Terrorism - Threat to Democracy, Peace and Security

Ladies and Gentlemen, let me extend my regards to the participants of this discussion. I am G. Karthikeyan, Presiding Officer from the legislature of the state of Kerala in India.

Democracy is not only an idea; it is also a set of values and a way of governing. Democracy is a condition in which people who comprise a nation submit themselves to institutions of law - law of their own making. It is not just a form of government but a set of principles that guide how we govern ourselves. Terrorism is merely a method of utilizing fear as a means to an end.

Terrorism poses a direct and indirect threat to democracy. The direct threat is a result of terrorism's capability to undermine the fundamental security that nations and international organizations provide their citizens, which is the foundation of the legitimacy of a government. Terrorism also poses a direct threat to the basic human rights of life and property. But the indirect threat to
democracy is by far the most dangerous. The war on terrorism challenges the very existence of democratic institutions of the nations and their ability to ensure the security of their citizens without harming innocent people.

Terrorists can and indeed, are attempting to cause us to ignore principles of democracy as we cater to our fears that terrorism brings. It is when we abandon the principles, even in the short term, which will bring the ultimate demise of Democracy. So we should not allow ourselves to fear terrorism but instead, we should discipline ourselves to allow the principles of Democracy and peace to prevail. Terrorism cannot destroy the principles of democracy.

It is dangerous that the phenomenon of terrorism remains subjective. One person's terrorist is another person's revolutionary crusader. It is also dangerous that terror is often committed in the name of God – but basically it is a way to fight for political goals in a criminal manner. Regardless of the definition of terrorism, democracies must be beware of the danger of transforming the war on terrorism
from a means of defending democracy to one that undermines its foundations.

The large amount of coverage that terrorism receives in the media is also a point worth consideration. Today, in addition to "conventional" terrorism, there are also the risks of the use of weapons of mass destruction and cyber-terrorism. The ability to use diverse methods in order to wreak havoc indicates that terrorism has become an existential world threat.

We cannot say that the threat of domestic terrorism is small. Technology has provided a new mass platform for violence, which includes cyber terrorism. With the advancement of technology and increasing international relations, the domestic terrorist forces are immensely aided by international terrorist agencies. The terrorists who struck Mumbai, India, in November 2008 represent a new breed of tech-savvy militants. It is high time that all nations promote mechanisms that address security concerns in cyberspace while ensuring the Internet remains open for the free exchange of ideas across national boundaries.
It was a matter of national pride for my nation that people across several states exercised their franchise to "demonstrate their faith in the rule of law and our democratic system even after the Mumbai terrorist attack. Even in the state of Jammu and Kashmir we have seen record polling so far. But democracy did not mean just exercising franchise once in five years because every day, at every place, free people expect to see that rule of law prevail through transparent and proper functioning of democratic institutions. There is no better insurance against the forces of extremism, intolerance and terrorism than the efficient and fair functioning of the institutions of democratic governance.

Agents of terror seek to pit one community against another. There is a systematic effort to spread communal disharmony and conflict. There is a method in their madness. Still the fight against terror should not result in the brutalisation of our society. We must also ensure that no group or section of society gets targeted in our commitment to fight terrorism.
Terrorists use the strategy to force the liberal government to react in an authoritarian nature through restrictions on civil liberties. This results in a situation in which a state is made to clamp down on civil liberties and human rights in order to defeat and capture terrorists, ending the democratic regime.

The controversy surrounding any legislation to combat terrorism raises an age-old debate; what measures must a state be willing to undertake in order to secure its own survival? What are the limits of state responses to security threats? Should national security take precedence over civil liberties? Where should the line be drawn? Do emergency legislations restricting civil liberties defend or attack democracy? A legislation to combat terrorism has to address the right to privacy; treatment of immigrants, refugees, and minorities; and finally security detainees and the criminal justice system. These involve complex issues for many nations especially for India.

It is generally accepted that states must balance their reaction to terrorist acts with the preservation of civil
liberties. An effective national security strategy against terrorism that sustains civil liberty is the goal for any democracy. But it is a fact that civil liberties are given up for increased security. So the question is maintaining a balance; a justifiable balance. There are times and situations where restraining civil liberties turns out to be an effective tool for combating terrorism.

A discussion on terrorism cannot miss the intricacies involved in the exercise of ‘emergency power’. There should be safeguards that democratic anti-terrorist legislation should follow. All aspects of the anti-terrorist policy and its implementation should be under the overall control of the civil authorities and hence democratically accountable. Emergency powers should be clearly and simply drafted, published as widely as possible, and administered impartially. Exercise of emergency powers should be warranted by legislations and these legislations are to be reviewed periodically.

Terrorists are improving their sophistication and abilities in virtually all aspects of their operations and
support. The aggressive use of modern technology for information management, communication and intelligence has increased the efficiency of these activities. Weapons technology has become more increasingly available, and the purchasing power of terrorist organizations is on the rise. The ready availability of both technology and trained personnel to operate it for any client with sufficient cash allows the well-funded terrorist to equal or exceed the sophistication of governmental counter-measures.

All peace-loving and democratic forces’ around the world must join hands in the fight against all manifestations of extremism and intolerance. The threat of terrorism is not divisible. The fight against it is also not divisible. The defence of freedom and peace is also not divisible.”

Thank you