

Independence Day Virtual Diplomatic Event 2021

**Address by Sashikala Premawardhane, High
Commissioner of Sri Lanka**

**Hon. Alvin Tan, Minister of State for Trade & Industry and
Culture, Community and Youth of Singapore**

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

Excellencies

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

**A very warm welcome to all those joining us virtually to
commemorate the 73rd Anniversary of Sri Lanka's
Independence.**

**I wish to thank our Guest of Honour, Hon Alvin Tan, for
honouring our event by agreeing to share his thoughts,
which you will hear in a while. We are deeply appreciative
of your contributions to the event.**

We are extremely pleased that all of you could join us today, as we celebrate the 73rd anniversary of Sri Lanka's independence. The COVID-19 pandemic has restricted physical events, nevertheless we are happy to be able to connect with you, virtually, on this important occasion for all Sri Lankans and friends of Sri Lanka.

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Sri Lanka gained independence from British colonial rule on the 4th of February, 1948. As we reflect on the post-independence journey of Sri Lanka, there is much that we can be proud of. We are one of Asia's oldest democracies, enjoying universal adult franchise since 1931. Sri Lanka has a robust democratic process and time and again the people, exercising their franchise, have voted in governments to represent them.

Sri Lanka conducted Parliamentary elections in August 2020, following up on the Presidential elections held in November 2019 electing both a new President and a new Parliament. Sri Lanka was also the first country in South

Asia to successfully conduct parliamentary elections during the pandemic.

Sri Lanka has maintained a strong commitment to education and health throughout its history with free healthcare and free education up to undergraduate level for its citizens. This has resulted in an adult literacy rate of 96.5%. In the recently released UNDP’s Human Development Report for 2020, Sri Lanka emerged as the top performer in South Asia. Sri Lanka’s Human Development Index (HDI) value puts the country in the high human development category—positioning it at 72 out of 189 countries and territories.

Sri Lanka treasures its multi-ethnic and multi-religious identity. Our social fabric has been enriched by people of all ethnicities that reside in the country.

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen,

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s vision for Sri Lanka outlined in the national policy document “Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour” is aimed at achieving a fourfold

outcome: a productive citizenry, a contented family, a disciplined and just society and a prosperous nation. The President has advocated “out of the box thinking” in order to meet the economic challenges posed in the New Normal context. The idea is to create a people centric economy, with a focus on strengthening the local economy, increasing export income and attracting FDIs.

Sri Lanka’s geo-strategic location in the Indian Ocean, is of significant importance. The President has advocated a foreign policy based on neutrality, non-alignment, mutual friendship and trust among nations. Sri Lanka has a long history of cooperation with the international community, and the policy of the Government is to continue to work with the United Nations and its agencies as we face global challenges together.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought with it unprecedented challenges. The impact of the pandemic on the global economy was particularly severe. Sri Lanka had to adapt and diversify its exports and do so quickly. Particularly the apparel industry was able to meet this challenge successfully ensuring export revenue to the country.

However, many other industries, such as tourism was affected significantly.

Sri Lanka's handling of the pandemic has drawn praise from world bodies such as the World Health Organisation with stringent measures in place by health and related authorities to identify, isolate, treat and contact trace. The caseload and death rate remain low in comparison to global averages. Sri Lanka took measures early to establish a task force comprising key agencies to ensure a coordinated and effective approach to containment. These measures have enabled Sri Lanka to open its borders to tourists commencing on 21st January 2021.

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

The pandemic brought significant changes to the way in which we live, work and interact with each other. It has been a year in which we have had to learn new skills and evolve or face resultant consequences. It has also taught us to value the relationships that we have built with each other and to strengthen them as we face the New Normal together. Singapore and Sri Lanka did just that last year. It

was coincidentally our 50th anniversary year. Last year we celebrated 50 years of the establishment of formal diplomatic ties. Despite the many challenges of 2020 the relationship has grown stronger and we have expanded our areas of cooperation.

In particular, I take this opportunity to express heartfelt appreciation to the Government of Singapore and to Temasek Foundation for the strong support given to augment Sri Lanka's response to the pandemic by donating vital health care equipment, PPE, ventilators, test kits and much more in the past year. We were also able to overcome supply chain disruptions and collaborate, and for the first time a Sri Lankan company, MAS Holdings produced patented Swiss technology Livinguard facemasks for Temasek Foundation to be used in Singapore and beyond. One million facemasks were donated back to Sri Lanka to be used by frontline healthcare workers, and officials in the fields of education and law enforcement. The past year has truly cemented the bonds of friendship between Sri Lanka and Singapore.

This is not all, colleagues in Singapore's Ministry for Foreign Affairs, assisted the High Commission to repatriate over 1500 stranded Sri Lankans not only from Singapore but also Brunei, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Cambodia, the Philippines, and Thailand. We also greatly appreciate the support extended by the Ministry of Manpower, the Ministry of Home Affairs, and the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority during this time.

Various charitable organisations, groups and individuals supported the High Commission to provide much needed food, dry rations and accommodation support to many of the stranded Sri Lankans until repatriation flights were arranged by the High Commission. We are deeply grateful for their friendship and support.

SriLankan Airlines continued fly to Singapore throughout this period operating both repatriation and cargo flights. They supported to bring Singaporeans back home in addition to repatriating Sri Lankan nationals.

It has been a time of tremendous trials and tribulations for all of us. The friendship between the two countries enabled us to get through this difficult time together.

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

Let me now turn towards trade and investment between Singapore and Sri Lanka. As you may be aware Sri Lanka and Singapore concluded a Free Trade Agreement in 2018.

Bilateral trade in goods between Singapore and Sri Lanka was valued at USD 881 million in 2019, with a trade deficit weighted in Singapore's favour. Despite the global pandemic situation, Sri Lanka performed considerably well and the value of exports to Singapore in 2020 stood at nearly USD 91.35 million. The comparative figure for 2019 stood at USD 115 million. New opportunities also emerged during the pandemic for PPE products, E-commerce and Agri-business sectors particularly for ethnic products. Service exports such as IT and IT enable services will also have more growth potential in the Singapore market in the future.

Key activities within 2020 included, among others, the promotion of Sri Lankan cuisine through a food festival, a webinar on food and digitalization, virtual B2B meetings on various sectors, participation by Sri Lankan companies at PrintPack virtual trade fair, new product launch and supporting market penetration efforts for Sri Lankan goods.

Cross -border start-up collaboration opportunities were also identified as a way to promote bilateral trade through innovation. A herbal beverage named “Simha” which is an innovative product especially developed by two start-ups from the Sri Lanka and Singapore was launched last December to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the diplomatic relations. This sector has also been prioritized by the newly launched “Council for Startups” which is an initiative of the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce of Sri Lanka.

Linkages were established with the business cells of the Universities of Moratuwa and Sri Jayawadenapura, with Singaporean entities to support trans boundary start-ups to

commercialise their innovations and explore opportunities to expand the business across borders. Opportunities also exist for Sri Lankan tech driven start-ups in sectors such as Agri-Tech, Fintech and Edu- tech areas.

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

Singapore is at present the 5th largest investment partner for Sri Lanka. In 2019 the total value of the investments from Singapore was US\$ 97.175 million. Even with the constraints of the pandemic, during the period January to September 2020 investments from Singapore stood at US \$ 43.36 million.

Singapore has invested a total of US\$ 786 million during the period of 2005 -2019. Around 100 Singaporean businesses operate in Sri Lanka involved in various sectors such as manufacturing, real estate, and infrastructure development.

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

Sri Lanka and Singapore enjoy a warm and abiding friendship, underpinned by mutual respect and understanding, shared cultural values and strong people-to-people linkages. The pandemic did impact on the plans that we had to celebrate our 50th anniversary year. However, we intend to continue to celebrate this milestone with an issue of a commemorative stamp and an academic publication in 2021.

Bilateral relations between the two countries thrived with interactions at high levels continuing virtually. Singapore has continued to provide much needed virtual capacity building and training opportunities to Sri Lanka through the Singapore Cooperation programme. We sincerely appreciate the cooperation extended by the Ministry of Trade and Industry, Enterprise Singapore and Economic Development Board in the trade, investment and economic spheres throughout 2020.

I also avail of 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.

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

Sri Lanka is a beautiful island paradise just 4 short hours away from Singapore. We have opened our doors to tourism last month with stringent health regulations in place. We DO hope to see Singaporeans visiting Sri Lanka in the future. Sri Lanka is truly a unique experience. An island with 8 UNESCO world heritage sites, 6 cultural and 2 natural and one of the few places in the world where the largest land mammal the elephant and the largest sea mammal the blue whale can be seen within a few miles of each other.

In conclusion, I wish to take this opportunity to thank you for being a part of the 73rd anniversary celebrations of Sri Lanka's independence.

I thank you.

