

*Seminar in advance of Tokyo Conference
on Sri Lanka's Reconstruction and Development*

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When you hear the name Sri Lanka, what picture comes to your mind? What is your picture of her people? As you sort through all the countries around the world in your mind, where do you place Sri Lanka?

A tear drop of an island off the Indian subcontinent, lush tropical colors, home to just about 19 million people, per capita income not even \$900 per year, decades of violent internal conflict ...

You could very well leave it at that. But we had better take another look. Sri Lanka is no ordinary developing country.

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When I came to the World Bank, I was shocked to find Sri Lanka listed among the low-income developing countries in the World Bank Atlas. I grew up, in Japan, thinking of Sri Lanka as a developed nation, with a reverence one naturally holds for the cultural and historical heritage of an advanced civilization.

My own mental picture of Sri Lanka was suffused with impressive bits of information. Let me share with you some of those mental brushstrokes.

- A nation that boasts one of the oldest, if not the oldest, written history in the world.
- One of the first countries in the world to introduce universal adult franchise – in 1931, two years after Britain and nearly 20 years before India.
- A tradition of democratic governance right down to the village level, with elected village and town councils accountable to the people, as early as in the 1930s.
- A nation who produced the world's first lady Prime Minister, in 1960s.
- A people with among the best socio-economic indicators in all of Asia – be it life expectancy, infant and maternal mortality, literacy, near universal primary school enrolment, etc.

- Jaffna College dating back to 1819 and the American missionaries who founded it, where Malaysian, Singaporean, South Indian and even Japanese students were enrolled as early as the 1930s and 1940s.
- *The Observer* out of Colombo founded in 1934, a national newspaper still in circulation today, and the *Morning Star* out of Jaffna in 1841.
- The Ceylon Chamber of Commerce, the world's oldest such chamber dating back 164 years, and thriving today.
- And, Lee Kuan Yew's pronouncement that he wanted Singapore to be like Sri Lanka, when he visited the island in the 1950s.

These are just a few brushstrokes of a nation called Sri Lanka, of a people of deep political awareness. It is a nation that looks at her poverty, and says this surely does not become us. It is a nation that looks at her recent history of social exclusion and violence, and says this surely does not become us.

Justice Sutherland of the United States Supreme Court said the following, back in 1936: *"Rulers come and go; governments and forms of governments change; but sovereignty survives. A political society cannot endure without a supreme will somewhere. Sovereignty is never held in suspense."*

Today, there is a coincidence of the sovereign will of the people of Sri Lanka to change – to capture peace, to secure good governance, and to embrace sound economic policies – and their leaders with the singular mandate to regain Sri Lanka that becomes all her people. We are invited to offer our moral and financial support, to assist them begin that journey. We can do so effectively, in ways that will be sustained long after we are gone, if and only if we can honor the sovereign will, and respect Sri Lanka's own leadership for positive social, economic and political change.

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Peter Harrold, the World Bank Country Director for Sri Lanka, will now present the details about Sri Lanka's reconstruction and development needs. I end my remarks by wishing peace and prosperity to all Sri Lankans, on this auspicious first day of Sri Lanka's traditional New Year.