environments and equal pay, and has been very strict about employing child labour. It is appropriate for me to say that, having gained admission to the ILO in 1948, Sri Lanka has become a party to 31 ILO Conventions, including

the eight core Conventions. This is particularly appropriate because Sri Lanka's unique strength lies in the quality of its human resources.

We have had a proud history of worker participation in the political life of our society. Worker activists have been elected in their own right first to the State Council in 1931 and then to Parliament since 1948. There is no doubt that it was their activism which was substantially responsible for Sri Lanka's achieving unprecedented social standards for a third world country. I am proud to say that Sri Lanka achieved universal adult franchise in 1931, and that women gained the right to vote before this right was achieved in many western countries.

In formulating our public policy, we have always tried to strike a balance between three objectives: macro-economic management, development and welfare. We have provided a large number of welfare measures. Education has been compulsory for children below 14 years. We have a proud inheritance of providing free education in government schools, universities and our technical colleges. We have provided free medical care to all our citizens and we do provide certain consumables at subsidized rates to those below the poverty line.

Our compliance with global standards has gained Sri Lanka the right to market its garments under the slogan "Garments without Guilt".

With all these welfare measures and a sharp focus on the development of the human being, it's no wonder Sri Lanka enjoys a very high rating in the UN Human Development Index at number 93. We are also on the way to achieving or surpassing many of the Millennium Development Goals. All these benefit the worker, the rural farmer and the self-employed.

Our Government will continue to follow socially oriented policies with the interest of the working classes uppermost. It is with that in mind we launched our rural development movement "Gama Neguma" ("the revival of the village") to improve the life of the rural masses who have tended to be left behind by the rapid development of the cities. This programme encompasses all aspects of rural life, including livelihoods of people, and will uplift rural communities. The theme of this programme is central to the aims of the ILO – the empowerment of people and the provision of opportunity for the fullest development of the human personality.

We are proud that our social attitudes have been conditioned by a caring culture nurtured over two millennia. Sri Lanka, as a predominantly Buddhist country, has always had a very strong compassionate approach to fellow human beings. This is a cultural dimension which we share with our neighbours. In this context, I would also like to mention that, unlike those countries that discovered human rights in the aftermath of the massive destruction caused by global wars and bloody social revolutions, caring for fellow human beings has been very much a part of our philosophy for thousands of years.

This rich inheritance will be part of our policies in the future as well. Of course, in the midst of conflict there may be lapses on the part of individuals. However, our efforts are consciously directed towards addressing these lapses so that our intrinsically caring nature can dominate our policies even at the most difficult of times.

One of the biggest challenges confronting our carefully developed social institutions is the threat

of terrorism, which is today a matter of global concern. As you know, a ruthless terrorist group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), continues to challenge us, determined to force us to compromise on the standards that we have developed over the years.

Terrorism has no place in the contemporary world. As a Government, we are not prepared, at any cost, to bow down to terrorism. Would any of your governments submit to terrorism had they been in our position? However, we are determined that, in a democracy like ours, where political views can be expressed freely, political objectives must be realized through negotiation and dialogue and through compromise. There can be no room for extremism, and even less for violence.

My Government has been able to form a coalition of 13 democratic political parties to work in harmony for the well-being of the country. Most of them opposed me at the presidential election. All Muslim parties and Tamil parties, except one, are in my Government. We are a multi-ethnic government. Such a government cannot and will not discriminate against any minority groups.

When I assumed the Presidency of my country in November 2005, I had already declared that I was willing to talk to the LTTE, and even its leader, with a view to a negotiated settlement of the conflict we have been facing for over twenty years. Two weeks after my assumption of the Presidency, the LTTE commenced its killing spree by killing a group of unarmed soldiers taking food to their colleagues. It continued killing innocent civilians, children, young people, old ladies and soldiers regularly.

Then in April 2006, just five months into my Presidency, they attempted to kill the commander of the Sri Lanka Army in Colombo while he was on his way home. Fortunately, the suicide bomber failed to assassinate him. Even then, our armed forces did not retaliate, but only took deterrent action. In June 2006, exactly a year ago, the LTTE closed an agricultural canal that provided water to nearly 30,000 acres of rice fields and 15,000 families. No amount of appeals to reopen the canal softened them, and the armed forces had to forcibly open the canal.

Thereafter, the LTTE evicted 53,000 Muslims from the town of Mutur, in the eastern province, and later launched a massive attack on Jaffna and Trincomalee harbour. It was then that we had to clear the entire East and I am glad to say, after one year, that we are now successfully resettling the people who fled their homes due to the escalation of the conflict.

Today, there is a misunderstanding and false propaganda that we are involved in ethnic cleansing. This is absolutely false. I must remind this august assembly that it is the LTTE which resorted to heavy ethnic cleansing from the early 1980s. They evicted all the Muslims and the Sinhalese from the north.

Those countries afflicted with the menace of terrorism know very well what they have to undergo. These terrorist outfits cannot be contained easily. Our armed forces and the police have had to be extra smart in containing the LTTE. I want to assure you that our armed forces and police are among the most disciplined in the world, and they are respected for human rights. Any lapses on their part will be promptly investigated and corrective action

taken. But I am sad to say that there has been so much false propaganda against the Sri Lankan armed forces and the police that is being taken so seriously by the rest of the world.

Recently, there was much concern when we cleared some lodging houses in Colombo. On average about 20,000 persons occupy these lodges and only 302 persons were the subject of this evacuation. In fact, many of those 302 left voluntarily, including, I think, the women and children. Please do not forget that over 60 per cent of those living in Colombo are Tamils and Muslims. Almost all suicide bombers have operated from these lodging houses, and therefore we have had to keep an extra vigil over them. As our Government declared, if any inconvenience was caused to innocent persons, we regret it very much.

A Presidential Commission of Inquiry has been set up to investigate into some of the killings that happened in the past. Its work is being observed by an international independent group of eminent persons. All the observers came at our invitation, as we want to establish the truth. Very few governments would have done what we did and none have done it before us. We are open to scrutiny because we respect human rights, democracy and the freedom of the people. Unfortunately, it is our flexibility and sincerity that seems to encourage the global non-governmental community to demand further involvement. We do not believe in a military solution, I must tell you. Therefore, I invited all democratic political parties in Parliament to form an All-Party Conference, (APC). The purpose of the APC is to formulate political proposals to ensure political reform, and through that address the grievances of the minorities. An All-Party Representative Committee is in the process of examining an array of proposals that have been submitted. I firmly believe that the outcome of this process will be satisfactory. We look to our friends around the world to assist in our hour of need.

My party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), also submitted a set of proposals on devolution to the district level. Prior to the establishment of Provincial Councils in 1988, the Government effectively dealt with people's issues with a network of 25 district secretariats. In order to devolve power to the lowest level possible, the SLFP proposed district level devolution, while creating a Grama Rajya, quite similar to the Panchayati Raj system in India, our neighbour. We strongly believe that people at the grass-roots level will be truly empowered if we adopt district level devolution. We expect this process of finding the right solution to political reform to continue evolving. However, we await the final outcome of the APC discussions: a set of reform proposals through consensus among its members.

Friends, I have had the good fortune of being an employee, a trade unionist and a Labour Minister. All these opportunities of tripartism have given me the privilege of learning, and of acquiring the ability to be flexible and practical in my thinking. That is why I am able to work with a large number of political parties within the Government and provide a platform for consensual politics and governance. I also want to ensure that workers become a strong force in our societal fabric, with the ability to take part fully in all aspects of national life. Most workers are poorer than they ought to be. They are in a debt cycle which they cannot get out of. Are we sincerely addressing these issues? It is time for us to

think very seriously whether all the treaties we are party to will really help workers to have a better life. In a rapidly changing world, we have to think again about many of the values and ideas we have inherited.

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen, our efforts must be to look at labour afresh where the ILO has worked over a period of time to bring about the Decent Work Agenda. The Decent Work Agenda is important because it is central to peoples' lives.

Work is also at the heart of politics. As a politician, these are some of the issues that I have seen, which people vote on. It has been said that elections are won and lost on promises, successes and failures to deliver opportunities for work. Therefore, it is important that we have high quality in the workplace.

My belief is that a satisfied worker will be the key to a country's prosperity. This compels me to request the United Nations, other international organizations, the developed countries, and international lending institutions to think primarily of the worker.

It is the worker who is at the centre of development. In this context, the suspension of post-tsunami recovery aid by certain developed countries is a direct blow to the workers themselves.

Lending policies and conditions for assistance need to be attuned to ensure that the lives of the workers are made better. A satisfied worker will also ensure corporate profitability. A worker, whether in the agricultural, industrial, commercial or any other sector, is the core of development.

Most workers in the developing world come from rural environments. Unless we raise the dignity of the rural worker, the rural peasants, the rural technologists, the rural artisans, we will never be able to uplift our rural areas and of course the majority of the working class.

I make a fervent appeal, therefore, to this august assembly, whose heart is with the worker, to consider these thoughts and deliberate on policies that will make the worker a satisfied person and the environment in which he lives, mostly rural areas, to be more conducive to a pleasant and productive life.

I must sincerely thank the ILO, the oldest specialized institution in the UN system, for being an or-

ganization that has encouraged the whole world to recognize the values of the worker. This is one Organization which concentrates on the individual, his skills, his happiness, his working conditions, occupational health and safety and also the environment in which the work is done.

I am also grateful to the Director-General for extending this rare invitation and conferring upon me the honour to address this august assembly. I wish to say that our commitment to the ideals of the ILO, whatever challenges we may confront, remains steadfast. We will continue to look after and develop our democratic institutions and improve the life of the worker.

Let me conclude by saying that we will never shirk our responsibility to ensure a better future for the working masses of Sri Lanka. We will always be guided by the caring nature that we inherited from our forefathers, as we look forward to the future.

In conclusion, let me thank all those present for your kind attention and I sincerely hope there will be many more future Heads of State and Government from among the labour ministers present here today. You are capable of it.

May the Noble Triple Gem bless you all!

The PRESIDENT

Your Excellency, your country has ratified the eight ILO fundamental Conventions, and your words today also bear witness to Sri Lanka's attachment to the values of the ILO. We are aware of the great efforts your country has made since it was struck by the tsunami disaster in 2004.

We are, moreover, aware of the importance you attach to equitable development and to improving the lives of the rural poor. Sri Lanka has also targeted discrimination, gender equality, youth employment and vocational training as primary areas for action.

These are all signs that your thinking goes hand in hand with that of our Organization. On behalf of my fellow Officers of the Conference and of all participants, I should like to express profound gratitude to you for your words to the 96th Session of the International Labour Conference today.

(The Conference adjourned at 11.45 a.m.)

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