

**"LTTE ARE NOT TERRORISTS, THEY ARE GENUINE FREEDOM
FIGHTERS, I SUPPORT THEIR CAMPAIGN "**

Lalith Kotalawala To Gulf News

Lalith Kotalawala, chief of Ceylinco Group has given a controversial interview to Gulf News in Dubai, United Arab Emirates and has told that he is supporting for LTTE Tamil terrorists' campaign.

Kotalawala was a Buddhist and converted to Christianity for his commercial and business gains have further told that he is in minority club being a Sinhala Christian. Sri Lankan public widely believe that Kotalawala and his business of Ceylinco Group is more pro-LTTE and had anger against him over the death Ven. Gangodawila Soma theru.

The interview he has given to Gulf News is below;

Sri Lanka's Dr Lalith Kotalawala's business card is actually six cards printed on either side with five folds, listing all the companies that are part of his company, Ceylinco Consolidated.

As a Sinhala Christian, Kotalawala is part of a minority group, but as the head of 256 companies that employ more than 30,000 people, he is also acknowledged as one of the country's leading business personalities.

He reveals for the first time how he entered a Tamil Tiger's home, was welcomed, and how he believes that the chances for peace in the nation have never been better.

Kotalawala's uncle was the third prime minister of Sri Lanka and his father fought for economic freedom, so he is not new to serving his country.

He is the recipient of Sri Lanka's highest civilian honour, Deshmanya, and has also set up the Ceylinco Sarana Fund, which helps the poor.

As a result, the businessman has in recent years, become better known for his philanthropic efforts.

On a short trip to Dubai, Kotalawala talked exclusively to Weekend Review on a range of topics, from his tsunami relief efforts and corporate social responsibility, to peace on the island nation and poor people's right to credit.

Is it true that you have an unofficial mandate that requires all Ceylinco employees to set aside money for charity?

Each employee is encouraged to contribute to the fund. It is purely voluntary and the directive is recommended depending on the salary scale. The higher up you go, the more you give. Today, the Ceylinco Sarana Fund has Rs128 million. It has been decentralised and we give the money to the 400 branches and every month Rs10 million is distributed. The money is given out to areas other than Colombo as we don't want to restrict charity to the urban poor, but focus on the rural poor.

Does the money go to the northern and eastern parts as well?

Yes, it does.

Has charity always figured in Ceylinco's business plan?

In 1996, the LTTE exploded a bomb in the Central Bank and I was there. Both my eyes were seriously damaged and it was only after many operations that I regained sight in one eye. When I was convalescing, Mohammad Yunus [2006 Nobel Peace Prize winner] gave me a book about Grameen Bank and access to credit. I was moved by it and invited him to be the chairman of Ceylinco Grameen. Today, 300,000 women are members. A large number has risen above the poverty line and we have given out more than Rs1 billion in loans.

What kind of interest rates does Grameen charge?

Well [pauses], it is high. It is about 20 per cent per year. But when you compare it to what the poor are paying to the loan sharks, it is a blessing from heaven. The loan sharks charge them almost 10 per cent per day. Grameen gives \$50 to the poorest of the poor to start with, and they have the opportunity to get a shop-house in 20 years that takes care of their workspace and housing problem in one shot. Finally, where Grameen succeeds is that it provides access to credit to the poor that they would have never been able to get from other agencies.

Do you think Mohammad Yunus should have won the Nobel for Economics as opposed to the Peace Prize?

Well, I don't know about that. I just know that he should be recognised, which he was and that's all that matters [laughs].

Did Ceylinco's charity work have to shift its focus a great deal after the 2004 tsunami hit Sri Lanka?

At the time, we were the leading insurance company in Colombo. I saw that insurance companies across the country - including mine - were turning away people and said that they can't pay because the tsunami was an act of God and was therefore not covered.

I felt horrible and it just didn't feel right to say no. So, on the spur of the moment, I just said 'we have to pay'. My staff was horrified and said it would cost us billions. But so many people had lost so much. They had nothing left. The Sri Lankan people trusted a Sri Lankan company and when they needed us I said we cannot desert them.

So we paid up and I personally led it. We went from town to town - even the North and the East. I went to the Tamil Tigers and was invited into their homes. I've never told this to anyone but I was allowed, or I should say, welcomed into their homes. We sat. We talked. And they were delighted to know that we cared.

Is it true that the Sri Lankan government has set aside a 100-metre buffer zone that forbids the fishing folk from rebuilding their homes and settling within that radius, but has given that land to larger hotels?

[Nods] Yes, it is true. I have objected strongly to that rule, but there is no change in the law. Most of the Grameen women are fishing folk. We rebuilt their homes even though the government took over the land and gave it to large hotels. But we rebuilt some of the homes.

So you broke the law?

Yes, we did. But I'm not afraid of that when it is for a good cause.

Most would say that it doesn't help to have a conscience in business ...

That's true. And I believed that too until the bomb blast in 1996. It made me realise we

all have a purpose in life and this is all the more true of people blessed with money. I have been given a lot of money, but I can't take it with me when I die.

Today, I have many homes, bungalows and holiday homes. Some I haven't even seen. I have almost 20 cars, but I can only drive one at a time. I can afford to eat the best food at the best hotels, but I am a diabetic. So I cannot. Money is a tool that can be used to improve lives and I believe that those with money must use it to help others help themselves. It can really help alleviate poverty.

Do you think the world has become more materialistic over the years?

[Nods] Yes. Definitely. Especially after this whole globalisation thing.

You're not a fan of globalisation?

I am against it. I don't believe in inviting foreign giants. I prefer the micro alternative of small businesses and encouraging these instead of allowing larger outfits taking the country over and benefiting people who are not even in the country.

They would argue that they provide jobs and an infrastructure ...

Jobs for how many? A few thousand? We are a completely home-grown company and employ 32,000 people. I think other countries should encourage us by opening up their markets further and allow developing economies such as ours to work towards self-sufficiency.

What are the chances for peace in Sri Lanka?

I think this memorandum of understanding between the two parties - the president and the leader of the opposition - is very good. It is a coming together of 80 per cent of the voters, the people of Sri Lanka. I also believe that there should be a change in the attitude of the LTTE leadership.

If you ask the Tamils living under them if they want democracy or the militia, they will choose democracy. The LTTE leadership has to join the democratic process and must have the vision to do so. When I visited the regions after the tsunami, I learnt that the people were fed up with the war. They wanted freedom for their children to go to school in peace, without the fear of conscription into the cadres. The tsunami tragedy was a perfect opportunity for the government to talk peace. I was appalled at the way the aid was handled. The world responded with great compassion but the government, under Chandrika Kumaratunga, would not give it to the LTTE. We could have clinched peace at that time, especially because the north-east was the worst off.

Does the LTTE, in your opinion, have the vision that you talk about? Are they ready to relinquish the control they wield over their people?

They should not be afraid to do that. In all fairness, the LTTE has been pushed into doing it. They have done great service to their people and you can't brand them as pure terrorists as they are genuine freedom fighters. They must realise that the best opportunity to work things out is through a system of self-governance. That is the structure that needs to be discussed.

The current policy of the government is a hit-back policy and that is an Israeli policy. I don't think it's right. Mahatma Gandhi said that the eye-for-an-eye, a-tooth-for-a-tooth policy makes the world blind and toothless. And it will only keep escalating.

We can't ask them to disarm in order to sit down and talk while we hold onto our arms.

Things must be left as they are and we must talk about devolution, federal state or autonomy.

Is it possible for ethnic groups that have been divided by war to live peacefully in the future - assuming a political solution is found?

I think it is possible to do so. Looking at Ceylinco, since 1973, we have followed a policy of not checking for the ethnicity of any employees. We don't have a religion or ethnicity box in the application form. It is a pure meritocracy and I don't know how many Tamils, Sinhalas, Buddhists, Muslims or Christians we have. When you start counting, you have a problem.

You are from a minority community but head the largest holding company in Sri Lanka. Is that a problem at times?

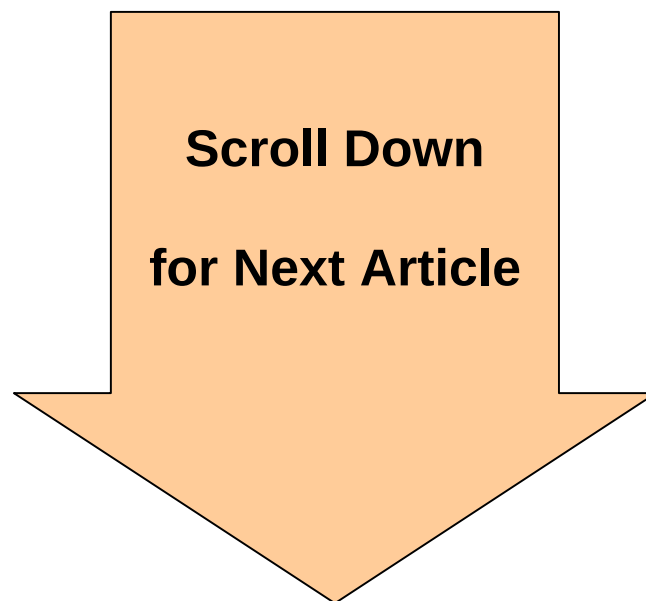
Of course. I've been attacked many times. I think that some Sinhalas follow a militant form of Buddhism when they put their religion above everything else.

No war can be holy. In which religion does God tell you to kill or maim your fellow human beings? So, yes, I do get attacked by racist Buddhists as I'm accused of converting Sri Lankans.

How do you respond to the allegations of conversion?

We don't have any religious affiliation. At Grameen, we don't care what religion the members are from or who benefits from the charity funds. We are only concerned about alleviating poverty.

Courtesy : www.sinhala.net



How Can One Be A Patriot and Terrorist Sympathizer at The Same Time?

By Darmitha-Kotte

If there is any individual who wants to be considered as a 100% good human being, that is Mr. Lalith Kotelawela. His biography "Deshamanya Lalith Kotelawela" written by Mrs. L.S.K. Perera in 2001 who is also an employee in the Ceylinco Group amply exhibits this view point. To project one's self as perfect is a natural tendency and there is absolutely nothing wrong with that and when the writer happens to be an employee, naturally the writer will go all out to please one's employer-this again is natural.

However, Mr. Lalith Kotelawela came into the news in a big way recently due to a press interview he had given Gulf News (to Staff Writer Vinita Bharadwaj) while he was in Dubai presumably on a business trip. The press release did not give the readers, the positive image that Mr. Kotelawela wishes to project of himself. This is indeed sad as we all would like to believe that Mr. Kotelawela is not in "the pocket of terrorists!"

It is a very well known fact that LTTE terrorists are not representing the Tamil community at large and their mythical "homeland" they talk about is just a ruse to hoodwink unsuspecting INGOs, NGOs and ofcourse the international community.

The terrorist movement unfortunately is a fully Christian Church backed operation and the agenda is to fragment the country. When our armed forces are being attacked by terrorists, Church Fathers are silent but when the terrorists are being cornered, every Catholic Bishop come out to put pressure on the democratically elected Government of Sri Lanka!

The terrorists are also constantly "terrorizing" their own Tamil community for the last 25 years in which case, it cannot be said that they are the sole representatives of the Tamil community in Sri Lanka! Tamil children are unable to continue their studies due to the harassment of terrorists who torment their parents into surrendering the children for the LTTE Children's Brigade. If a group has love for their community, they cannot traumatize them but treat them with absolute love and care. What is the "freedom" that they are fighting for, because the freedom has been taken away not by the GOSL but by the terrorists-can anyone disputes this fact?

Having given the press interview which naturally created quite uproar amongst Sri Lankans, Mr. Kotelawela is now in a dilemma as to how best to come out of it? For a number of days he was not available for comment (until he was able to coin an acceptable version) and has now been reported in the Daily Mirror of 22nd November 2006 as "Tigers freedom fighters: Kotelawela" and in the Sunday Island of 26th November 2006 another article titled "I'm no traitor, I love Sri Lanka and her people, says Kotelawela." Traitors are people who "bett on the wrong horse" when it comes to issues of national unity and sovereignty and if terrorists and a democratically elected Government of Sri Lanka are put on the same pedestal by him- then there is something radically wrong in the mindset of Mr. Kotelawela. No doubt, he will find it difficult to deviate from the belief of his Church and its clergy! One cannot love one's country

and at the same time support and sympathize with terrorists organizations and expect to be considered a patriot Mr. Kotelawela.

In another place in his interview, he talks about his Grameen Bank policies and admits that they charge an interest as high as 20% from the poor people who take these loans through this scheme and in the same breathe justifies that this rate is still good compared to the loan sharks! If his intentions are truly to help poor people, then he must not insult Mr. Mohamed Yunus by fleecing the poor of this country. This is another traitorous act if one may call it. As we know what Mr. Yunus has done in his country is truly to help his poor countrymen to uplift their economic situation.

To a question asked by Gulf News “ *is it true that you have an unofficial mandate that requires all Ceylinco employees to set aside money for charity?*” his answer is “ Each employee is encouraged to contribute to the fund. It purely voluntary and the directive is recommended depending on the salary scale.....” We are aware that there is nothing voluntary about this scheme, it is just deducted from their pay-cheques! The employees do not have much of a say because they have to take what they get at the end of the month. The employees are also required to pay for their uniforms (those who are required to dress in uniforms) and this amount too is deducted from their salaries.

Another question posed by Gulf News “*You are from a minority community but head the largest holding company in Sri Lanka. Is that a problem at times?*” to which he replies thus “*Ofcourse. I’ve been attacked many times. I think that some Sinhala follow a militant form of Buddhism when they put their religion above everything else. No war can be holy. In which religion does God tell you to kill or maim your fellow human beings? So, yes, I do get attacked by racist Buddhists as I’m accused of converting Sri Lankans.*” It is sad to note that Mr. Kotelawela has not read the Holy Bible front to back and back to front. On the other hand, it will also depend on which version of The Bible he has read because there are hundreds of different versions as I understand. **If he has, he would be able to find how many instances there are in The Holy Bible where God instructs his followers to kill non-believers.** What was the “Inquisition” all about? When it comes to the subjects of religion, **Buddhism is the only religion in the world that has not murdered human beings to force and convert to Buddhism- all other faith based religions have a “glorious and recorded historical past” in this respect!**

Mr. Kotelawela and his companies supposedly spend as much as Rs.20million per month on advertisements in the local newspapers and other media channels like TV and Radio. Criticisms and articles sent to the media are never published because the editors get phone calls with threats of black mail saying that no future business will be given if anything unfavorable to Mr. Kotelawela or his group of companies is published-that is “the freedom and democracy” he practices with patriotic citizens of this country who incidentally also give him and his banks business and money without which he will not have six business cards attached together and 256 companies!

Accumulating money and wealth from the majority Sinhalese, the Government of Sri Lanka, The Armed Forces who all have either insurance policies with the Ceylinco Group or Seylan Bank as well as The Finance Company and then sympathizing and pampering the terrorists who wish to fragment the country- these are not the traits of a patriot Mr. Kothelawela. **Patriots are people who place the sovereignty of the Motherland before vested**

interests!