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Sri Lanka: From war to reconciliation

By Jaliya Wickramasuriya, Sri Lankan ambassador to the United States - 07/06/10 10:01 AM ET

Just one year ago, Sri Lanka prevailed in its decades-long war on terrorism, a victory that promises an era of reconciliation and prosperity in my country. Over the past month, senior U.S. officials have praised Sri Lanka's journey from war to peace. White House advisers visiting Colombo expressed President Obama's admiration for the Sri Lanka's defeat of terrorism. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton noted Sri Lanka's successful rebuilding efforts. Most important, the secretary endorsed Sri Lanka's Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission, an independent panel tasked with the authority to investigate alleged abuses during the last stages of the war on terror. The commission "holds promise" and "the steps that have been taken by the Sri Lanka government are commendable and we are supporting that effort," the secretary of state said after a recent meeting with Sri Lankan Minister of External Affairs G.L. Peiris.

I want to thank the Obama administration for its encouragement of our efforts and its appreciation of Sri Lanka's accomplishments over the past 12 months. As the secretary stated, Sri Lanka and the United States "share a history of democratic institutions." I hope other nations will also take note of Sri Lanka's accomplishments.

We understand that military victory is not the end but a beginning. We believe the victory over terrorism can usher in a new era of peace, reconciliation and prosperity. Despite much of the world's focus on Sri Lanka's past, Sri Lanka's future is now.

We have no intention of squandering Sri Lanka's peace dividend. In fact, Sri Lanka has experienced a "sea change" that defines our nation's economic potential. While the world economy remains in a slump, Sri Lanka expects a growth rate of close to 7 percent this year and higher in 2011. Inflation is down from a high of almost 29 percent in June 2008 to roughly 4 percent this year. Trade barriers are being reduced. Import duties on automobiles and other consumer good have been slashed to spark economic activity.

We are determined that the peace dividend reach all Sri Lankans by spreading economic development throughout the island. Approximately \$6 billion is being dedicated to spending on Sri Lanka's infrastructure, including new roads, ports, a new international airport and the construction of enough coal and hydroelectric power plants that electricity will soon reach every Sri Lankan.

Tourism is also booming. Our target is 2.5 million visitors over the next three to four years. The numbers are encouraging. Tourism in Sri Lanka jumped 47 percent in April 2010 from April 2009. Many of these new tourists are from the United States, perhaps influenced by an article in The New York Times that ranked Sri Lanka the No. 1 place to visit in 2010.

Prosperity can help drive reconciliation, a top priority for our country. Sri Lanka acknowledges we must address our past to reach political and ethnic reconciliation. We believe the Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission will enable Sri Lanka to "bind up our nation's wounds," as your President Abraham Lincoln stated after the American Civil War.

The U.S. recognition of this effort is important to Sri Lanka. We also appreciate the secretary of state's emphasis on Sri Lankan efforts to resettle the approximately 300,000 people displaced by the war on terror. "There has been tremendous progress and many thousands and thousands of such internally displaced persons have returned home," Clinton added.

The secretary's comments have already had a dramatic impact in Sri Lanka. Just as important, I believe U.S.-Sri Lankan ties have been strengthened during recent weeks. Certainly, that is one of my goals as ambassador to the United States. Sri Lanka wants a deeper, broader relationship with the United States, one that embraces economics, security and trade, as well as human rights. Last year, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee issued a major report calling for a "multi-faceted relationship" between the United States and Sri Lanka. I believe Sri Lanka and the U.S. are turning that policy recommendation into a reality that benefits both nations.

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