

Good Evening,

Thank You very much for the introduction.

Honourable Professor G.L Pieris,

Honourable Secretary to H.E. the President Mr. Lalith Weeratunga,

Your Excellencies

Chiefs of Defence Staff,

The Commanders of the services

Senior Officers,

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am indeed privileged and honoured/ to stand here today/ and share with you my experiences and thoughts about/ "ON BOARD SECURITY;/ THE THREAT,/ BEST PRACTICES/ AND TRENDS IN THE INDUSTRY". I am overwhelmed/at the prospect of sharing my thoughts/in the presence of such an august gathering of very senior officials/for whom maritime affairs,/ its geopolitical ramifications/ and impact on security of coastal nations/ are only second nature.

Those of you who have had time to visit the Galle Dialogue Web Site/ would have noticed a statement by Mr. Gotabhaya Rajapaksa,/ the Secretary to the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development of Sri Lanka,/whose brilliant initiative this Galle Dialogue incidentally is. He states/ "The lack of coordinated international effort to uphold maritime security/ not only affects ocean going vessels,/ but also the national security of coastal nations".

That statement I think/ is the best preamble that I could have had/about what I wish to share with you today.

I have gleefully taken up a new challenge at sea/ and that is/ the fight against the rapidly growing sea piracy in the Indian Ocean.

The threat posed by sea piracy is easy to comprehend/ and,/ as you are aware,/ has been in existence from ancient times. In the context of modern day piracy,/ there are 2 distinct and crucial aspects/ that I wish to highlight/ as they need to be addressed on an urgent basis.

Firstly,/ we should be abreast of new trends in the modus operandi of these pirates/ if effective countermeasures are to be evolved. That is proper intelligence.

The second aspect I wish to address/ is even more dangerous than piracy itself;/ that is,/ ad hoc development of what are perceived to be/ countermeasures against sea piracy. Most of these ad hoc measures have evolved haphazardly / without any control by governments,/ hence are more dangerous/ and pose a more serious threat than piracy itself,/ especially to coastal states in the region,/ and a recipe for disaster/ if not subjected to stringent control and accountability.

Avant Garde/in partnership with Rakna Arakshaka Lanka Ltd/ is involved in anti-piracy operations/ directly under the control and supervision of the Ministry of Defence/in a public-private-partnership/and is accountable to the Ministry of Defence in a transparent manner at all times. This has ensured that the operation has been conducted in a legal,/efficient/and accountable manner,/ without any problem whatsoever.

Keeping abreast of new trends of the modus operandi of pirates is vital,/and is the domain of intelligence services,/ but such information and intelligence cannot be gathered by state agencies alone/ because of the vastness of the theater of operation. Such information could be gathered/ only through a joint effort of state intelligence agencies/ and private entities that fight against sea piracy.

Keeping a track of big vessels on international trade/ is somewhat possible/ as they usually keep to accepted shipping lanes for safety and convenience. However,/ even for that to be effective,/ those ships should conform to accepted norms. Otherwise/ there is no guarantee. Rogue ships could switch off AIS/ and get out of international shipping lanes/ so that the whereabouts would be unknown.

That is about big ships. Just imagine numerous small boats in the world's oceans. There are millions, many engaged in fishing. They go wherever there are fish.

There is absolutely no way how all these boats could be monitored. Any one of them could at any time be involved in any illegal activity. There is no way the oceans of the world could be policed effectively to monitor all types of vessels. Navies and Coast Guards even of the most powerful maritime nations simply cannot do it because they cannot be omnipresent. Even if they could be to a reasonable extent, it is impossible to check every boat even in a demarcated and confined area like the Gulf of Eden.

Then, how do we obtain intelligence about the presence or modus operandi of pirates?

The only way to have such information is by using those very same people of the big ships and fishing boats themselves, because they are the ones in the theatre of pirate operations.

Having identified this, we at Avant Garde have developed a very interactive exchange of such information with maritime security companies.

Navies may have unlimited resources for intelligence, but only seafarers and sea marshals are continuously present in the theatre of operations. The information they gather and share with us are priceless for collation and conversion to intelligence to be shared by all stakeholders. Only thing is that they should be coordinated. Since most of these security companies operate off Sri Lanka, we are able to coordinate gathering of information systematically. I have great pleasure to provide the information and intelligence that we have so gathered and continue to gather. That information and intelligence is priceless and could be crucial in successfully pursuing international efforts to repress piracy.

The second aspect that I wish to share with you is even more frightening than piracy.

As you may appreciate, counter action against piracy has evolved without much involvement by any government or international body. The strategies and tactics have been developed by private entities who offer their services to ships that are vulnerable. That is good, so far as everything is clear-cut and legitimate.

The counter measures so evolved have worked in protection of ships. Indeed, ships are now being protected.

Piracy off North and East African coasts have significantly reduced/ and it is reliably learnt/ that the prime reason for such a reduction/ is the presence of armed guards on board.

The genuine intentions of these security companies should be/ commended and admired. Ships are being effectively served.

Protection of ships is mostly carried out by companies employing retired special forces personnel,/ and they are professional,/ steadfast,/ focused,/reliable,/ discerning,/and disciplined. They have contributed immensely to repress piracy.

Like any lucrative business,/ ship protection has also attracted many more,/ some as good as the professionals,/ but unfortunately,/some not so professional. Private Maritime Security Companies have mushroomed all over. It is good,/ as long as they confine themselves/ to the admirable task/and conduct straight forward business.

As you are aware,/ merchant ships have always rejected weapons.

Weapons and commercial shipping do not go together. Now it is different. Threat of piracy has changed the status quo.

This has created a situation/ where thousands of private weapons are present at sea at any given time.

What control are these weapons subjected to,/ especially when out of government control?

The 2008 terrorist attack in Mumbai is still fresh in our minds. Those terrorists have come ashore in hijacked fishing boats.

The damage that can be caused by a few terrorists with weapons is colossal/ as witnessed at Westgate Shopping Complex in Nairobi, Kenya.

So,/ implications of uncontrolled movement of weapons at sea are very serious.

What is to prevent any of those weapons would not be secretly sent ashore/ especially when the incentives are too great to be refused?

Excess weapons flowing freely in the region therefore/should be considered a threat to national and regional security.

Some may say that flag state approval is adequate,/ but we all know that is not adequate.

The recent arrest and detention of a vessel in Tuticorin is a case in point.

We, as an international forum, should go to whatever lengths to prevent recurrence of such deplorable terrorist acts. One way of doing that is to eliminate all possible supply lines to them. Too many private weapons moving freely close to our shores could create these supply lines, hence is too great a risk to ignore.

In addition, there is another grave risk I wish to address. There are hundreds of long liner fishing trawlers operating in the Indian Ocean with the approval of coastal states. Most of these trawlers are protected by armed guards.

These armed guards undergo extremely difficult and testing conditions. They should be fit to sustain the difficulties of spending long time at sea, sometimes over a period of one year enduring extremely limited facilities. They should be physically fit, mentally stable, alert and capable of performing effectively in these harsh conditions.

These armed guards are provided with government owned weapons.

They are ex-military personnel but irrespective of that, yet subject to further vetting and training before deployment. Being ex-servicemen, they are well trained in the use of weapons, realize the implications and cleared physically and

mentally in the use of weapons. As you would appreciate/ use of weapons should only be by specially trained people/ determined to be suitable in all aspects,/ especially in the harsh conditions.

A new trend is now developing/that has the potential of seriously undermining national security of coastal nations in the Indian Ocean/ by opening avenues for a further free flow of weapons.

We have irrefutable evidence/ that for commercial interests,/ some of these trawlers are obtaining weapons of doubtful origin,/ perhaps from the underworld.

What happens is that weapons from shore is hidden and taken in a harmless looking fishing boat/ to be transferred to the foreign fishing trawlers,/ which means they could be similarly transferred ashore also/ at some other place.

Now,/ the situation has become even worse.

In order to further reduce cost,/ some of these foreign fishing trawlers do not employ trained and disciplined armed guards,/ but double up their crew to act as armed guards. The ramifications/ are too serious to even contemplate. Weapons,/which ought to be handled with extreme care and

by professionals specially trained and suitable/ are now seemingly used indiscriminately.

Then how could the safety of these weapons be assured?

This also needs to be addressed/ if we are to ensure the security of coastal nations.

It is impossible to monitor all fishing boats in the region. But what is possible/ is for the coastal nations/to lobby and demand from states where these foreign trawlers are registered/ that any armed protection they obtain/ should be underwritten by a state/and such transaction be transparent. Further,/ armed guards they employ should be suitable and dedicated for the task. Any trawler not conforming could pose a serious threat to national and regional security.

However,/ for it to be effective/ and assure regional and national security,/ there should be concerted efforts/ where all states act in unison. Any less effort/ is doomed to fail/ as it would not encompass the whole region.

So,/ I have highlighted issues/ that could pose a serious threat to national and regional security,/ and what measures should be taken to eliminate this threat.

Summarizing my thoughts and concerns,/ I wish to propose to the distinguished assembly here,/

Firstly/ to form a core group of Combined Government-Private Sector intelligence Unit,/ consisting of leading private sector companies. As mentioned earlier,/ Avant Garde,/ in furtherance of common interests,/ is ever ready to provide whatever information gathered/ and intelligence we have through our coordinated efforts.

Secondly,/how do we go about permitting weapons of any origin/ to be used in the region even in international waters. Since we should not disrupt legitimate business,/ private weapons could be allowed/ as long as they are obtained, used and stored in a legitimate manner. Combined efforts are required for this to be effective,/ and I suggest/ another core group be established to update legislation and regulations,/ and to disseminate them/ for adherence of everyone in the region. This core group could address all issues pertaining to free movements of weapons in the region/ and work out ways/ to eliminate any possibility/ of private weapons getting into the hands of terrorist elements.

As all of you know/, a very effective way of enforcement/ is by being uncompromising in the implementation of regulations/

and we are dealing with nothing less than regional and national security.

Therefore,/ I earnestly request from all of you/ to give due consideration to these matters seriously/ and ensure security of coastal nations are assured.

Thank you,/ and I will be honoured to answer any questions that you may have/ and further elaborate on any matter relating to maritime piracy.