

THE ADDRESS
OF
THE HON. R PREMADASA
PRIME MINISTER OF SRI LANKA
AT THE
SPECIAL SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS
ON THE
INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF SHELTER
FOR THE HOMELESS 1987
UNITED NATIONS, NEW YORK

12TH OCTOBER 1987

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Mr. President,
Mr. Secretary General,
Distinguished Delegates.

Today, we are meeting at the Special Session of the United Nations to commemorate the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless 1987. This is a unique occasion for the world community. It signifies and gives expression to our collective commitment for a better tomorrow. The presence of so many distinguished delegates, with expertise and experience in the field of shelter dignifies this occasion. To all of you, I bring the personal felicitations of His Excellency J R Jayewardene, President of Sri Lanka.

At this moment when we should be discussing housing development with tranquility, my heart is saddened. My eyes get filled with tears. A cold shudder runs through my body.

Mr. President, this has arisen from the tragic acts of terrorism which have resulted in not only the destruction of thousands of shelters but also the loss of thousands of lives in Sri Lanka. On this occasion I would like to make a plea to this august assembly. I would like you to divert your attention to my motherland-Sri Lanka; to Sri Lanka which is an independent, sovereign and unitary country; a country which has earned a rightful place in the United Nations, in the Non Aligned Movement, in the Commonwealth of Nations and in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation.

I urge you to divert your attention towards Sri Lanka which introduced the concept of the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless. I want you to open your eyes to the dastardly acts

of terrorist violence perpetrated by terrorists who are being assisted and sheltered from outside our shores. I want you to fully understand the manner in which innocent families together with their children have been thrown out of their homes. The manner in which their houses have been set on fire and razed to the ground. In the face of such acts which are dastardly, barbarous and unjust, can an august assembly of the stature of the United Nations turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to what is happening in Sri Lanka? Where else can we make representations against this grave injustice other than at this World Assembly?

Terrorism in Sri Lanka is not aimed at finding a solution to an ethnic problem. Terrorism in Sri Lanka is not intended to gain human rights. It is now established beyond doubt that terrorism in Sri Lanka is aimed at destroying democratic systems, tearing up the country into bits and pieces and murdering innocent people. At least we are relieved by the fact that this truth - this absolute truth - has now been realised by the civilised democratic world. Now, everyone has come to recognise who the cunning parents are, who fostered, who nurtured, who sheltered and who armed these mischievous and murderous miscreants. Undoubtedly, those responsible will be subjected to the condemnation and the ridicule of the entire world community.

Seven years ago, at the 35th General Assembly of the United Nations in 1980, Sri Lanka proposed the concept of a selected year to focus on shelter. We did this because the great industrial and agricultural development visions tended to bypass the nexus of human development - the home. Citizens of developing countries in particular, have a long and strong family attachment to the traditional home. Thus, poor housing and sub-standard dwellings affect the very soul of our societies.

The International Year of Shelter for the Homeless was born out of this concern. However, there was also another fundamental assumption which guided our understanding of the importance of an International Year. This was our belief in the value of individual effort. We were conscious of the fact that the personalised involvement of ordinary men and women, could solve national problems. This is more so when the masses are motivated, mobilized and disciplined. Our perception of the International Year reached much beyond mere construction programmes. We then saw it, and we still see it, as a new moral order transcending ideological, political and social barriers.

Since the adoption of the proposal for the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless, remarkable changes have taken place in the context of development. It is now increasingly evident that shelter can become a new organising principle for development. In the less affluent areas of the world, at least 100 million people are without homes. Hundreds of millions of others live in sub-standard or obsolete housing. The grand designs of economic strategists scarcely touched this devastating plight of the poor and ill-sheltered. However, in a short span of time housing has become both a catalyst and a stimulus. It has shown promise as a new development effort that will address and redress this condition.

Distinguished Delegates,

I say this not as an abstraction of theory. I speak from the crucible of experience. In the past decade, we have built well over half a million housing units in Sri Lanka. The One Million Houses Programme which was launched in 1984, has made steady progress. We hope to complete this on target in 1989.

Our motto is minimum intervention by the State and maximum participation of the people. Our end objective is the creation of a house-owning democracy in Sri Lanka. Through self-help approaches and the release of mass creative energies, we have reduced the direct cost to the State of an average family dwelling to US\$200/- in rural areas and to US\$400/ in cities. Our efforts are far from perfect and far from complete and we have yet much further to go. However, what successes we have had illustrate the value of embracing the central themes implicit in the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless. What we have accomplished is largely due to the imagination and labour of ordinary men and women fired with the vision of ownership through personal dedication.

Distinguished Delegates,

The spirit of the Year of Shelter must not terminate at the end of 1987. The International Year has given us an opportunity to put aside, at least in the area of human settlements, the diverse divisive issues - divisive issues of ideologies, political systems, economic conflicts and the arms race. It has allowed us to demonstrate that the global community of nations can work together. If we can sustain the encouraging momentum of the International Year, we can perhaps prove that this ethic of national and planetary cooperation can be extended into other areas of human concern.

This is why the efforts of the International Year must continue if they are to realize both our more immediate developmental objectives and our large visions. Our visions must be lasting if they are to have purpose. To this end, I have submitted five specific proposals to the United Nations Commission on Human Settlements.

Firstly, my proposal for the extension of the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless to a global programme targeted to assure Shelter for All by the Year 2000 has received wide support. My second proposal called for the creation of an independent international credit institution - a Global Housing and Shelter Bank.

Third, the initiation of Regional Research Groups on Regional Settlements Approaches, Technology Sharing, and Shelter Education is being actively pursued. My fourth proposal is of immediate relevance to the developing countries. It calls for the commencement of an international pledging system to accelerate settlement building, develop long-range forecasts and strategies, and create a sense of global accountability.

My fifth proposal called for the establishment of a specialized agency or an international institution within the United Nations System solely devoted to the promotion of shelter and allied activities.

These five proposals are the building - blocks for a New International Spatial Order - a massive effort for social justice and development through priority for housing and living space. Such an effort, coordinated and monitored through the United Nations, can provide the vital thrust for development. This will constitute the most sought after link between the inadequacies of the present and the delivery of satisfactions to the global masses in the future.

A New International Spatial Order will have a transcending impact on human values and aspirations. It can give new life to that old and central institution called the family, the most primary of all human organizations. It can provide and engender a

multitude of other development efforts. Above all, it can bring a vibrancy to life in the poorest regions of our planet and hope to those who live there.

Mr. President,

In the name of all those who look for a better life; in the name of all those who seek development and not dependency, I call on this assembly to endorse the concept of a New International Spatial Order and to undertake appropriate institutional planning that will make this vision a reality. This will be a monument to the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless and a beacon for the future.

Mr. President,

Those of us committed to shelter must remember that our efforts do not take place in isolation from the overall context of world events. In many ways, housing is a barometer of global security. And so, our concerns must also embrace these issues which determine the destiny of mankind. The security or insecurity of nations is not lodged in the plentitude or paucity of armaments alone. We must not forget other forms of security - political, economic, and cultural.

Mr. President,

Two years ago when I addressed the 40th Anniversary Session of the United Nations General Assembly, I urged the United States of America and the Soviet Union to agree to a reduction of military expenditure by ten percent each year for five consecutive years beginning in 1987. Such restraint could make available over US\$60 billion for creative and life sustaining investments in development. As long as the arms race persists the

dreadful prospect of a war of universal destruction remains a clear possibility.

We are happy to note that the United Nations Conference on Development and Disarmament just concluded has recognized these imperatives. There is a clear causal connection between arms expenditures and the shortfall of capital for development. That is why we should support any accord aimed at diminishing arms expenditure. We must work together to end this most unpredictable system where the security of many is hostage to the ambitions of a few. It is in this spirit that we welcome both the declarations of the United Nations Conference on Development and Disarmament and the preliminary progress made in the area of super power arms reduction.

In today's world, there is an unfortunate tendency for large countries to seek psychological and physical advantage at the expense of smaller and weaker states. Such large and often predatory nations need to be reminded of the fundamental principles of the United Nations: that might does not make right; that relations between nations must be based on the concept that the sovereignty of states is inviolable and that, dealings between legitimate governments must be based on reciprocity and non-interference in internal affairs. Any attempt to abridge these principles is surely not in keeping with the Charter of the United Nations. Such attempts are out of step with the dictates of public morality bequeathed to us by such great sages as Mahatma Gandhi. We must not lose or pervert this heritage in the quest for strategic advantages or political supremacy.

The quest for political security needs to be accompanied by the search for economic stability and cultural integrity. We are now almost two generations into the post-colonial world. Yet,

patterns established in times of colonialism remain deeply rooted in our physical environment and our external relations. Imbalances of trade, debt burdens and inadequate rates of growth reflect many of the structural patterns of the past. We also need to be sensitive to waves of cultural assault which endanger the traditions and the lifeways of old societies. Paradoxically, the persistence of old patterns in economics and the intrusions of social modernizations combine to destabilize and degrade a large part of our world.

What protection have we from these threats and infringements? Mr. President, I believe that the answer rests in the capacity of each country to accelerate the ethic of self-reliance. We must involve our peoples in the mental and physical dynamics of self-development. If the disadvantaged nations of the world can create the necessary grassroots mobilization and maintain a sense of discipline in nation-building, a large part of these global problems can be resolved. If the affluent nations of the world realize that the good life of plenty cannot be long sustained at the expense of mass deprivation, a new partnership for development can be forged. This is the message of all the great faiths of humanity. It is a call we ignore at our peril.

Mr. President,

We stand at the crossroads of history. We, the peoples of the Planet Earth, the only known species of life in the universe, are heirs to a mixed legacy. Great creativity has elevated a large part of our heritage and nourished it with the ideals of compassion and caring. Great destruction is also within the provenance of human capability. Today, these forces of creativity and destruction contend on a scale unknown in the past. On the outcome will rest the destiny of humankind.

As we reflect on this commemoration of the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless - our own contribution to weighing the scales of history on the side of creativity - let us take guidance and inspiration from the teachings of the great spiritual leaders of the ages. Without exception, Lord Buddha, God Krishna, Lord Jesus Christ and Prophet Mohammed, preached the message of social upliftment. They spoke with one voice on issues of human concern and welfare. Lord Buddha expressed it in the Sutta Nipata: Ekam hi saccam na dutiyam atthi. Truth is one - there isn't a second.

That truth, Mr. President, is contained in the high ideals of the International Year. As we work towards its upliftment, let us join hands in the spirit of fraternity that will make this International Year a memorable beginning - the beginning of a long march for a better life in a saner world. As the Charter of the United Nations enjoins us, let us "reaffirm faith in the dignity and worth of the human person through social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom". To that commitment, let us rededicate our work and ourselves.

I thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "J. P. ...", is written above a solid black horizontal line.

