

**Speech of His Excellency Mahinda Rajapaksa, President of Sri Lanka, at the laying of the Foundation Stone for the 'Indo - Sri Lanka Human Rights Centre for the South Asian Countries' at the RLEK Campus and the releasing of the book on 'Capacity - building of Women in Local Governance in South Asian Countries - a Handbook' at the RLEK Auditorium, at 3.15 pm on Sunday the 26th November 2006 at the RLEK Auditorium, 68/1 Rajpur Road, Dehradun, India.**

Hon. Chief Secretary of Uttaranchal - Shri. S. K. Das, Chairperson of RLEK Shri. Avdesh Kaushal, Members of the RLEK Fraternity, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I feel very honoured and in fact happy to be back again at RLEK: This time to participate in the Laying of the Foundation Stone for the Indo Sri Lanka Human Rights Centre for South Asian Countries, and in the releasing of the handbook on Capacity building of Women in Local Governance in South Asian Countries here at the RLEK Auditorium.

I thank the chairperson of RLEK, Shri Avdesh Kaushal for inviting me today and for granting me this privilege. I first came to your campus in 1999 for your Human Rights Conference. Since then I have visited your campus at least 5 times. I must complain, however, that my friend Aveshji has in fact visited me in Sri Lanka only once!

I am therefore no stranger to this campus and to its work. I am no outsider anymore. I am sure Shri Avdesh Kaushal will not grudge me the privilege of the RLEK family. Not only have I come here several times. On each of my visits I have met many people out here, and made friends with several legal luminaries of India, - friendships I value very much.

This time I bring with me the greetings and best wishes of Sri Lanka's Human Rights Community for the Human Rights Practitioners of this esteemed Human Rights Organization of my country's closest friend and neighbour, India.

As many of you are aware, I cut my teeth in politics over 30 years ago as a human rights activist. I have remained a human rights activist ever since. This is perhaps another reason to attract me to your activities, as I feel most comfortable in your challenging human rights environment. As a human rights activist on the one hand, and the head of a neighbouring country on the other, permit me, Mr. Chairman, to comment very briefly on what has impressed me as being some of your more important achievements where our region is concerned.

Over the past several years, RLEKs Human Rights Centre has played an important role to disseminate a Human Rights Culture in the SAARC region. It has done so through its training courses in which activists from the region participate each year. By training your students to look at human rights from a global perspective, you have created in our region and outside, a sensitized cadre of global citizens to carry the torch of human rights to the different parts of the SAARC region. For this, you must be strongly commended.

As we all know, the South Asian region is beset with problems of human rights violations. The impunity with which the LTTE in Sri Lanka violates the human rights of the Tamil-speaking people in particular and the Sri Lankan people in general is a glaring example of this. Any Tamil leader who does not agree with their cruel and inhuman modes of operation is killed by them. Dissent is not allowed by them from any section of the Tamil community. A diversity of views, - the hallmark of any democracy, - has no place in their order of things.

The Sri Lankan government has always offered to negotiate with them across the table and craft a solution that respects human rights and democratic values. They have always either rejected our efforts or made their own positions impossible. It is against backgrounds such as this, that RLEKs work in the South Asian region must be appreciated.

We in Sri Lanka have had to adopt emergency measures to protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of our country threatened by the menace of terrorism. But even at a time like this we remain deeply committed to the promotion and protection of the human rights of all our citizens. Our government has taken firm action, - both administrative and executive in nature, - to ensure that the violation of human rights in any form is not tolerated. I have ensured that the law of the land is enforced without exception, and all those responsible for human rights violations are brought before the law and justice is enforced on them.

To ensure that all complaints relating to alleged human rights violations are inquired into, impartially and in accordance with the relevant international norms and standards, I have appointed a powerful Commission of inquiry to investigate and inquire into serious violations of human rights. The work of this Commission comprising highly respected persons representing all ethnic communities and all segments of civil society, will be observed by a group of internationally recognized independent and eminent persons. This group will be headed by a former Chief justice of India, Justice P.N.Bhagwathi.

This model has met with approval from a group of foreign nations as well as from the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. They will be nominating persons to this group to function as international observers. I am advised that no other sovereign nation has ever before instituted such a unique mechanism to investigate and inquire into human rights violations in their country.

Apart from Human Rights, our South Asian region is also beset with problems of Local Self Governance. Here too, RLEK has worked successfully to establish linkages beyond national boundaries to collectively address these issues. We ourselves in Sri Lanka are very interested

in these issues. We have stretched out, for example, to study the experience of the Indian Panchayati Raj System with the idea of learning lessons from it for crafting our own Sri Lankan solution to our own ethnic problem, with the maximum devolution of power. Against this background, the handbook you release today on Capacity-building of Women in Local Governance for South Asian Countries will, I am sure, be useful to us as well.

Let me conclude, therefore, by congratulating you on your achievements both in the field of Human Rights and of Local Self Governance. The relevance of your work for my own country, Sri Lanka, only goes to reflect its importance for the other SAARC countries as well. I thank you once again for inviting me, and giving me this opportunity of coming back to RLEK yet again. Thank you.

Shri Avdesh Kaushal, Chairperson of RLEK, welcoming President Rajapaksa said: "In today's world of strife and terrorism, where leaders and governments are compelled to be partisan, ruled by compulsions of local sentiments and political gain, we salute you for walking the "middle path" even in most testing times.

Your Excellency has also agreed to institute an international body of independent observers to ensure transparency of the commission to probe "abductions, disappearances and extra-judicial killings" in Sri Lanka. It has been recently in the news that Your Excellency has ordered an independent investigation on the 'child soldiers'. We hope others in power would emulate your qualities of neutrality and honesty.

"Moreover, Sri Lanka is the only sovereign nation in the world, which in the larger interest of peace and harmony has agreed to negotiate across the table with the LTTE, a banned organization in most of the world. India too has not remained unaffected by the heinous and condemnable activities of the LTTE. The murder of one of our most outstanding and dynamic young leaders, Rajiv Gandhi, late Prime Minister of India and a dear friend of mine, by the LTTE is unpardonable. Forces within and outside the Government who sympathize with the perpetrators of such an outrageous act should be condemned irrespective of whether they are politicians or just citizens."