

THE STATEMENT BY G.L. PEIRIS, HEAD OF THE SRI LANKA
DELEGATION, AT THE PRESS CONFERENCE OF FIRST ROUND OF PEACE
TALKS IN THAILAND



Mr.G.L Peiris,
Head of GoSL Delegation,

There are moments in history, few and far between, which have the potential to change beyond recognition the course of events and to impact profoundly on the destiny of a nation. It is to moments such as these that one of the greatest writers of all time referred, when he said: "There is a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune.

" The government of Sri Lanka is mindful that, as we gather here in the congenial surroundings of Sattahip in the Kingdom of Thailand to embark on a historic task, we have arrived at such a moment in the history of our country. Together we repudiate today a legacy of rancour and hatred, which has torn asunder the fabric of our nation for decades. This devastation is all the more tragic, since our beloved Island, which the ancient Greeks named 'Serendib', has over the centuries been home to a community whose culture, at its very core, has been inspired by compassion, fraternity and understanding. This inner serenity, nurtured and sustained by the four great religions illuminating the course of human civilisation --- all of which have made their indelible imprint on the story of our nation--- was the bedrock on which we built a society founded on mutual respect and fulfilment.

It is Sri Lanka's collective calamity that this wholesome state of things yielded place in recent times to the emergence of narrow and sectarian attitudes which, as night must follow day, have wrought acrimony, disintegration and destruction. The straws had been in the wind for half a century, and the inexorable sequence of events, debilitating in their influence on every sphere of national life, culminated in a war, unique in its ferocity and the ensuing ravage in terms of human life and the depth of anguish and suffering.

This is now behind us. Our nation has resolved, with a firmness of conviction that has served us well at the most critical moments in our long and eventful history, that a sea change is necessary, now that the tempests have abated. Nothing is as evident in all substantial shades of public opinion in our country today as the unquenchable thirst for peace, dignity and opportunity for all our people. The wellsprings of a cultural tradition that derives from abiding and spontaneous respect for diversity and pluralism in their ramifications throughout society fortify us as we prepare to make pivotal decisions, for ourselves and for generations to come, at the crossroads of history.

We turn our backs on war as an instrument for realising the dream of a nation. This is a matter of empirical experience. The intensity of pain and deprivation, which pervaded the armed conflict of eighteen long years, has banished from our minds ---in perpetuity--- the appeal of sabre-rattling.

Human aspirations are anchored in legitimate expectation. During the last few months our people, whatever their ethnic identity, have savoured deeply the fruits of peace and grasped, within the contours of their daily lives, the infinite vistas of opportunity that peace will bring in

its wake. A beginning, promising albeit modest, has been made in respect of the provision, interrupted for so long, of goods and services ---access to which is the inalienable right of every citizen--- to the people of the areas directly affected by the conflict. The formidable task of reconstruction and rehabilitation has commenced in earnest. The benefits flowing from these developments, in terms of enhanced investment in many vital sectors of the economy including tourism, trade and infrastructure, have percolated to every segment of the community and amply enriched their lives.

Above all, the fear which stalked a whole generation has become a thing of the past, heralding in its stead the spirit of freedom and contentment, much in evidence in the countenance of the tens of thousands, who in the company of their family and friends, whether on business, on pilgrimage or on holiday, have rediscovered for themselves whole regions of their country, which had been all but inaccessible to them in recent times. It is inconceivable to us that a people, hovering on the threshold of such exhilarating possibilities, should decide to jettison it all in order to return, of their own accord, to the travails of war.

Changes of this magnitude in the mindset of a people do not occur fortuitously. They are the product not of coincidence but of mature, far-sighted deliberation and pragmatic action. Pre-eminent among the circumstances which have made this achievement possible is the role of leadership characterised by consistency, courage and dynamism. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, through vicissitudes calculated to break the most indomitable spirit, held fast to his course of national reunification with a degree of tenacity born of depth of conviction.

His policy, persuasively articulated and realistically implemented, of one step at a time, an initiative abjuring the mire of threshold conditions ---the bane of numerous attempts in the past-- and opting instead for a series of practical measures, which have engendered a climate of confidence sufficiently durable to support a viable negotiating process, has fired the imagination of a beleaguered nation. This has made possible, as the inauguration of these historic proceedings bears witness today, the beginning of an epoch making exercise in healing and rapprochement, which has eluded us for so long.

Despite the colour and drama of this event, however, it behoves us to remember that the unfolding panorama of history represents a continuum. President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, soon after her election for the first time eight years ago, committed her government to the goal of a negotiated peace. It is the endeavour of our government at this time, with malice towards none and goodwill towards all, to consolidate and build on all positive elements buttressing previous attempts at different times and yet, in all humility, to learn from the mistakes of the past, not to impute blame but simply to avoid their repetition and perpetuation.

At this critical hour of national renewal we call on all our people, irrespective of ethnic identity, cultural background or party affiliation, to join with us in ensuring fulfilment of the abundant promise of our beloved land.

As we renounce war and embrace negotiation as the key to our Island's future, far be it from us to deny or even unwittingly to make light of, the challenges and hazards that confront us. A reservoir of suspicion and antipathy, which has filled to the brim over extended periods, can scarcely be wished away overnight. Assuredly, no quick fix is feasible. Unmistakably indicated are the qualities of patience, perseverance and dedication.

At this point in time we cannot foretell, with certainty or precision, what the future holds. Nevertheless, there are several truths, as we perceive them, which stand out starkly and vividly in our minds.

We are convinced that no process of negotiation could aspire to be fruitful in its outcome in the absence of a threshold of trust and confidence between the parties. It is the sacred duty of all our people, and in particular of all those ---whatever their political complexion--- on whom the mantle of leadership has fallen at this decisive moment, to consign to oblivion the wounds of the past, to rise above the lingering memory of injustice, pain and worse, to disavow the heritage of vengeance and retribution and to draw upon the reserves of wisdom, generosity and large-heartedness with which our cultural traditions have bountifully endowed us.

Nothing is clearer, in the interest of national survival, let alone national prosperity, than that this is the time for a fresh point of departure. We, for our part, as the government of our country, are equal to this challenge. We pay tribute, at the same time, to the foresight of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and their leader, Mr. Velupillai Pirabakaran, in embarking on the transformation of their movement into a political organisation responsive to the changing nuances of contemporary priorities.

We declare, with all the vehemence at our command that the negotiations, which we are about to commence, are not in our view, by any means, a zero sum exercise. It is not a question of the winner taking all. Indeed, it is plain for all to see, at this watershed in the meandering course of a fratricidal conflict, that there are no winners and no losers. These negotiations cannot be pursued on the basis that gain accruing to one party, involves reciprocal loss to the other. We emphatically reject that premise. We acknowledge that we both have a problem, destructive of the pulsating heart of our nation, which it is in our mutual interest to resolve together. This is very much the spirit in which we conceive of, and will carry through, our role in the ensuing discussions.

The natural corollary is that, an adversarial or confrontational approach is singularly inappropriate. Sincerity, openness and candour, which will be reflected in the sharing of perspectives, insights and information, including technical information relating to legal and constitutional issues, will supply the underpinnings of our attitude to the work that lies before us. It is our hope and expectation that this will be unhesitatingly reciprocated.

It is the government's fervent desire that the discussions should commence and go forward in an atmosphere untrammelled by inhibitions of any kind. We believe that broad horizons and resilience of mind are indispensable. And yet, in determining the parameters of the talks, there are some elements ---rudimentary in quality--- which cannot but be constant. These represent the irreducible foundations of what we care for and believe in.

We stand unwaveringly for the amplest degree of devolution and for the establishment and strengthening of institutions designed to achieve this purpose. But these reforms must necessarily be effected within the framework of a State whose unity and territorial integrity is ensured in fact and in law by the envisioned structures.

As we turn to the task before us, we are encouraged by the knowledge that all sections of our people, and the international community, give us unqualified support every step of the way. We note that it is envisaged that the Hon. Rauf Hakeem, who is present as a member of the Government delegation, will in due course participate in the talks in his capacity as the leader of

the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress and the Head of a Muslim delegation. This arrangement would, no doubt, ensure the continuance of a constructive and meaningful dialogue.

We are mindful that any substantive structural and institutional arrangements that may be evolved should provide for the rights of all communities. In this context, we have taken note of the apprehensions expressed by the Sinhala and Muslim communities living in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. All parties should take cognisance of the need to ensure the safety, security and identity of these communities as well, and the protection and advancement of their political, social, economic and cultural rights. We should ensure that their concerns are totally addressed.

In order to arrive at durable peace, it is imperative that steps be taken for the resettlement, rehabilitation and reintegration of all displaced persons in their original areas with honour, dignity, assurance of personal safety and adequate reparation. Such measures would demonstrate our commitment to pluralism and mutual accommodation.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge and to express appreciation of the yeoman service rendered with regard to all aspects of the peace process by the Royal Norwegian Government. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and other members of his government have stated in the Parliament of Sri Lanka and elsewhere that the peace process is unlikely to have reached its current positive phase without the finesse, professionalism, tact and hard work, which the representatives of that government --- in particular, Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen, Special Envoy Erik Solheim and Ambassador Jon Westborg--- have steadfastly brought to bear on their work as facilitators. Their continuing involvement in that capacity is a source of inestimable comfort.

We thank the Royal Thai Government warmly for the readiness, with which they placed at the disposal of the negotiating teams, the excellent facilities available to us here in Sattahip, as we enjoy the legendary hospitality of Thai people.

We cordially welcome representatives of other governments, non-governmental organisations and the Sri Lankan and international media, and we thank them for their goodwill and support as we prepare to keep our trust with destiny.

