

Independence Day Virtual Diplomatic Event 2022

Address by Sashikala Premawardhane, High

Commissioner of Sri Lanka

His Excellency Desmond Tan, Minister of State, Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment of Singapore

His Excellency, Chandra Das, Non Resident High Commissioner of Singapore to Sri Lanka

Excellencies

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

It gives me great pleasure to extend a very warm welcome to all those joining us virtually to commemorate the 74th Anniversary of Sri Lanka's Independence.

I take this opportunity to thank our Guest of Honour, His Excellency Desmond Tan for accepting our invitation to participate in this event. I look forward to hearing the

Minister's views on this very important bilateral relationship that Singapore and Sri Lanka share.

To all those joining us virtually today, we are extremely pleased that you have taken some time to connect with us on this significant occasion for all Sri Lankans and friends of Sri Lanka. We hope to be able to greet you in person and warmly welcome you to a physical event next year, pandemic permitting, when Sri Lanka celebrates its 75th anniversary of independence.

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the last two and a half years, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on humanity as a whole. Sri Lanka, as a developing nation, had to grapple with multiple challenges in facing the pandemic. The economy in particular felt the brunt with key sectors such as tourism, foreign labour, and the apparel industry being affected. Restrictions that **had** to be put in place to control the pandemic also impacted on many small businesses, the self-employed and daily income earners.

The Government, led by the President His Excellency Gotabaya Rajapaksa, prioritised vaccination as a measure to deal with the pandemic. **And** despite economic constraints acted to safeguard the health of the people. Government quarantine and treatment facilities were set up across the country and approximately 35,000 new beds were added to the hospital system.

Due to the extremely successful vaccination drive more than 85% of the target population of those aged 16 and above have been fully vaccinated, as at date. Administering of the booster dose is currently in progress with approximately 35.5% of the fully vaccinated population having received the booster dose.

Presently, Sri Lanka compares favourably to many countries in the world in terms of pandemic control. We have been able to successfully resume normal community life as a result. The Government also extended relief packages to those who were severely impacted by the pandemic including daily wage earners and small businesses.

I am thankful to the Government of Singapore and Temasek Foundation International for the extensive support extended to augment our health sector response to the Pandemic. We have received consistent support by way of much needed medical

supplies and equipment as donations from Temasek Foundation over the past two years for which we are deeply grateful. Temasek is also partnering with Nanyang Polytechnic International on providing training in the areas of Public Health and Emergency medicine to officials of the Health Ministry this year.

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Frontline healthcare and essential workers around the world have made tremendous sacrifices during this pandemic and I take this opportunity to pay tribute to all of them particularly in Sri Lanka and Singapore who have worked tirelessly to keep us safe and are continuing to do so at great personal cost.

We must recognise that the challenges surrounding the production, distribution, deployment and acceptance of vaccines must be overcome urgently if we are to be able to effectively deal with new strains of the virus. Ensuring that everyone, everywhere, is vaccinated appears to be the best way out of this pandemic. Sri Lanka intends establishing a Regional Knowledge Hub in collaboration with the World Health Organisation (WHO) to facilitate exchange on lessons learnt

from the pandemic and support countries to recover better. Increased global cooperation visible during this pandemic reiterates the importance of multilateral cooperation in the face of global challenges.

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

Sri Lanka's economy is gradually beginning to return to normalcy with a clear growth in both the tourism and export sectors. However, a number of challenges remain.

Merchandise export earnings have shown a year on year growth of close to 25% in 2021 earning approximately 12.5 billion US \$. Apparel and textiles, coconut and coconut based products, and rubber and finished rubber products featuring prominently in this respect.

Tourism arrivals stood at 194,495 as at December, 2021 and in the month of January this year 82,327 tourist arrivals were recorded. Tourism earnings in 2021 were USD 261.04 mn. Sri Lanka was ranked among the top 5 countries to visit by Conde Nast Traveler in 2021 and named as one of the top travel

destinations by CNN Travel in January 2022. The iconic Sigiriya Rock Fortress was featured by Bloomberg as one of the new 7 wonders of the world whilst the readers of Travel + Leisure magazine voted Sri Lanka as one of the top 25 islands to visit. These are a few of the accolades Sri Lanka received as a travel destination in spite of the constraints of the pandemic. Whilst measures have been taken to ease travel restrictions the Tourism and Health authorities in Sri Lanka have put in place stringent measures to ensure the safety of those travelling to the country.

If we look at bilateral trade in goods between Sri Lanka and Singapore, the trade balance continues to remain heavily in favour of Singapore. In 2021 the bilateral trade in goods was valued at US\$ 819 million. While Sri Lanka exported goods to the value of US\$ 99 million, imports from Singapore was valued at US\$ 720 million. We are looking to close the gap in 2022 with a more robust and diversified trade relationship between Sri Lanka and Singapore. The High Commission has been working with exporters on expanding the range of products that are coming into this market with some success. We have seen the entry of agri-produce and new packeted food items with many of these items available on e-commerce platforms and popular supermarket chains. A Sri Lankan ethnic

goods store and a Sri Lankan restaurant have also made their debut in Singapore, recently.

On the tourism side, the launch of the Vaccinated Travel Lane between the two countries is a significant step forward. I take this opportunity to thank colleagues in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Transport of Singapore who worked closely with us in making this possible. 557 tourists from Singapore visited Sri Lanka in 2021 which is a 78 % decrease when compared to the previous year. However, we are optimistic that travel for tourist purposes will pick up this year with strong connectivity and the VTL in place. At present 5 Sri Lankan Airlines and 10 Singapore Airlines flights are operating between Colombo and Singapore on a weekly basis. Travel Guide Singapore carries a centre page spread on attractions for travellers to Sri Lanka including on cuisine and unique products in its February edition and I encourage you to pick up a copy to better understand our tourism offer.

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

Sri Lanka is an important emerging market offering excellent investment opportunities. In particular Sri Lanka is looking to attract investments from Singapore in the renewable energy, urban development, supply chain and logistics, real estate, IT/BPO, agri-produce, fisheries and aquaculture, healthcare and pharmaceutical sectors. There are also investment opportunities in the Colombo Port City which has been set up as a Special Economic Zone. Spanning 269 hectares of reclaimed land from the sea, Port City Colombo is envisaged to be South Asia's premiere residential, retail and business destination, offering unmatched planned city living along the warm waters of the Indian Ocean.

Singapore is at present the 7th largest investor in Sri Lanka. It has invested a total of US\$ 864 million during the period 2005 -2021 -of that US\$ 19 Mn was invested in 2021. Around 100 Singaporean businesses operate in Sri Lanka involved in various sectors such as Manufacturing, infrastructure development and hospitality.

We hope to see more Singapore government led investments going into Sri Lanka in 2022.

Throughout 2021, the High Commission worked with the Ministry of Trade and Industry, the Singapore Business

Federation, Enterprise Singapore and other partners to provide exposure on both trade and investment potential of Sri Lanka through a series of webinars, B2B meetings and targeted discussions. We hope to continue this in 2022.

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

Sustainability is at the heart of our national policy framework “Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour”. Sri Lanka’s updated Nationally Determined Contributions aims to reduce emissions towards achieving carbon neutrality by 2050.

We will increase the contribution of renewable energy sources to 70% of national energy needs by 2030 and are taking steps to phase out use of fossil fuels. Sri Lanka is the co-lead of the “Global Energy Compact for No New Coal Power”.

In 2019 Sri Lanka spearheaded the Colombo Declaration on Sustainable Nitrogen Management, which seeks to halve Nitrogen waste by 2030. We look forward to more countries joining this initiative. Sri Lanka also leads the Action Group on Mangrove Ecosystems and Livelihoods under the

Commonwealth Blue Charter initiative. Sri Lanka welcomes investments, technology transfers, and climate financing for our ambitious sustainability efforts.

The X-Press Pearl incident demonstrated the vulnerability of coastal states to maritime disasters. Apart from the devastating impact on the environment there were dire consequences for local communities particularly fishermen who lost livelihoods and had to be compensated. The incident is complex as it involved several types of pollutants including *inter alia* oil, hazardous chemicals and plastics. We appreciate the support extended by the Maritime Ports Authority of Singapore from the start of the incident and look forward to continued cooperation. We are also thankful to Singapore based Non-Profit, Alliance to End Plastic Waste which donated 8 beach cleaning equipment worth 180,000 USD to support the efforts of the Sri Lankan authorities.

It is extremely important for coastal states to be supported when such disasters occur.

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The bilateral relationship between Singapore and Sri Lanka continues to thrive with cooperation extending to a multitude of areas and fields. Interactions at highest levels have continued to be maintained with several official visits scheduled to take place in 2022.

Sri Lanka and Singapore are more connected historically than many realise. It is said that Sri Lanka, then Ceylon, was responsible for inspiring much of Singapore's progress in the beginning. Sri Lankans came to Singapore the early 1900s and were instrumental in supporting Singapore's nation building process. They aided developments in the fields of civil service, law, medicine, education, engineering, housing and sport. These linkages clearly demonstrate the lasting ties that exist between the people of Singapore and Sri Lanka. We are happy to see the close to 12,000 strong Sri Lankan community continuing to contribute towards the development of both countries. We look forward to more employment opportunities for Sri Lankans in Singapore in the future. The High Commission has been actively engaging with interlocutors to secure such opportunities which we envisage will be realised in 2022.

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

We ended our celebrations of the 50 years of diplomatic ties by jointly issuing commemorative stamps in 2021 at ceremonies held in Singapore and Sri Lanka with the participation of the two Foreign Ministers. The stamps feature coral reefs in Sri Lanka and mangroves in Singapore symbolising the shared interest in preserving and protecting our natural environment.

I take this opportunity to thank all Sri Lankans including those of Sri Lankan origin in Singapore and our Singaporean friends for their contribution towards strengthening the relationship between our two countries.

In conclusion, I wish to take this opportunity to thank you for being a part of the 74th anniversary celebrations of Sri Lanka's independence.

