

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on ‘Sustaining Peace and Achieving Sustainable Development Goals’

2nd September 2016

It is an honour to be here today to talk about the links between peace and sustainable development. This is my first visit to Sri Lanka since 2009, when I saw great suffering and hardship. Hundreds of thousands of people were displaced and in need of humanitarian aid after the terrible conflict that tore the country apart. I called for fast reconciliation and action to build peace, in the knowledge that conflict can recur in fragile post-war societies.

Today, the picture is very different. I congratulate the Government and people of Sri Lanka for the progress you have made. There remains much hard work ahead, but you have moved with determination along a new path with great promise for all the country’s people.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Last year, 2015, was a landmark year both for Sri Lanka and for the United Nations. The United Nations turned 70 at a time of great turbulence. As we witness conflicts in Syria, Yemen, the Central African Republic and elsewhere, the words of the United Nations Charter “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war” may sometimes ring hollow. Extreme poverty and deepening inequalities challenged our sense of what is just. The number of people displaced by conflict reached the highest level since the Second World War. The threat of violent extremism gave rise to countermeasures that were sometimes counter-productive – xenophobic or heavily militarized responses that did not respect human rights.

But 2015 was also a year of inspiring collaboration. In March, countries agreed the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. In July, they reached consensus around the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development. Then in September, world leaders came together in New York to launch the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda — our plan of action for people,

peace, prosperity, partnership and the planet. It was followed in December by the historic Paris Agreement on Climate Change. I thank the Sri Lankan cabinet for your decision this week to ratify the agreement, and I encourage you to deposit your instrument of ratification during the High-Level event that I am convening on 21 September or by the end of this year, so that it enters into force as soon as possible.

At the same time, the United Nations carried out a series of reviews on our peacekeeping and peacebuilding work. We looked at our progress on involving women in peace and security, and our capacity to prevent and manage conflicts and build peace. These led to parallel resolutions by the Security Council and the General Assembly on Sustaining Peace, which reaffirmed our shared responsibility and renewed our commitment to work together to tackle the root causes of violence.

And in May of this year, at the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, world leaders, humanitarian organizations, people affected by crisis, the private sector and others came together to reaffirm the centrality of political will to prevent and end conflicts, address root causes, reduce fragility and strengthen good governance.

Here in Sri Lanka, change was also under way. The Government that took office on 8 January, led by President Maithripala Sirisena, set out an ambitious reform programme and has made significant progress in implementing it. The people of Sri Lanka voted for good governance, reform, an end to impunity and the abuse of power, and restoration of the rule of law. President Sirisena pledged in his speech at the opening of the 70th Session of the General Assembly that his government's social and human development approach was founded on pluralism, reconciliation and sustainable development.

I congratulate the Government and people of Sri Lanka on passing the 19th Constitutional Amendment and the recent Right to Information Act. I commend your efforts to move forward on a comprehensive transitional justice agenda, and on a constitutional reform process. I also welcome the symbolic steps you have taken, including the decision to sing the National Anthem in Sinhala and Tamil on Independence Day last February for the first time since the 1950s.

These steps have built confidence and trust, and strengthened transparency and accountability. But more can and should be done to address the legacy of the past and acknowledge the voices of the victims. Sri Lanka is still in the early stages of regaining its rightful position in the region and the international community.

There is still much work to be done in order to redress the wrongs of the past and to restore the legitimacy and accountability of key institutions, particularly the judiciary and the security services. I commend the Government's moves to restore the credibility and independence of the Human Rights Commission. Now it is important that the Commission receives the respect and resources it needs to carry out its work effectively. This is critical for reconciliation, and for ensuring respect for the human rights of all Sri Lankans, without regard for ethnicity, religion,

political affiliation or any other factors. I also urge you to speed up the return of land so that the remaining communities of displaced people can return home. In parallel, the size of the military force in the North and East could be reduced, helping to build trust and reduce tensions.

To recover from the cataclysms of the past, Sri Lankans will need all four elements of post-conflict resolution: truth-telling, accountability, reparations and institutional reform. There is no fast route to achieving this. It will take many years of political courage and determination.

I assure you that the United Nations will be your partner on every step of this journey.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The 2030 Agenda marks a watershed in the way we have formally linked peace and security to sustainable development. It points the way towards reducing violence, promoting harmony and prosperity, and making the world safer for all. The entire 2030 Agenda is centred on respect for human rights. It aims to ensure that no one is left behind, by reaching out to the most vulnerable and marginalized first.

Sustainable Development Goal 16, on promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, provides the clearest example of this approach. Goal 10 on reducing inequalities, Goal 5 on gender, and several other Goals focus on inclusivity in education and economic growth. These are all testimony to the mutually reinforcing links between sustainable development and peace.

In the same way that Sri Lankans called for more accountable government, people the world over have called for good governance and the rule of law, inclusivity and equality, justice and human rights, through the 2030 Agenda. They asked for transparency and accountability in how governments plan and deliver development and ensure security. Goal 16 is a benchmark for peaceful and inclusive societies. It demands action against corruption and crime. It requires that institutions function in a transparent and efficient way, based on the rule of law, and that access to justice is guaranteed for all.

These are important targets in themselves, but they are also crucial for achieving all the other goals. They mean basic services delivered without discrimination or corruption. They mean stability for investors and predictability for business, with clear legal frameworks, decent jobs, and recourse to an independent court. They mean natural resources are harnessed to benefit the many, not the few, and environmental impact is measured and controlled.

A human rights-based approach is fundamental both to post-conflict reconciliation, and to global peace and prosperity. People are our greatest and most precious natural resource. Here in Sri Lanka, the world's work for human rights faced one of its most difficult tests. The decades-long civil war saw terrible violence, terrorism, the use of human shields and other grievous violations of human rights and humanitarian law. In the conflict's decisive final stages, tens of thousands of

civilians perished. The war was ended — an unquestionable good for Sri Lanka, the region and the world. But we also know that even in its ending, the price was high.

Sri Lankans are deeply engaged in a process of reckoning and reconciliation. The United Nations has also engaged in self-scrutiny. Reports by expert, independent panels that I appointed found serious systemic problems on the part of Member States and Secretariat alike. It seemed clear that the fog of war had obscured the centrality of human rights.

Sri Lanka has taught us many important lessons. Building on these, the United Nations has taken wide-ranging steps to strengthen our focus on human rights, particularly during times of political and humanitarian crisis. In particular, I launched the Human Rights Up Front initiative, which aims to focus early attention on violations, before they escalate to reach a point of no return. This work often faces opposition, from repressive governments to individual hatreds. But we are determined to ensure that human rights are where they belong: at the centre of our decision-making.

I again commend Sri Lankans for examining the difficult period you have now begun to leave behind. I am sure those efforts will continue to generate important lessons for the international community that can save many lives in many places.

Ladies and gentlemen, the watchwords for the path you have chosen are inclusivity, transparency and accountability. All sectors of society must be involved in planning for peace and sustainable development, and the results must benefit all.

Women and young people have a central role to play. I met youth representatives at Galle Fort during my visit yesterday, and I was inspired by their vision for a peaceful and sustainable future. Young men and women have the energy and the motivation to break down barriers, reach across cultural divides and lead peacebuilding efforts. Women must also take their rightful place, and here I would like to pay tribute to a great Sri Lankan, Radhika Coomaraswamy, who has worked tirelessly for women and children throughout her many years of public service for the United Nations. The women of this country must be involved in your plans for peace, reconciliation and sustainable development as leaders like Radhika Coomaraswamy; as community representatives; as project managers and as partners in consultation.

There must be robust participation mechanisms to secure the broadest possible ownership of the post-conflict reconciliation and sustainable development agendas. There is a place for representatives of people who suffered from human rights abuses, as well as international actors. I call on international partners to come forward with coordinated support for the framework the Government has put in place.

I call on Parliament to be an active partner, providing initiatives as well as checks and balances.

I invite the private sector to invest its energy and resources. I applaud the courageous and vibrant civil society of Sri Lanka and count on you to bring forward your brightest ideas, as well as constructive criticism when it is due. I salute the women and young people of Sri Lanka and look forward to your contributions in taking this country forward on the new path of peace and reconciliation.

The United Nations is here to support you every step of the way.

Thank you.