I would like to present some thoughts on Conflict, the resolution of conflict and Peace building.

These subjects have been dealt with since time immemorial, for human conflict has existed since the dawn of human society. It remains a most pressing problem in our Age, because Conflict – Intra State as well as Inter State, continues to bedevil our world.

The nature and scope of both types of conflict have undergone a paradigm shift during the 20th Century, posing a severe threat to the very existence of our world.

The most urgent challenge Humanity faces today, is to find solutions to pre-empt conflict or to resolve them when they have occurred.

Conflict and the resultant violence, not only drain away economic and human resources, but they destroy the Soul of Nations for generations to come.

Political Conflicts are mainly of two types:-

- Inter State – between two or several States,
- Intra State – between a State and some groups living within it.

The first type has become rare since the Second World War and the creation of international structures to deal with Inter State problems such as the UN, the EU, the International Court of Justice and so many other regional and international bodies. The invention of nuclear weaponry has also played a not inconsiderable role in the containment of international wars.

However, the occurrence of conflict within States has not abated. The process of decolonization, in the second half of the 20th Century and the emergence of
independent States, gave rise to demands from communities of homogeneous ethnic, linguistic, religious groups living within these new States. The refusal to recognize these rights has resulted in struggles, leading at times to full blown terrorism.

The ideologies and attitudes of a State and its elites regarding Conflict can be classified into two groups.

- The first would maintain that the leaders of uprisings and the associated demands are caused by the desire for personal gain, power and wealth; that they harbor some sinister plans to destroy the State together with the dominant class and grab the privileges and perquisites for themselves.

- The other view recognizes that there may exist causes that have given rise to these demands and the ensuing conflicts, that these causes must be understood and action taken to resolve them. This view holds that the elimination of the root causes of a conflict would either prevent or end violent conflict, as the case may be.

My long experience in dealing with conflict and its resolution has convinced me of the truth and correctness of the second premise.

The search for root causes of conflict has led to diverse theories. The often cited cause is

- poverty and income deprivation.
- Another much studied cause is “identity”.

The politics of “identity” leading to the theory of the “right to self-determination” flourished with the freedoms obtained and enjoyed by the peoples of newly independent States, in the post colonial period during the latter half of the 20th Century. While the people awakened to the existence of their rights-individually and collectively, the majority community in each Nation, established itself within the economic, social and political power structures, claiming their rights and formulating laws, practices, setting up institutions to guarantee and safeguard their long held privileges, to the exclusion of the “other”.

In recent times, a more comprehensive view of conflict, its genesis and causes has emerged from scholars in the developed as well as developing countries. This hypothesis focuses on Inequality in its entirety and not on unequal incomes and poverty alone.
It holds that the main cause of dissent and violent conflict is major inequalities occurring horizontally – that is, among groups that are otherwise of equal status culturally. X1 Deprivation is looked at not only in income and economic terms but measured as social, political and cultural inequality.

The concept of “exclusion” and its corollary – the need to adopt policies that promote the “inclusion” of all segments of the population of a country is becoming accepted among scholars and policy makers. This implies the construction of “Inclusive Societies” where the benefits of development are equitably shared, where access to Education, Health Services, other infrastructure facilities and jobs are equally available to all and where every citizen has equal rights to participate in the political power structures.

Numerous studies done in this field, demonstrate that inequalities have invariably led to conflict and the absence of peace and stability as well as to economic regression.

Perceived injustice engenders violent or terroristic responses from the victims of that injustice. Frustration and despair caused by continued social marginalization, economic deprivation and political defeat has been known to result in violence. It was said that “young hope betrayed, transforms itself into bombs”. Leon Trotsky described the two emotions central to terrorism as despair and vengeance.

The exclusion of some communities from an equitable share of the benefits of prosperity causes inequalities in every sphere. I wish to dwell briefly upon some of these

**Cultural, Economic, Political Inequalities**- occurring between specific groups cause deep resentment, resulting in violent struggles, Violence in multi-religious and multi-ethnic Nations is not caused by the presence of diversity or by the “clash of civilizations” (Huntingdon) but is due to the exclusion of the less powerful groups. The marginalized groups then mobilize around their group identity – be it religious, ethnic, linguistic, ideological.

It has been affirmed that Poverty, Injustice and their relationship to conflict may be measured by the difference in opportunity structures for the excluded. The most potent source of violent conflict today is identity. The denial of rights to or the exclusion of certain groups with common identity becomes the bedrock of dissent and violent conflict.
The monumental advances of Science and Technology, the spread of knowledge and the global reach of the Communications Industry have facilitated awareness of the concepts of equality, rights of the individual and of freedoms.

Conflict has invariably arisen in States that have marginalized minority groups.

The refusal by hegemonistic States to recognize the justice and legitimacy of the rights of all communities has been the major cause of Intra State conflict in modern times.

Whereas States that have promoted inclusivity and built cohesive societies seem to enjoy political stability and economic prosperity.

This leads me to affirm that ending a conflict or a War does not necessarily bring Peace. The mere absence of War is not Peace. Peace entails much more than victory in War. As Francois Mitterrand once stated “Peace is a battle. It is not won easily”. It demands humility and sacrifice from all. It requires the will to comprehend the root causes of a conflict and to seek solutions to them.

At this point, I wish to describe some specific instances of the relationship between inequality and conflict. I will classify inequality into four main categories.

1. **Economic and Social inequality.** Economic inequality is usually measured by average assets of a household, which would include income from employment and wealth, especially housing and land. Social inequality centres mainly on levels of education and access to good health care. But caste, race and religion could also give rise to inequality.

   - Studies reveal that there is a significant rise in the probability of conflict in countries with considerable economic and social inequality. This increases threefold when the inequalities occur horizontally between different ethnic groups.

   - A study of Indonesia, confirms a definite relationship between the occurrence of violent ethnic conflict and comparative economic and social deprivation of marginalized communities. Low levels of economic development have also given rise to religious polarization.
• The relative socio-economic inequality suffered by Muslims has been found to bear a direct connection to the long lasting Moro rebellion in the Philippines.

• Similarly, there is strong evidence to support that the Maoist uprisings in Nepal are closely linked to the deprivation of specific communities, on a regional and caste basis, measured by poverty and literacy rates.

2. Cultural inequalities have also engendered political instability, even conflicts of extreme violence.

Ethnicity, language, religion define the identity of citizens within a State.
The ethno-linguistic and religious identity of the majority community is often different from that of smaller groups living within the same State.

Conflict has arisen in innumerable countries, when the State apportions a larger share of the privileges to the majority, marginalizing and excluding the minority groups – seen as “the others”. If I may cite some examples:-

• In Peru and Guatemala, cultural discrimination was exercised constitutionally prohibiting the use of indigenous languages. In Malaysia this was achieved indirectly against non-Muslims through the operation of Bhumiputra laws – and in Ivory Coast against non-Christians.

• The Protestant Orange Order movement in Northern Ireland, the destruction of religious buildings in India, Palestine and recently in Malaysia led to conflictual polarization of victimized communities and to violent conflict.

In Sri Lanka, language policy has had a similar effect in polarizing a peaceful Tamil Community around the demand for equal status.

3. Political inequality is yet another major cause of conflict. There exists much evidence to demonstrate that inclusive government reduces the probability of political instability and violent conflict, when power is shared and there exists less political inequality.

We are aware of many instances where peace prevails, even in the presence of serious economic and social inequalities, when political
power sharing arrangements function well. Formal systems of power-sharing, federal states, territorial autonomy and electoral systems giving a fair and equitable representation to all communities have proved effective in reducing potential conflict. Political inclusion has prevented conflict among marginalized groups, even in the continued absence of policies to alleviate poverty and social deprivation.

- The examples of Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and Bolivia are clear evidence of this. It is interesting to note that when Kenya changed policy to become politically exclusive, violent conflict ensued, until a power sharing regime was introduced once again.

- Nigeria defeated the separatist Biafran uprising militarily and achieved peace through devolution of political power. Malaysia is yet another instance where political inclusion of disadvantaged minorities even without adopting policies to improve socio-economic status, has sufficed to prevent conflict.

- Similarly Canada has found a lasting solution to the separatist demands of Quebec by means of devolving political power to the province.

- In the case of Peru, the armed uprising of the Sendero Luminoso was militarily defeated, but the causes of conflict – the demands for land and political rights have not been satisfactorily resolved. Instability and conflict continue in Peru.

- India has managed to contain serious conflict for six decades after Independence, by establishing a Federal State, whereby political power is effectively shared between its myriad communities, belonging to various ethnic, linguistic, religious groups. The formation of an inclusive society through the operation of a non-religious, secular Constitution has significantly contributed to the cohesion and stability of the Indian State. The recent increase in the occurrence of uprisings there, seems to be area or group specific, arising among disadvantaged communities and during periods when the political authorities have slackened in the strict and effective implementation of power sharing, secularism and equitable development.

4. The nature of the State has also been found to impinge upon conflict. Democratic States with an inclusivist government have successfully
prevented or smoothed over potential conflict – **In Ghana and the provincial State of Sabah in Malaysia**, an accommodating and inclusive policy adopted by the governments have prevented the escalation of conflict.

- On the contrary, the vicious and repressive handling of the small, nascent rebellion in **East Timor, Indonesia** led to its escalation into a full blown civil war, resulting in the formation of a separate State.

As for **Sri Lanka**, little serious research has been done in this field. I will venture to state that, based on empirical evidence and knowledge, the constant and comparative economic, social and cultural deprivation of the Northern and Eastern regions is clearly related to the violent conflict we have witnessed. Low levels of development of infrastructure, relatively little opportunity to access quality education and employment, political marginalization with minimal opportunity to participate in decision-making processes in the political and administrative superstructure, together with the language barriers erected by the ‘Sinhala Only’ policy, are undoubtedly the root causes that gave rise to the terribly violent conflict in my country.

The consistent rejection by the State of the demand of the Tamil movements for language parity, led to increased demands for power sharing through Federalism, and finally for a separate State.

The experience of the countries I have cited is proof enough that peace ensues where the benefits of economic development, as well as political power are equally shared.

Such States have effectively built Inclusive and Shared Societies. It is evident that the proper functioning of inclusive societies could only be achieved within the framework of a free and democratic State.

The challenge of the 21st Century for many Nations remains the enterprise of erecting pluralist, multi-ethnic, multi cultural States.

This requires that we manage the existing diversity within our Nations, directing the richness of this diversity towards positive change in order to build Free, Democratic and Prosperous Societies.

We need to accept and celebrate diversity, not reject it. The combined efforts
and skills of peoples of different communities can only enrich our Societies, not damage them.

I would now like to more specifically talk to you briefly about my personal experience as Head of State of Sri Lanka.

My Government inherited a country torn apart by ethnic strife and civil war. The dominant ideology of the State until this time was an exclusivist one, which presented the rights of the majority community to the exclusion of the rights of the others. The predominant discourse advanced the view of the superiority of the Sinhala Buddhist majority. This ideology dominated over all others to the point that every successive government abrogated their responsibility to undertake effective measures to negotiate a settlement of the ethnic question. For the first time in the history of Independent Sri Lanka, my Government offered a comprehensive package of solutions to the minorities’ problem. Even while we were obliged to continue with the war, we undertook development in the regions where large concentration of minorities lived.

At the same time we proposed to enact a new Constitution, containing extensive devolution of power to the minorities, together with various other measures adopted to guarantee their rights. This draft constitution also contained measures to abolish the Executive Presidency that embodies a high degree of authoritarian powers.

However, we could not translate our dream of enacting this constitution and transforming a divided and violent Lanka into a united Nation where humanity and peace prevails, because of the consistent and violent rejection of our Peace Proposal by the LTTE, as well as the obstinacy of the parliamentary Opposition in refusing to give the government the few votes needed to make up the required 2/3rd majority in Parliament.

The continuous denial of the rights of the marginalized Tamil community led to a recrudescence of Tamil demands for equal rights into the demand for a separate State and adoption of terrorist politics. When we gained independence from Colonial rule, the process of nation building required a strategy to include all minorities. We needed to accept our diversity, comprehend its richness and formulate policies to include everyone in the process of nation building, development and governance.

Today we have an unprecedented opportunity to achieve a lasting peace. The War has been decisively won by the State. The major antagonists have been
defeated convincingly. Yet we have not seriously begun to win the battle for Peace. As I stated earlier, Peace implies bringing in and including the “other” fully and honestly, not only in the process of development, but also as full and equal partners of the process of government – to power sharing.

In other words, in Sri Lanka, where we have three major communities that have lived together for two millennia, an essential prerequisite for Peace, a stable and strong government and prosperity is a democratic, pluralist State. This is the only magic potion I know to bind together diverse peoples of a multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, multi-religious and cultural country like ours, as one undivided and strong Nation.

Today we see instead a deeply disturbing trend – the war victory of the State over the separatist forces is projected by the State, as an exclusive triumph of the Sinhalese Buddhists over the others. The official discourse often takes a dangerous turn towards a natural right of the majority and an attitude that encourages the ideology of the predominance of the majority.

We hear an extremist discourse of Sinhala Buddhist exclusivism. Anti-terrorist emotions are being harnessed to increase anti-Tamil, and now anti foreigner and even anti-everyone else sentiments, by means of a massive State led media campaign. They dig deep into the Sinhala Buddhist psyche, searching out the fears and concerns of a small and weak country, to direct them against so-called “enemies”. The Sinhala Buddhist identity is projected as the exclusively legitimate one, with the right to dominance over the State, the body politic and its attendant privileges.

We see a hardening of views and attitudes. The exclusivist ideology is being utilized to consolidate and further enhance the authoritarian powers of the Executive.

- Provisions have been promulgated instead to give further powers to the Executive Presidency and remove limits placed on the term of office of the Chief Executive.

- The military and police are being accorded an increasingly important role in civil affairs.

- The denial of media freedom which was being justified by the State on the grounds of Security concerns during the war, still continues unabated 2 ½ years after the conclusion of the War.
The practice of challenging one extremist ideology by another tends to continue the cycle of extremism and violence, because the one is the mirror image of the other and they sustain each other in an unending cycle of violence. There is evidence that to end this cycle of violence, one has to challenge extremism with an ideology and a practice which falls outside the reach and comprehension of the extremist, i.e. the discourse of inclusion as opposed to exclusion; of understanding and generosity as opposed to the exclusivist’s hatred and refusal to accept that the “other” has similar rights as himself.

We need to rise above emotionalism and adopt objective national policies. The view that is presently being popularized that political power need not be shared with the minority community and that it would suffice to grant them some economic development has been disproved time and time again, as I argued earlier. We need to understand that sharing the privileges enjoyed by the majority with the others will in no way reduce the strength of the majority. Instead, it will enhance it by bringing together divided communities which will henceforth work together and contribute their skills, talents and knowledge that were denied to the Nation since the beginning of the conflict. The diverse skills and talents of all our peoples, collectively participating in the nation building process, will immensely enrich and unify a divided, economically weak and fragile State.

Positive leadership is essential to effect profound change. History is written by leaders – good and bad. Great leaders write new chapters of human history; they have the courage to stride towards the unknown and envision a collective national project. They do not need to conjure up “enemies” to stay on top. They possess the wisdom and ability to bring in everyone, the “other” into the collective national project. They can traverse primordial emotional responses to reach the realm of the possible.

Weak leaders use the concept of the enemy as a tool of government management. Their incapacity to envision a greater project for their people, to shape a dialogue from different views and emotions to reach a common humanity, is concealed under the mists of a so called struggle against “the enemy”.

I believe that when there will be a true and wide participation of large sections of a Nation in public affairs and government, leaders will be obliged to work towards implementing national projects based on national needs and not on personal agendas.
At this point, I wish to sound a note of warning. We live in an era where globalization is fast eroding physical boundaries erected around individual States. In the name of international solidarity and human freedoms – the powerful have arrogated to themselves the authority to resolve conflicts arising within Sovereign States.

It is urgent that States manage their internal problems effectively, resolving them in a durable manner, if they are to safeguard their sovereignty and independence, while participating actively in the international community of Nations.

Let us together strive to build a World Safe for Difference.