

.....

**SINHALA-TAMIL NEW YEAR CELEBRATION
HOSTED BY THE SRI LANKA-CANADA
ASSOCIATION OF OTTAWA
APRIL 21, 2007 7:00 PM**

- Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen.
- I would like to begin by thanking Mr. Gamini Senarath, President of the Sri Lanka-Canada Association of Ottawa, for inviting me here this evening to attend the festivities marking the arrival of the Sinhala-Tamil New Year.

- As Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, I am pleased to have this opportunity to extend warm New Year's greetings to the members of your association and to the Sri Lankan community in Ottawa on behalf of the Government of Canada.
- Although Sri Lanka lies over ten thousand kilometres from Canada, that distance is at odds with the closeness we feel to Sri Lanka and Sri Lankans.

- As most of you are aware, Canada is home to the largest Sri Lankan diaspora community in the world. Your presence not only enriches the fabric of Canadian society, but also engenders a feeling of closeness and familiarity which belies the physical distance between Sri Lanka and Canada, as well as any superficial cultural differences.

- In other words, Canada's Sri Lankan community reinforces the official government linkages between the two countries, and ensures that these are based not just upon diplomatic niceties but upon true friendship, mutual respect, and a genuine understanding of each other.
- We live in a country that is almost unique: it is bilingual, multicultural, and deeply influenced by its Aboriginal roots and history.
- We also live in a federation, in what has been called one of the most decentralized countries

and successful federations in the world. What also makes Canada almost unique in the world is that we do not merely tolerate each others' differences, but we in fact celebrate them.

- These are important experiences that are relevant to other pluralistic societies, experiences which we hope to share with Sri Lanka as part of our commitment to play a constructive role in the search for peace and social and economic development in Sri Lanka.
- In a recent speech, Prime Minister Harper asserted that Canada “will continue speaking clearly and openly on the international scene to

uphold the fundamental values of the Canadian people and of all civilized peoples: freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.”

- With that in mind, Canada continues to work in conjunction with the international community, to strengthen stability and security in the world.

- This work is based on the promotion of these fundamental values, in order to ensure that the rights of all people are respected by responsible governments.
- In Sri Lanka in particular, our role in support of a peaceful resolution to the conflict is also based on these values.

- As a result, as both a government and a people, Canada has looked on with regret and dismay over the past three years as the peace process has slowly broken down and Sri Lankans have once again plunged into a bloody internecine conflict.
- The process which commenced with the signing of the Cease-fire Agreement in February 2002 was, at the time, described as Sri Lanka's "last, best chance at peace."
- Let us hope that this is not the case. Let us hope

that ordinary Sri Lankans and their leaders –
regardless of their religion, language, or ethnicity
– can again pull themselves back from the brink
and find it possible to negotiate a lasting political
solution to Sri Lanka’s deep-seated troubles.

- I hope that as Sri Lankan-Canadians, who have enjoyed first-hand the social, political and economic benefits of a pluralistic society based upon a structure of federalism and a society of tolerance, you will do whatever you can to take this message back to Sri Lanka. Pluralism and federalism are not only nothing to fear, but are ideas that could form the basis of a peaceful and prosperous future Sri Lanka.

- In this spirit, Canada strongly urges both parties to cease the use of violence and return to negotiations in order to find a political solution to the conflict.
- Canada believes that any permanent solution to the conflict should respect the territorial integrity of Sri Lanka. In addition, in order to be truly sustainable, this solution must uphold the fundamental values of freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.
- It must also address the legitimate concerns of

all Sri Lankans, regardless of language, ethnicity or religion.

- The New Year in Sri Lanka is a unique celebration. It is not only an important holiday celebrated by Sri Lankans of all faiths, but a symbolic break with the past, and therefore an opportunity to begin anew and to improve, based on lessons learned.

- History teaches us that peacemaking, which is difficult to forge even in the best circumstances, creates especially challenging situations for multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-lingual societies, such as that of Sri Lanka.
- The New Year therefore provides an opportune moment for Sri Lanka to put the difficulties of the past aside, and for all parties to renew their commitments to overcome these difficult times and work toward peace in the country.

- On that note, Ladies and Gentlemen, please allow me, on behalf of the Government of Canada, to extend best wishes to all Sri Lankans for a happy New Year, as well as a peaceful and prosperous future. I can assure you that all Sri Lankans –Tamil and Singhalese and others – have a good friend in Canada.
- Thank you.