

THE EMERGING MARITIME THREATS TO THE MALDIVES

Galle Dialogue 2011

Introduction

It is indeed a great pleasure to be here in this beautiful location of Galle. Before I begin my presentation I would like to thank our kind host, Sri Lanka's Ministry of Defence and Urban Development for their gracious hospitality. I would also like to express my gratitude and appreciations to Vice Admiral Dissanayake, Commander of the Sri Lanka Navy and members of the Sri Lanka Navy for their flawless arrangements and efficient manner in organizing this year's Galle Dialogue.

Maldives is 1192 island archipelago stretched from 7 Degree North Latitude to 1 Degree South Latitude. Just over 780 kms west of Sri Lanka and about 500 kms south of Indian subcontinent, locates us roughly in the very middle of the Indian Ocean. This geo strategic location and increasing maritime trade and other activities in the region has already started taking its toll on the country's traditional security environment. There is little over 300 square kms of land while we have a territorial water space of over 115,300 square kms. These numbers itself poses a huge challenge to security forces both in terms of physical security and logistic requirements.

As a very small island nation in this dynamic and rapidly evolving Indian Ocean environment, it is of paramount importance that we share and collaborate with our friends and partners in order to deter and prevent these threats and challenges. Hence I would like to share a Maldives perspective of the threats and challenges to security of the Maldives. I will be delighted to take your questions and any suggestions that you may have at the end of this presentation.

Regional Terrorist Groups:

In the last decade, terrorism has been the main threat to regional stability and international security. Even long before 9-11 attacks on twin towers, we have been a victim of many terrorist incidents. This beautiful island nation of Sri Lanka is a testimony to the devastations such a group could pose to any nation and life of its people. In my opinion LTTE Sea Tigers are the most effective and ruthless maritime terrorist organization we have seen until today. Their well-structured command organization with established logistic mechanism and highly developed and battle tested tactics posed greatest threat that the maritime community of this part of the world has seen up-to-date. Such a terrorist organization could not have been engaged in their war without substantial assistance from outside for such a long period. However it is worth noting the Sri Lankan Navy's courageous actions, making inventive use of existing naval assets to defeat this terrorist organization.

The Indian Ocean Region will continue to be a hub of maritime terrorist organizations for many reasons:

- High level of terrorist organization with proven maritime capabilities;
- Rising fundamentalist organizations and their affiliation to Al Qaida and other Jihadi terrorist organizations;

- Presence of major global choke points such as Bab-al-Mendeb and Straight of Malacca, along with rising annual shipping traffic in this region;
- Tension between the nations of this region;
- Emerging economies of Asia and multiple high value targets in the coastal area and off-shore.

For a small island developing nation such as the Maldives, the primary security concern is the instability in the region. It is evident that ethnic turmoil caused by religious extremism is prominent in every corner of the multi-ethnic countries of South Asia. Such conflicts are strongly augmented and fuelled, generating militant separatist movements and proliferating readily available and highly trained terrorists. The most notable aspect of such ethnically aggravated conflicts is the growth of terrorism in the region and its spillover effects across the whole of the subcontinent. Hence, our concern is, it places most of the regional small states stability and sovereignty on the threshold of acute danger.

Continued tension in the region and evolving situation in Afghanistan still continues to raise many fundamentalist terrorist groups with many different names under one common slogan of terrorism. LTTE, Laskar-e-Taiba or LeT, Jamai-Islamiya Ji and Al Qaida have taken lives of many innocent people of all color, creed and religious back grounds. The continued series of Bomb blasts in several Indian, Pakistani and Afghanistan cities and much notably the recent Bombay attacks stand testimony to this assessment.

Though all these people tend to reiterate the slogan of political or religious cause their attacks do not distinguish any difference. The most recent attack of the Lashkar-e-Taiba or LeT, on Taj Mahal Mumbai Hotel on November 2008, is of grave concern to the Maldives, an island nation prospering mainly on the tourism.

Though a small nation Maldives have already seen the devastation a terrorist attack could bring to the people and country. On early hours of the 3rd November 1988, the sudden attack by a group of mercenaries belonging to a terrorist group known as PLOTE brought the nation to an abrupt halt. The continued 8 hour long gun fight between the terrorists and security forces caused the loss of lives of 19 Maldivians including 8 servicemen and 11 innocent civilians. Courageous efforts of the people of Maldives and timely assistance from the government of India were the crucial factor in bringing these terrorists to justice.

Moreover, the rising fundamentalist ideology in the region and growing number of youths entering into these organizations has become an area of grave concern to Maldives. However apart from the September 2007 Sultan Park IED explosion and the stand-off between the security forces and an extremist group in October 2007, the Maldives have not seen any organized activity threatening to security and stability of the country until today.

Maritime Piracy and Armed Robbery at sea

Modern maritime piracy has become the major threat to the safety at sea. In this globalization era, our region has become one of the most vital water ways in maritime commerce. The emerging economies of Asia and hunger for the energy market demand our collective engagement to maintain safety of SLOCs in this region. Since 2008, the Western Indian Ocean is experiencing an unprecedented upsurge in piracy at sea, resulting in very significant and collaborative international efforts to suppress these attacks.

As mentioned before the Indian Ocean is home to many critical choke points, such as the Bab-al-Mendib, Straits of Hormuz, Straits of Malacca, Lombok and the Sunda Straits. Any disruption in traffic flow through these points can have catastrophic consequences. The interruption of energy flows in specific is a substantial security concern for littoral states, as a majority of their energy lifelines are sea-based.

Since energy is vital in influencing the geo-political strategies of a nation, any turbulence in its supply has severe security consequences. Given the escalating demand for energy from economic powerhouses such as India and China, it is certain that these countries are highly sensitive to the security of the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and the vulnerability of the choke points of the region.

With the rapidly growing economies in Asia and globalization, the prospects for seaborne trade are set to rise dramatically. Unfortunately, along with this rise in traffic, the assortment and concentration of threats, including piracy, armed robbery and other maritime crimes are also expected to show a proportional rise.

As a case in point, Maldives Security Forces responded to a scenario which involved an Iranian fishing vessel which had been hijacked and used by pirates for over 6 months in May 2010. However, the situation evolved more into a rather humanitarian assistance aspect as the vessel's engine malfunctioned and ran out of water and food. I am pleased to note that the MNDF were able to respond to the situation rapidly and brought the vessel and crew under protective custody, and rendered humanitarian assistance as needed. However until to date 7 Somali skiffs have been found in Maldivian waters leading to 37 Somali citizens in the protective custody of the Maldivian Authorities. This year we have not had any experience with Somali pirates. We are very grateful for the tremendous assistance we have received from our friends and partners to secure our waterways.

Natural Disasters and Climate Change.

As I have highlighted earlier, the islands of Maldives are very small and low lying. Perhaps, Maldives is among the least contributors to environmental degradation, but unfortunately it would be amongst the most helpless in dealing with the potential catastrophic effects of climate change and global warming.

However, environmental threats are not limited to small island nations alone but to other countries as well. Hence the strengthening of global cooperation for environmental protection and sustainable development is urgent. Presently the government is pursuing a strategy of raising awareness amongst the people about the importance of clean environment in Maldives to protect and preserve the surrounding sea, natural habitat, reefs and beaches of these islands.

This alone is not enough for the Maldives. Today we need to educate greater global community and bring about a universal effort in dealing with the dramatic changes in global environment and its potential impact on us as a region and individual country. It is a fact that a large numbers of the planet's natural disasters, unfortunately, happen to hit our region. The Boxing day tsunami of 2004 demonstrated the level of death and destruction that can be brought to our region by a mega disaster. Climate change, global warming, rising sea levels, melting glaciers, frequent floods and droughts we are experiencing is already taking its toll on our regions security and stability. The potential impact of these natural disasters and its consequences on social

and security of the region needs to be addressed and assessed. We believe that this is a forum to share these concerns and advocate our argument to make collaborative efforts in mitigating and reducing potential impact of environmental disasters.

Likewise the increase in traffic of petroleum and other forms of energy by ships and its impact on fishing and tourism industry has become an area of grave concern for the Maldives. The 8 degree channel just miles north of Maldives has become a major sea route to transit these oils and other toxic material between east and west of Indian Ocean. The potential impact of a spill on our delicate marine environment, fishing industry and tourism industry is both unprecedented and disastrous. The economic and environmental cost of such an incident could very well cost us our country. Hence we believe that illegal discharging of bilges, dumping of toxic wastes and oil in the unregulated waters of Indian Ocean needs a collective effort from all nations represented here at this Galle Dialogue. We as a region need to work together in making more stringent laws and law enforcement mechanism for the betterment of our future generations.

Trafficking of Dugs, Weapons and Human.

The Arms, drugs and human trafficking in the Indian Ocean Region are still estimated to be on the increase and expanding in its scope and modus operandi. An interesting incident that has drawn attention in the past is the entry of an armed trawler into the territorial waters of Maldives on the 16th May 2007. The vessel which originally belonged to a South Indian Company had set sail on 7th March from Kollam in Kerala, India was captured during its journey by an unknown group of armed men and it appeared on Maldivian waters, just about 6 Miles off a Southern Island in Gaafu Alifu (Ga) Atoll on Wednesday May 16th.

Trouble arose when it fired at some local fishermen drawing the attention of the Maldivian Coast Guard. After 12 hours of standoff, on early Thursday morning, the Maldivian Coast Guard was forced to fire on to the ship due to non-compliance and subsequently sinking it in Maldivian territorial waters. The subsequent investigations have identified that the vessel which started off as an innocent deep sea fishing trawler was hijacked by a LTTE group (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), for gun running and to later rendezvous with a bigger ocean going LTTE arms vessel in the high seas off south of Maldives.

Human trafficking is also a matter of grave concern and one which needs serious attention by authorities. Recent studies have identified that the extent of such operations are widespread across the region and provides a lucrative source of income, which could be utilized for other illegal activities. The Maldives is also highly concerned about trafficking situation associated with the large expatriate labor force in the country, and we are undertaking an interagency effort towards tackling the issue. With the two principal areas of illicit opium production, the Golden Triangle and Golden Crescent, located on the rim of the Indian Ocean, the trafficking of drugs is a serious and frightening threat to the security of Maldives. This is further proven by incidents like on 23rd April 2006 when 1.6 tons of narcotics were found stashed in a lagoon within our internal waters.

For a nation that predominantly survives from its income from tourism and fishing which are greatly dependent on the peace and tranquility of our waters, threats of such nature are matters of serious national concern.

Resource Exploitation.

Maldives is a country very heavily dependent on the fishing industry. Throughout our history fishing has been the main source of income and fisheries played a vital role in the national development since time immemorial. It is with great pride Maldivians consider themselves as the children of fishermen. Except the presence of fish in these waters, there are no other natural resources such as oil and minerals. Hence, fish has been the country's traditional and main source of food and plays a vital part of the economy as well. Illegal poaching of fish in Maldives EEZ by foreign vessels has become a matter of serious concern to the fishing industry and the country's socio-economic security.

Conclusion

Maldives being a small country has neither the capability nor the resources to counter the emerging threats to the security and safety of our nation. We are keen to make partnerships and work together with our friends and allies to resolve these challenges. We believe that the present day security challenges such as terrorism, piracy, natural and man-made disasters, trafficking and resource exploitations does not see any boundary or physical country. These are not only threats to us as individual nations, but to our regional security and stability.

The 21st Century will be written in the history as the Asian Century. The rising Asian economies along with Asian military and economic powers will attract many non-traditional security issues to our region. Unless we decide to be pro-active and start working with our partners we may not be able to achieve our common objectives

This big waterway that binds us does not only provide us with multiple resources, but it gives us an opportunity to think outside the box. It's a platform to unite and start working together. I believe that the success of this year's Galle Dialogue will depend on our willingness to start working together for the betterment of our countries and our region. Together we can resolve.

Thank you and God bless us all.