

Colombo Defence Seminar 2017
Countering Violent Extremism: Global Trends

Valedictory Address
by
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Distinguished Guests

Ladies & Gentlemen

I take the floor at the very end of two days of deliberations on one of the most important subjects of our time – "*Countering Violent Extremism*". The opening ceremony, as you know, was graced by the President of Sri Lanka, manifesting the importance and leadership Sri Lanka provides at the highest levels of Government, in dealing with violent extremism, not just in Sri Lanka, but worldwide, as this is not a phenomenon confined to a country, to a community, or a society; and success requires working with others, in fact with everyone, everywhere, in partnership.

Admiral William J. Fallon's Keynote Address yesterday set the tone for our deliberations over these two days. The discussion on this important subject that commenced yesterday should not end when we bring down the curtain this evening on this Colombo Defence Seminar. The partnerships we formed, the networks we built, the dialogues that we started, the ideas that we exchanged during our time here should continue, and should be transformed into implementation in our societies, communities, and countries, in dealing with this complex phenomenon.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am not a Military person, nor an Academic, but a Diplomat for long years. Hence, I intend to take a generic, down-to-earth view on this important issue as I see it, both from national and international perspectives.

You are all familiar with Sri Lanka's story. Our country was mired in conflict for almost three decades. We experienced two youth insurrections in the South, and separatist terrorism in the North.

All this tore our societies and our communities apart. Thousands of young, productive lives were lost to our nation. Death, destruction, displacement, citizens leaving our shores, and considerable economic loss of a magnitude that is inconceivable – these were the results of violent conflict that arose as a result of extremism.

Today, as we chart our path on a journey towards stronger democratic institutions, good governance, reconciliation, and economic development, we recognize that this is a journey that requires strong commitment and perseverance for the long haul. We have to heal our own who still bear the scars of conflict – both mental and physical.

Of course, no more bombs go off here now thanks to the efforts of most of you present here today. No children are dragged away into battle. Parents can sleep peacefully, knowing that their children are safe. But, societies are fragile. They are not immune to influence from extraneous sources. Communities are no longer what they used to be when we were growing up, where everyone knew everyone else in their neighbourhoods, and stood up for, and cared for one another; where parents spent time with their children; and children played with each other, and had conversations with real human beings face-to-face, instead of being glued to the internet and online games.

So, while we journey towards rebuilding our nation and healing our communities, and realizing our vision of a stable, peaceful, reconciled and prosperous Sri Lanka, we are aware that this requires hard work and commitment, not only by the Government, as this is not a task that Government alone can undertake and succeed in. It requires the dedicated effort, care, and commitment, of each and every individual citizen at every level of our society.

Of course the horrors of war are behind us here in Sri Lanka. But, we are acutely conscious that there are other parts in the world where the horror of what we faced, is repeated, and is playing out, even as I speak. Parents are living in fear of the loss of their own lives and their children's lives. There is no safety, and no security even in their places of worship. Somewhere, some young person is being lured over the internet by someone living oceans away perhaps, into taking up arms or blowing himself up, for some strange cause. Some innocent child, somewhere, is being taught to hate. Sri Lanka is an island, yes. But as long as there is suffering somewhere on this planet, no one is safe. As long as there is injustice somewhere on this planet, no one can rest assured of peace. As long as someone's rights are violated, either here in this country or elsewhere, our peace, our stability, our prosperity, is short-lived. So just like dealing with climate change, we are all in this together, and for the long-haul.

Security Forces are often called upon to counter, when societies fail to prevent conflict, casting a heavy burden on Security Forces. They have to be mindful in carrying out their duty, and extremely mindful and cautious in using the tools in their hands, while operating in very difficult circumstances of hostile conflict. They have the burden of making sure that their actions don't exacerbate conflict.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This Conference bears the title – 'Countering' Violent Extremism. 'Countering', though, often refers to a 'response' to something. It includes 'prevention' which often refers to stopping something from happening. Therefore, when we speak of dealing with violent extremism, it is important to do so in terms of both 'preventing' and 'countering'. In fact Admiral Fallon, in his Keynote Address, mentioned this fact as well.

Prevention includes many things:

One:

It includes finding ways and means of reaching the very roots of our societies and communities to imbibe in people – this includes children in their formative years, parents, and teachers – the importance of embracing empathy, tolerance, respect, and compassion. This involves getting in touch with human values that are in each and every one of us, and looking afresh, at the concept of education. This is important because although we call ourselves "educated", one wonders whether young people today are really educated in being able to deal with life's challenges by the time they leave school or by the time they leave university. How competent are our children in dealing with challenges in a meaningful and successful way? Most often, 'education' and 'success' are measured, or are equated with the ability of getting the highest marks in an exam and beating all the rest at sports, going out into society and being able to secure the highest pay-cheque, buying the most expensive car, the biggest house, and wearing branded clothes and wrist watches and vacationing in the most expensive spots in the country and overseas. Where in this system of education are human values? Do we not need to focus on giving each and every student the skill-sets required to be compassionate towards each other, towards all beings, towards his or her environment without which all the success achieved in terms of getting the highest pay-cheque and buying the biggest car will ultimately fail because one can't succeed alone in society. The ability for critical thinking, care, empathy, to be responsible for oneself and others, to respect oneself and others, the ability to not fall apart in the face of adversity and not get lured by those extremists who prey on the vulnerable – these are very important skill-sets that must be passed on to our children, if we are to be realistic about preventing violent extremism. Civic consciousness, and the fact that we cannot succeed if we marginalise others, are important priorities to focus on, alongside the virtues of reading, writing, math, and science. It is important to give young people the skills to be able to use their powers of critical and analytical thinking to come up with alternative, peaceful ways to get what they want, instead of being lured into turning themselves into human bombs, destroying themselves and everyone and everything else around them when they cannot secure what

they may seek. Respect for life is an important virtue that must be valued. This includes respect for one's own life.

In our country, as I said before, we have been through the most extreme forms of violence. This is despite our nation being blessed by the four main religions in the world. The cycles of violence that we have witnessed and experienced can help us to perfect the art of making our people realise the importance of embracing peace and peaceful co-existence as a way of life, while abandoning violence as an option, forever.

We still see, in our country, people resorting to violent speech and destructive action including in protests demanding what they seek, and refusing to negotiate and reach solutions through compromise and consensus. We see this type of behaviour in mature adults in society, including, unfortunately, by those who hold important positions as well.

Realising the need for transformative change, and the need to begin at a young age, the Government, most recently, approved a programme called "Think Equal" which will be rolled-out in pre-schools throughout the country from January 2018. This programme attempts to change mind-sets and attitudes through value based education that focuses on social and emotional learning as a compulsory new subject on national curricula from the earliest years. As a country that is recovering from conflict, we are convinced that the only lasting way to address the wounds of division is by instilling empathy, a sense of oneness, inclusion, forgiveness and love in our children while they are still very young and open to attitude and behaviour change from the age of 3 onwards.

Understanding differences and accepting differences, equality, tolerance, justice, mercy, compassion, humility – these are human values that transcend religion and ethnicity, and we hope that through discussions such as what you have had, we will succeed in making a lasting, credible and real change in our future generations.

Two:

In our own country and throughout the world, breaking any cycle of violence requires treating those who give up violence, with sensitivity. They must be assisted to return to their communities, without the threat of continued violence, harassment, suspicion or discrimination, and ensuring that those displaced get the care and attention that they need.

Three:

Strengthening inclusive democratic governance that provides for nonviolent mechanisms for social and political change, and building the capacity of democratic civil society groups that enhances democratic norms, is another crucial preventive mechanism. This will help lower and minimise the urge to resist through violence.

Citizens must be offered an alternative that is better – which offers hope, and systems that deliver on promises. There are many who resort to joining extremist movements as they have trouble finding meaning or opportunity in their lives; or they are deeply frustrated and alienated and have no identity, purpose, or dignity. Disillusioned and misguided, they think that terrorist movements can offer them some dignity and power.

It is important that we work hard to ensure that the grounds for recruitment such as humiliation, marginalisation, inequality, poverty, and corruption are removed from our societies. There must be ways to care for the vulnerable. Citizen engagement in decision-making can be enhanced so that they feel they have ownership of their future.

Increased investments in schools and training programmes to prepare young people to be able to compete in the global marketplace; infrastructure and the means to connect producers to consumers; investment in demonstrating to the people that they are cared for through social services and counselling programmes including psycho-social support for those who need such facilities to deal with the pressures and stresses of modern-day life, and the wounds and scars of conflict, are essential.

Although women's education does receive attention in our country, there has to be much more done to help Women-Headed Households and the empowerment of women at all levels, as women can play an important role in preventing violent extremism in our societies.

Another important aspect is the need to strive to lift up the voices of tolerance and peace in our societies, including online, especially on social media. All forms of media have a very important role to play as well, in lifting up and highlighting the voices of peace, togetherness, harmony, respect and co-existence, and carrying these voices across society to all corners of the world.

Four:

It is important to build trust in government at all levels, including in law enforcement agencies and the security forces that are meant to protect people, and build confidence in the judiciary.

Bribery, corruption, and fraud must not be tolerated, and must be countered, as these phenomena feed organized crime including human trafficking, and discourage honest and accountable governance, undermining entire communities.

Corruption makes ordinary people feel that the system is rigged against them, and that the people in power are stealing what is rightfully theirs.

Corruption, injustice, and humiliation, makes people easy prey for extremists, and make communities ripe for extremist recruitment. Eradicating corruption and creating confidence in the integrity of government institutions, are important ingredients for preventing violent extremism.

It is vital that countries – that is governments, organisations, the private sector, and civil society, and we, officials – all combine efforts to commit to broad-based development that creates growth and jobs for all, and not just for some.

Government being transparent, including development assistance and grants actually reaching the people, is also an important aspect in this context.

Five:

Political grievances must be addressed, as these are breeding grounds that extremists exploit. When people feel oppressed, and their human rights are denied, particularly along sectarian or ethnic lines, and when dissent is silenced – it creates an environment that can be ripe for recruitment.

Lasting stability and real security requires functioning and credible democracy, with strong and credible institutions. Independent judiciaries that uphold the rule of law, law enforcement authorities and security forces that respect human rights at all times, free speech and freedom for civil society groups, and freedom to practice religion – all this is vital. Diversity in society must be accepted, preserved, and upheld, so that all feel that they truly belong in their countries, societies and communities, and they feel safe and secure.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I spoke so far on prevention of violent extremism. Now, a few words on Countering Violent Extremism which also involves combating terrorism. We must always remain vigilant and unwavering and fully committed in our fight against terrorist organisations worldwide. This involves working together in cooperation and in collaboration with all key partners and entities that work on countering violent extremism. We must use our knowledge and expertise to contribute to the efforts of others by helping others build and enhance their capacities.

We ourselves must modernise and transform our own tri-forces to meet the needs of the present and future. Vigilance is of course the better part of valour. Of course, the Sri Lankan tri-forces fought a terrorist group and defeated them militarily, eight years ago in 2009. Threats evolve, terrorists adapt, new challenges emerge. Our tri-forces must now look at ways of modernising, right-sizing, transforming, and enhancing their skills, build partnerships, and adapt to meet new challenges in close partnership with other armies, navies, and air-forces of the region and beyond to combat and counter

terrorism and violent extremism, whenever and wherever necessary. We must seek cutting edge technology methods and think innovatively to not allow any room for extremists to turn violent.

An important point made by Admiral William J. Fallon, in his Keynote Address yesterday is definitely worth repeating. We must, at all times, be mindful of the methods used to combat terrorism and extremism. Swarming a society with surveillance and overarching security apparatus may be effective, but it curtails civil liberties and individual rights. It is easy to drive fear into people by cracking down on each and every one of a certain community or age group who theoretically may pose some sort of a threat. But extremism cannot be defeated through repression or by creating fear. Fear instilled through repression invites contempt and can lead to the creation of terrorists and more extremists. It is trust that creates confidence, and it is trust that creates citizens and feelings of citizenship and loyalty. Of course, each State has the duty to take measures to protect all individuals within its territory and those subject to its jurisdiction, from violence. However, the methods used for doing so must at all times be consistent with individual rights. As the former Secretary-General of the UN, Mr. Ban Ki-moon once said, "the objective of violent extremists is not necessarily to turn on us – it is for us to turn on each other. Their biggest mission is not the action, it is the reaction. The aim is to divide communities. The goal is to let fear rule." – and we must not fall prey.

Finally, I want to share two important thoughts with you.

First, Nelson Mandela's words:

"No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite."

Second, the preamble to the Constitution of UNESCO which declares that,
"since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed".

To my mind, these are two very important ideas that we must be guided by, in crafting our strategies and plans for preventing and countering violent extremism. Dialogues across countries and cultures; dialogues within countries; and across faiths, as well as within faiths; building bridges of communication and trust; building confidence; allaying fears; and getting back in touch with human values that transcend religions and ethnicities.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I congratulate the Commander of the Army, Lieutenant General Mahesh Senanayake and his team for providing this excellent platform for an important dialogue, the content of which we will all take home for further reflection and action, as possible.

Thank you.