

**Remarks by
Mr. Mano Tittawella
Secretary-General
Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms (SCRM)**

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Mr. Chairman, Ambassadors, representatives of respective United Nations organizations and civil society, ladies and gentlemen.

In 2015 the first National Unity Government in our nation's history, set out on a path of profound reform to strengthen our democracy and institutions, entrench respect for human rights and the rule of law, and to take the necessary steps to learn from our past to ensure that future generations of Sri Lankans of all backgrounds, could live as equal citizens, free from violence and conflict.

The challenge of accomplishing our objectives and reform agenda has been daunting, and at times frustrating, with each of our proposed reforms facing harsh criticism from a communalist opposition determined to preserve the status quo at any cost and labeling all steps for reform as foreign imposed infringements on Sri Lanka's sovereignty.

In fact, nothing could be further from the truth.

The desire and demand for reform comes directly from Sri Lankan citizens who voted for our reform agenda in 2015. Our Government understands that long term peace and prosperity can only come about if all citizens and all communities believe that they live in a nation with respect for the rule of law and human rights.

Part of our approach to reform has focused on positive re-engagement with the international community.

That engagement was never imposed on us. It was our choice because we knew then and know now that complex reform and peace-building processes benefit from broad international experience and assistance.

Thus, we reached out to you and, thankfully, you reached out to us.

The Government of Sri Lanka has an intricate and multilayered institutional framework in its approach to the transitional justice and reconciliation agenda. It reflects across political composition and all levels of the government. In fact, the 19th amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution necessitates the President as a duty, to "promote national reconciliation and integration". Thus the Ministry of National Integration & Reconciliation was established under the President, and functions as one of the three national ministries pertaining to reconciliation.

The other two being the Ministry of National Coexistence, Dialogue and Official Languages, and the Ministry of Prison Reforms, Rehabilitation, Resettlement and Hindu Affairs. In addition, the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR), headed by Her Excellency former president Madam Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, which comes under the

National Integration & Reconciliation Ministry, assists in policy formulation and implementation of the non-recurrence agenda.

The Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms (SCRM) sits within this arrangement to design and implement Transitional Justice mechanisms and ensure effective coordination of the national reconciliation program.

I would like to begin my substantive intervention with a brief highlight on the work of ONUR in relation to Reconciliation and Non-recurrence.

The organization functions as a catalyst where needs and gaps are identified, and innovative interventions are designed as program elements; and subsequently translated into actionable strategies for implementation.

ONUR's mandate functions on the notion of sustaining peace in Sri Lanka. Thus it aims for long term systematic change as well as building Programmatic Agendas.

Certain key initiatives of ONUR include Arts & Culture, Conflict Transformation & Interfaith Dialogue, Education, University Engagement, Livelihood and Community Development, Psycho-Social Support, Women for Reconciliation, and Public Outreach. There is a lot of focus on youth and women as securing the support of these two groups is invaluable in sustaining peace.

Programs and activities carried out by ONUR are conceptualized, designed and implemented in a consultative and a collaborative manner.

Over the last 2 years, ONUR has worked with over 250,000 students, 1000 community leaders, elected & public officials, 1000 religious leaders, and tens of thousands of members of the general public through their initiatives in taking the message of national unity and reconciliation to the local level.

Following a year's worth of comprehensive consultations with multiple stakeholders, including Government officials, Ministries, Departments, members of Provincial Councils, Civil Society, Academia and Experts and grass-roots activists, the National Reconciliation Policy & Coexistence was adopted by the Cabinet of Ministers in May this year.

The impact of ONUR Programs in the last 2 years has been positive. More than 1000 government officials, youth & religious leaders have been trained as resource persons for community-based conflict transformation projects. ONUR's "Religious Harmony" programs have succeeded in involving 250,000 students as participants from the 4 major religions. In addition, under ONUR's Sahodara Paasal / Paadasaalai scheme for school children, 5 day residential camps were conducted, where students from different provinces learnt to live together and be change-makers in their respective schools.

ONUR works closely with the Ministry of Education to bring about progressive reforms in policy and curricula. A new curriculum module on Reconciliation will be introduced in 7 key universities from 2018, aiming to build social cohesion among students from different communities. The first batch of psycho-social counselors have been trained and deployed in the field, in Jaffna, to provide support to individuals in need, particularly women and youth.

ONUR has also initiated a national project titled "Heal the Past, Build the Future" to build social cohesion nationwide among adults of all communities. Arts & culture programs which uses the performing arts to spread the message of peace have been initiated in the form of street and forum theatre, films, tele-dramas, radio dramas as well as cartoon, essay and art competitions. ONUR additionally carries out infrastructure development programs in the North and the East which includes development of schools, hospitals, roads, agriculture, drip irrigation, fisheries, housing, sanitation and livelihood support.

ONUR focuses strongly in inculcating a sense of social harmony in the minds of our younger generation, which is essential for national integration.

In partnership with the Bakeer Markar Centre for National Unity, ONUR has successfully organized an art and essay competition for school children, the competition attracted 1283 essays in all three languages and 9060 pieces of art, covering all provinces of the country.

In partnership with the European Union, they organized the photographic exhibition titled 'Hope' which the Foreign Secretary briefly spoke about.

ONUR is also currently engaged in developing a program for memorialization.

What should be noted about ONUR's interventions is that while other programs and agendas initiated by the government, target medium to long-term actions for reconciliation, its programs target normalizing people's lives first, prior to beginning reconciliation.

All of these agendas, to be sustainable, would require assistance from Sri Lanka's development partners.

Another important programme that we have commenced, under the auspices of the Education Ministry and the Ministry of Provincial Councils, is the introduction of a subject called "Think Equal" in pilot pre-schools across 12 districts. This subject, with the aim of strengthening reconciliation, teaches children social and emotional intelligence, and core values including gender sensitivity and human rights. From next year (2018), this programme, as approved by the Cabinet of Ministers, will be extended to all pre-schools in the country.

As Secretary General of the SCRM, Transitional Justice is a direct responsibility in my portfolio. The co-sponsorship of UNHRC resolutions 30/1 of 2015, extended by UNHRC 34/1 earlier this year, set an extremely ambitious reform agenda including the establishment of four transitional justice mechanisms.

These mechanisms are in the process of being established with Sri Lankan leadership and participation. The process was enriched by the work of the Consultative Task Force, which in turn drew from broad civil society-led national consultations that were held in our country for the very first time. It also benefitted from shared international expertise and assistance.

The Office of Missing Persons (OMP), will be the first transitional justice mechanism to become fully operational during 1Q 2018. The Constitutional Council will begin interviewing suitable candidates for OMP commissioners very soon. The public application deadline closed 10 days ago. A budget and organizational framework are already in place and we

are working with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), among other international entities to provide training and expertise to the OMP to help it become operational to the highest professional standards.

A draft law on reparations has been prepared and is presently being discussed with experts, but ongoing reparations work by our Government is continuing under the Rehabilitation of Persons, Properties and Industries Authority (REPPIA), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) is helping us to lay the groundwork for an enhanced reparations process that draws upon international best practice.

Draft legislation for a Truth Seeking Commission is also complete and similarly under further discussion and consultation with experts before being presented to the Cabinet of Ministers. The civil society led drafting committee drew upon international best practices, while ensuring that the TSC model tailored to the unique Sri Lankan context while also drawing from recommendations made by the Consultation Task Force.

Our Government has benefited from insights shared by international experts on both Truth Commissions and Accountability mechanisms, most recently from Colombia, who were able to undertake a mission to Sri Lanka thanks to PBF support.

We are also making headway on the design of an Accountability mechanism, while trying to focus as a priority, at the earliest possible, on consultations and capacity building initiatives in forensics, investigations, and prosecutorial strategies, while also carrying out awareness raising programmes that the transitional justice processes, especially the judicial mechanism, will not unfairly target any community or the security forces but benefit all, equally. We are especially thankful in this context to the Government of Japan and to Judge Motoo Noguchi for sharing his experience and ideas on Accountability mechanisms, during his mission to Sri Lanka last month and look forward to remaining engaged.

In 2017, we have made slow, steady progress, but much of that progress is not yet visible. We have benefited from the support of many bilateral partners, the UN family, and the PBF in particular.

I will not attempt to mention all these entities, but I would like to recognize the support of UNDP, OHCHR, the Swiss Government, particularly with training of the military, civil servants and civil society representatives in transitional justice, UNICEF which co-sponsored a workshop with my office earlier this year on children and youth in transitional justice which highlighted important lessons to incorporate measures for the protection and participation of youth and children in our mechanisms, UN Women, which stands ready to deploy a Gender and Transitional Justice Expert for an initial period of six months and the British Government which funds two international TJ experts embedded in SCRM. Their support has been, and continue to be extremely useful for us.

We often feel that we are going too slow on transitional justice, indeed UN Special Rapporteur Mr. Pablo de Greiff, told us as much last month, but we are going to get there and we will need your continued help and partnership on this journey.

Having now studied other transitional justice experiences in post-conflict settings, we know how complex and difficult such processes are, and we are aware that no country has operationalized four mechanisms in a two-year time frame. Perhaps our original time-frames were too ambitious but our objectives, and our commitment, remain unchanged,

and our determination is strong and firm because we fully realize the importance of these processes for sustainable peace and reconciliation in our country, without which economic progress cannot be achieved in a meaningful manner.

Having touched on the transitional justice portfolio specifically, let me now turn to another aspect and challenge to our reform process.

As we all know, transitional justice processes do not operate in a vacuum.

They are part and parcel of a much broader reform effort in Sri Lanka, that includes constitutional reform, strengthening of rule of law and human rights, the adoption of a broad reconciliation policy and the creation of longer-term economic development plans that incorporate all of these elements.

There are aspects within all of these objectives that, in turn, link with our broader peacebuilding plan, and will benefit from the generosity and support of the PBC. Of these elements, let me just highlight a few steps already taken.

- 1) 19th Amendment to the Constitution, and a constitutional reform process with the report from the public representations committee, interim reports from all-party sub-committees, and the steering committee being tabled in the Constitutional Assembly, followed by a 5-day debate at end-October and earlier this month, in Parliament; and Electoral Reform at Provincial and Local level, which also provides for a special quota for women.
- 2) Adoption of a National Human Rights Action Plan, and open invitation to UN Special Rapporteurs issued in December 2015, with 6 thematic mandate holder visits in 2 years, strengthening of the National Human Rights Commission (HRCSL), ratification of several human rights treaties including ICPRD and the ICED, ending enforced disappearances and white van abductions, and ensuring freedom of expression.
- 3) Restoration of GSP + status with the European Union which also involved completion of UN Treaty Body Reporting and Examination Processes
- 4) Approval last week by the Cabinet of Ministers, of Sri Lanka's accession to the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and the appointment of the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka as the National Preventive Mechanism
- 5) Adoption of a National Reconciliation Policy
- 6) The adoption of the Government's Vision 2025 by both the main parties in Parliament for the first time in our history.
- 7) The extension of the mandate of SCRM, and full provisioning of resources required for its functions in the 2018 National Budget.
- 8) A broad communications strategy to be launched in January 2018 captioned "Ahanna" or "Listen" to sensitize the reform agenda amongst the public and inform them about relevant programs and their rationale.**

I believe the firmest indication of the government's commitment for transitional justice and the reconciliation process came through the budget for 2018, recently presented by the

Minister for Finance and Media and former Minister for Foreign Affairs, Hon. Mangala Samaraweera.

The Government has allotted a total of Rs 11.3Bn, directly for reconciliation related activities in the year 2018 and all-time record spending allocation.

Some of these projects include;

Rs 1000 Million to assist indebted people in the North and North Central provinces via credit cooperation societies.

Rs 750 Mn to begin construction of 50,000 brick and mortar houses with private sector funding

Rs 2500 Mn to strengthen reconciliation centered economic empowerment and social infrastructure development.

A special program to address the needs of the differently abled men and women in the Northern and the Eastern provinces.

The government will also support Ex-Combatants and war widows with an allocation of Rs 250 Mn to provide a salary subsidy to the private sector, who employees them, of around Rs. 10,000 or 50% of Salary. This will be supported by suitable vocational training programs.

The question of protracted Muslim IDP's is also a key issue that the government hopes to address with a Rs 2750 Mn allocation.

In addition, a provision of Rs 1.4 billion has been made to set-up the OMP.

The Peacebuilding Priority Plan that the Government of Sri Lanka has constructed along with the UN has established an organizational framework for peacebuilding in the nation. This is based around 4 pillars, namely Transitional Justice, Reconciliation, Good Governance, and Sustainable Development.

It serves as a coordinating framework for donor alignment with national peacebuilding priorities with its board comprising of representatives of government, civil society, development partners and UN to guide its programming elements.

Special mention must also be made of the Immediate Response Facility (IRF) which allowed for rapid quick impact support to address immediate grievances of minorities. This included resettlement of IDPs as well as broad based mechanisms for inter-ethnic trust building and technical assistance to enhance transitional justice capacities. The Peacebuilding and Recovery Facility (PRF) has allowed for flexible longer-term support for Transitional Justice mechanisms, provision of psycho-social support, strengthening the building blocks of peace, including engagement of youth and women.

Therefore, we now have a solid framework to build upon and to accelerate implementation. We believe that peacebuilding will only be successful if anchored in growing economic opportunity, where people have decent and sustainable livelihoods.

In terms of our transitional justice and reconciliation process, I hope that there is now greater understanding that our slow pace of reform is not an indicator of the lack of commitment.

As any democracy would, the Government of Sri Lanka derives its legitimacy through its people and this government continues to ensure its legitimacy through listening to the demands of all of them.

I must also mention that to ensure that the transitional justice process in Sri Lanka is fully achieved sequencing of our efforts, especially in truth, justice and accountability, is paramount. We are committed to build a sustainable peace! Thus any pillar or process, while linked to each other, must not suffer from the disadvantages the other faces.

We are also cognizant that a communications strategy is important in combatting the messages brought out by negative communalist elements, that transpires to derail the process. Thus, the government will enact an inclusive communications agenda reflecting this in the near future.

This will be in addition to delivering on non-recurrence and confidence building agendas which aims to secure the confidence of all minority groups in the nation. In addition, the government recognizes that tracking peacebuilding perceptions is critical for a targeted strategy for the transitional justice and reconciliation agenda of Sri Lanka.

To that end, we also realize that the Peacebuilding Priority Plan plays a critical role in catalyzing funds for this agenda. It serves as a key instrument to coordinate peacebuilding efforts with multilateral stakeholders, the UN and Civil Society. Also by extension, the Flexible funding component including technical assistance from the UN and other multilateral agencies is critical, if this process is to continue.

In considering our future priorities, let me once again reiterate that the government is keen on ensuring a comprehensive communications agenda to generate support for reforms. We are targeting to strengthen our domestic institutions to facilitate our overall reconciliation agenda. We are also committed to securing a long term political settlement through constitutional reforms and will continue strengthening national capacities on Transitional Justice. Dealing with the past and well-designed truth seeking, reparations and accountability mechanisms requires technical assistance particularly, to strengthen investigations, forensic and prosecutorial capabilities.

We identify, strongly, that the military is an important stakeholder in this discussion. Our engagement with the military thus far has been consequential and rewarding. Thus, we aim to continue and strengthen our military dialogues pertaining to transitional justice. We will also continue to scale up the provision of psychosocial support, complete the resettlement of IDPs, support the return of refugees, continue returning of private land, secure and empower Female Headed Households and ensure job creation and inclusive growth in the post-conflict provinces i.e. the North and East.

We will enact the much delayed and suitably amended Counter Terrorism Act, thereby repealing the present PTA, and also enact the Enforced Disappearances Act in the 1st Q of 2018.

Allow me to conclude, by saying thank you for helping us begin this journey and that we require the UN to remain engaged with us to continue working together to see this program through.

Your continued and enhanced support will be critical as a catalyst, to mobilize much needed international assistance and funding for this agenda.

An agenda which, to paraphrase President Maithripala Sirisena, focuses on fighting against the politics of ethnic and religious division and extremism and centered upon upholding promoting and protecting human rights of all and the pluralistic nature of our society; and ensuring inclusive and equitable growth and development in Sri Lanka.

Thank you.