

**Address by His Excellency President Mahinda Rajapaksa, at the 61st
Independence Anniversary Celebrations
Galle Face, Colombo
February 4, 2009**

Ven. Members of the Maha Sangha,
Respected Members of the Clergy of all other religions
Hon. Prime Minister, Hon. Speaker, Hon. Ministers & Members of Parliament
Hon. Governors,
The Hon. Chief Justice & all Members of the Judiciary
Members of the Diplomatic Corps
The Secretary to the President & all Public Officers
Commanders of the Security Forces & the Inspector General of Police
My Dear Mothers, Fathers & Children,

I announce with pride that we have raised the National Flag today over a motherland that is being united in keeping with the heart felt wishes and prayers of our people. My dear people who through sacrifice of life have come forward to defend the freedom of our land; and through their blessings and every thought supported that struggle; and my dear children who have eagerly looked towards the struggle for freedom in our land,

61 years ago our great motherland was freed from the clutches of British Imperialism. The British granted us Independence on February 4th 1948, after 500 years during which our country was controlled wholly or partly by the Portuguese, Dutch and the British.

By this time our people had struggled against colonial rule in 1818 and 1848. Our great heroes such as Monaravila Keppetipola and Puran Appu had sacrificed their lives in these struggles. Whenever we think of our freedom we always recall the greatness of such heroes.

However, due to our motherland being subjected to repeated foreign incursions and invasions there were many challenges to the progress of our nation. The unbroken progress of our knowledge and technology was suddenly interrupted. With the dawn of Independence from British rule on February 4th 1948, we gained the opportunity to move towards progress in a manner that was inherent to our nation. However, we failed to lead our society, handed to us with divisions, into the proper path of unity and progress. Therefore, as we completed 30 years after independence we saw the birth of separatist, racist and terrorist politics that sought to divide our motherland.

Friends,

Although every year in the past we have commemorated our Independence, through 30 years during this period we have lived in the midst of an illegal, armed, terrorist movement. Therefore, throughout this period we could not celebrate true Freedom.

Due to this terrorism the Sinhala and Muslim people who lived in the north were compelled to flee from their traditional lands. This period saw the massacre of Buddhist worshipers near the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi, at Anuradhapura. At Kaththankudi, Muslims were killed while worshiping in their mosque. There were terrorist attacks on the pinnacle of Buddhist worship, the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic in Kandy. Innocent people were collectively massacred in many places of this land.

That is not all, for the first time in the history of our land the tiger terrorists carried out ethnic cleansing. They sought to establish a fascist state in which the Sinhala and Muslim people, as well as the Tamil people who were not prepared to bow before them, would not live. A large number of Democratic leaders of the Tamil people were killed by the terrorists. Similarly, many of our national leaders were assassinated by the forces of terror. The entire country was terrorized.

Friends,

Our country became the victim of the most powerful terrorist organization in the world. We had come to the verge of the separatist terrorists achieving their goal of dividing the country and establishing a separate state of Tamil Eelam. We were being compelled by some administrators of that time to accept the so-called peace brought about by the division of the country, and the victory of the forces of terror. Many foreign forces attempted to persuade us that the path to achieving peace was to be subjugated by a terrorist organization that had power on land, sea and air as well as ruthless suicide killers.

Together with this, some international institutions sought to show our country as a failed State, which pained the hearts and minds of all of us at the unfortunate fate that was sought to be bestowed on the land of our birth.

Friends,

We were finally challenged by this unfortunate fate that our great motherland could no more bear.

In the Presidential election held in 2005 you brought me to the leadership of our land. It was to battle against this misfortune of fate; to defeat it and to bring victory to the nation over it. It was to defeat the foundations of a cowardly peace based on the victory of separatist terror, and instead establish a genuine and dignified peace for our land.

In the Presidential Election of 2005, you handed to me and to our Government the challenge of being victorious over the threat that time had raised against us. We faced this daring challenge with a determination to somehow achieve victory over it.

It is said that failure is the very mother of success. You are aware that most governments and leaders of the past attempted to solve this problem with separatist terror, through military means and discussions. It is no secret at all these efforts were unsuccessful. It is these failures that led me to decide to move towards success. This is what I stated in my policy statement – the Mahinda Chintana - presented for the 2005 Presidential Election:

“It is my intention to critically examine the merits and demerits of the steps taken so far to deal with this complex problem and consider a fresh approach. In doing so, the fundamental platform that I would base my initiative would be an undivided country, a national consensus and an honourable peace”.

We have now been able, within a short span of two and half years, to almost completely defeat the cowardly forces of terror that had wrapped our entire nation in fear through several decades. This great victory has been brought to our country through our Army, Navy, Air Force, Police, the Police Special Task Force and Civil Defence Corps carrying out the task before them, jointly and with great dedication.

Our heroic forces have given us the opportunity today to celebrate the anniversary of our Independence in a country freed, after many years, from the dark shadow of terrorism.

Friends,

We are all aware that there have been betrayals and subjugations throughout our history. This reminds us of many infamous names. At the same time are we also reminded today of the bravery, national pride and patriotism that was seen in our great kings such as Dutugemunu, Gajaba and Vijayabahu.

Our forces have protected the great heroism and dignity of the past and handed it to the future. It was no easy task to destroy the threat to the unitary nature and freedom of our country from the LTTE that was described as the most powerful terrorist organization in the world.

Our troops have given us the opportunity to see the dawn of an honourable peace for the country. They have sacrificed their flesh, blood, sinews and life itself to bring this great historic opportunity to our motherland. Our troops were able to carry forward the battle against terror with great care so as not to cause harassment to the innocent Tamil people. The dignified peace that is now dawning upon us becomes greater and more unique than the peace enjoyed by the people of other countries, because it is built on the immense sacrifice of these heroes.

Friends,

There are good reasons behind this victory. The people contributed to this victory without any differences, in the face of many economic hardships. They correctly understood that we have launched a proper battle for the defeat of separatist terrorism. But for the sacrifice of their children to the armed forces, police and civil defence corps in such large numbers by our mothers and fathers, as never before seen in our history, this victory would not be possible. Their immense commitment was not in vain. It is these sacrifices that have enabled the National Flag to fly with pride over the entire country today.

Our troops gave us this victory through their own skills, knowledge and expertise. Our forces did not obtain the assistance of any foreign experts. Similarly, our forces had a certain expertise of their own. It is their refusal to say no, on any occasion. They always thought that "we should do this somehow for our country". Our country has achieved these victories because they had the courage to think in such manner. Do not forget that in most countries where separatist terrorists have been active, they have achieved victory. However, In Sri Lanka we have been able to defeat terrorism and separatism and safeguard the unitary nature of our State.

Whatever the number of countries in the world, there is no place that is safer to anyone than the land of ones birth. The time has now dawned for the Sri Lankans who have left their country, because of this unfortunate battle that had dragged for more than 20 years, to return to their land of birth and to the places they lived in. On this important occasion, on behalf of the entire Sri Lankan nation, I make an open invitation to all Sri Lankans – Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim, Burgher, Malay and of all other communities, who left this country because of war to return to your motherland.

Friends,

I am confident that in a few days we will decisively defeat the terrorist force that many repeatedly kept saying was invincible. However, we should not think that with this alone we have overcome all challenges before us.

Since independence we have achieved good results in some sectors. We have obtained a satisfactory position on child health and education. 97% of our children obtain admission to schools for education. At a time when in most countries of the world a free health service and free education have been denied to their people, we as a government are dedicated to carry out these social responsibilities.

However, although there are several such matters about which we can be pleased there are many more challenges to be overcome, too.

It is necessary to provide a more productive education to our children, which is suited to needs of the progress of our country. Wherever poverty raises its head it should be overcome. It is necessary to see the emergence of a public service with different attitudes. We should bring the public service to the position when it considers the people as its master. Today, we all face the challenge of bringing about a country that has good governance and prosperity, leaving no room for corruption and waste.

Friends,

We are today a nation that has defeated a powerful enemy that stood before us. Similarly, we should have the ability to defeat all internal enemies that are found in our midst. We should be ready to change as it is necessary to meet these new challenges. What is best is to be united as one nation, to see the dawn of the proper social, economic, cultural and political goals of society.

Today, there is a new vibrancy in our National Flag. There is a new resonance in our National Anthem. The National Flag that our heroic troops took to the north flutters in the hands of the people of the north. Our entire nation is now united in the shade of the National Flag, conscious of the need to achieve victory over the new challenges before us. They love their country more than at any other time in our history.

Friends,

We should be ready to properly grasp and not waste the opportunity that history has presented to us after 61 years of freedom from colonial rule, to once again raise our country to the dignity it deserves.

The nation expects a new future, and a future of change. A future where the unpleasant experiences that we jointly faced in the recent past are not repeated. It is time to stop the refrain that we "cannot" and we "don't have". The remnants and leftovers of subjugation should be erased from our minds. We should look towards the future as a people with a proud and glorious history. Do not strain to demonstrate subjugation and servitude. Rather, strive to demonstrate your freedom and non-servitude, to rise with dignity of a citizen who equally loves the Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim, Burgher, Malay and all others who make up our nation. The sowing of discord belongs to the past. The future belongs to those who sow the seeds of unity. The spread of social injustice is of the past. The future is for the building of social justice.

How can it be difficult for us who were able to defeat separatist terrorism that many said was invincible, to build this new future in our motherland? However, difficult it may be, doing justice by the Sri Lankan nation has no other path than the determination to achieve it.

More than anything else I have faith in the spirit and pride of the Sri Lankan nation. Our heroes of war confirmed this belief of mine. We move towards an era of national reawakening and commit our service to it because, of this trust in our nation.

Friends,

What is before us is a century of expectations. If we are able to leave the stage of history as those who have fulfilled the expectation of the nation, what more satisfaction can one have? Let us all go towards realizing that great satisfaction.

In that march ahead, should we hesitate to say what has to be said? No. Should we hesitate to do what needs doing? No. Or else, would it be possible for us to bring about a Sri Lanka that is free of terrorism? In overcoming the challenges of the future too, we shall work in the same manner.

Friends,

I do not believe that the true extent of our development is seen on the bill-boards in our cities. I believe that the full measure of our progress can only be seen when the faces of our people and our children light up with joy and satisfaction. It is necessary to work hard to achieve this.

We took the greatest risk in the battle to defeat separatist terror. It was the risk of life. Our Defence Secretary and the Commander of our Army did not abandon their responsibilities even having faced terror attacks from suicide killers. During this period the forces of terror preyed on the lives two of our most senior Ministers. However, in the face of such danger we did not show that we lacked the courage to face up to the enemy. At a time when their fellow soldiers were dying from enemy attacks in the battle field, our troops did not abandon the battle for fear of their lives. Had we not the courage to face up to such dangers would it have been possible for us to safeguard our country? Similarly, I wish to state, that in the struggles ahead to build a new country we shall not fear to take necessary decisions in the face of any dangers that we may face.

We shall also in the same manner enter the struggle to establish stability and good governance in our country, free of corruption and waste. We must be able to change as required by the challenges placed before us by time. If we cannot do so we should be ready to leave the stage.

Friends,

A Former Governor of the World Bank James Wolfenson said thus on July 5th 1998: "Wherever social and economic expectations have been destroyed, in such a place there is only a small space for peace. Similarly, there is also very small space for stability".

I am today a firm believer in this. We are now building a country where people will not die through terrorism. Similarly, we should transform this into a country where the social and economic expectations of the people are not shattered. If not, there will only be a very small space for peace and stability.

It will be possible for the victories of war to be lost by war, only if such military victories are not consolidated through the plough. Therefore, we should be ready to direct our country towards a campaign that will take us to social, economic, cultural and political progress.

It is our responsibility to bring our people to the awareness that sovereignty lies with them. If the people do not believe that what is done is in keeping with their needs and expectations, the value of their sovereignty will be diminished. What change can we bring to the country without seeing the dawn of the day when the people realize that they are the real owners of the agricultural land, the assets of nature, the environment and all assets of the ocean and fisheries?

What other path is there to demonstrate the power of sovereignty, other than giving to the poor a standard of life under which they have land to live, a home, a good education for their children and proper opportunities for employment? What purpose is there to them in any power that does not bring about a change their lives? Ensuring the security of people's sovereignty means ensuring social security; increasing the space for peace and widening the space for stability. This is how we should protect the peace and stability we have won. I believe we can achieve this, too.

Friends,

In conclusion, permit me to say something very special on this day of national pride. I call upon you to stand on your feet with the firm conviction that we can take our country to future victories based on the experiences and the knowledge we have gained in the struggles we have won to date.

Let us be ready to raise our country to new heights as people full of enthusiasm, but with tranquility of mind; with the necessity for speed, yet with proper method. Let us not fear any challenges. Let us have the courage to realize our expectations.

Similarly, let us extend the cooperation of the entire nation to the people of the north and the east who suffered under the grip of separatist terror for many years, to once again step towards satisfaction and freedom in life.

Let us come forward both in word and deed to bestow upon them the kindness, friendship and prosperity they deserve.

This 61st anniversary of independence has given us the opportunity to realize the pride and dignity of our freedom. The time is now ready for the battle to raise Sri Lanka to the dignity of a country that is energetic, powerful, virtuous and wise. Let us as patriotic Sri Lankans achieve success in that battle too, without delay. Let us dedicate ourselves to bequeath this true freedom to our country.

Friends,

I respect the maxim that the motherland and one's own mother are comparable to paradise. At a time when our motherland is united under a single banner, I invite all parties to come together irrespective of ethnicity, community and party differences, giving the opportunity to all to do their duty by the motherland. What greater satisfaction can Mother Lanka have than all of us being the children of a single mother? I, therefore, appeal to you to join us to bring that great satisfaction to our motherland.

Let us look at all the children of our motherland - Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim, Burgher, Malay and of all other communities, spread throughout our land, and living with no divisive thoughts among them. They look upon us with great expectations. They question us and hold us to task. They seek their future from us. They are the future of this land. May you have the strength and courage to take our country in a new direction on their behalf.

May you all receive the Blessings of the Noble Triple Gem.