

Rising from the shackles of colonialism 62 years ago and annihilating an almost three decade long grip of terrorism from our shores eight months ago, we celebrate this anniversary of Independence in 2010, with a great sense of oneness and pride. Nearly half of our country's contemporary independent history has witnessed a struggle against the brutal forces of terrorism which sought to tear asunder the very sovereignty of our great nation gained by our forefathers. The successful humanitarian operation to extricate our motherland from the jackboot of the terrorists under the committed leadership of President Mahinda Rajapaksa, has brought a new Sri Lanka to its people and the world at large. The vote at the recent Presidential election, is an overwhelming endorsement by the people of this country of President Rajapaksa's achievements for their betterment, and providing a firmer foundation for the further strengthening of national amity, progress and prosperity of our nation as envisioned in the "Mahinda Chinthana".

The defeat of the separatist terrorists, one time thought to be invincible, has been achieved, thus eradicating the plague of terrorism. I pay tribute to our heroic forces who valiantly fought the elimination of terror to secure our blessed country, and the people of Sri Lanka, for the resilience demonstrated by their sacrifices through those dark days of uncertainty.

A new era of peace and hope has dawned for the country with a renewed mandate for the continued leadership of President Rajapaksa, that too with the beginning of another decade. Sri Lanka is now wholly poised as a free country to achieve prosperity, which the people so richly deserve. This freedom I believe, enriches the achievement of our Independence in 1948. While in the clutches of terrorist conflict, unprecedented development work has been undertaken by the Government, with the last four years recording an exceptional increase in per capita income, enabling sustained economic growth. Sri Lanka is a land of plenty, fertile in rich resources which provided the very basis for the country's economic resistance to a turbulent world economy, exacerbated by having to defend the onslaught of terrorism domestically.

Mega development programmes are being actively pursued in the country with the initiation of the construction of harbours, airports, roads, electricity generation etc. Investments are flowing into the country with new employment avenues being generated, further empowering the people with the accruing benefits which the Government has sought to spread equitably with the distribution of equal resources throughout the country. The surge towards the country's development and glory has now begun in earnest, which we must sustain to emerge as a "Wonder of Asia" in the near future.

Guided by the principles of non-alignment and being friends with all in the conduct of foreign relations, has earned Sri Lanka a pivotal position in the global community. The bedrock of our engagement with the international community has been one of moderation, engagement and peaceful co-existence which have facilitated Sri Lanka to continue to play an important role in the United Nations and other multilateral fora, culminating in currently being Chair of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) and endorsed to take the top slots of the G-15 this year and Commonwealth in three years. The diverse interests of Sri Lanka have been served through its membership in multilateral fora which also include BIMSTEC, IORARC, G77, Shanghai Cooperation Dialogue and the ASEAN Regional Forum. Sri Lanka has never been bereft of friends in the international community, and

this is an appropriate opportunity to extend our appreciation for the assistance rendered to us in countering terrorism to safeguard the sovereignty of this nation and enhancing economic development.

On this momentous anniversary of Independence, with the added significance of it being in immediate succession of the first post conflict national election, let us Sri Lankans, all come together in a spirit of trust and understanding leaving aside differences, to rededicate ourselves to be united as a single nation, community and citizenry, and embark on a journey to lead Sri Lanka into new vistas for a brighter future. Following in the footsteps of those Sri Lankans who freed our country from colonial domination, it is time that we banished any hatred and mistrust amongst us, and let no force queer the pitch of democratic institutions being reinvigorated which has begun, in order to create an equal political space for us all.

I reiterate the call of President Mahinda Rajapaksa for all Sri Lankans living overseas to return to Sri Lanka and join in being true stakeholders of Sri Lanka's economic and social advancement.

As we celebrate our anniversary of Independence in this new decade of the 21st century, let us all march forward united, to secure and begin an era with a greater vibrant democracy and spiraling development for the country, while achieving our own aspirations – it is a New Sri Lanka that is before us today.