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சனாதிபதி பேச்சாளர் மற்றும் சர்வதேச ஊடக அலகு
Presidential Spokesman and International Media Unit

Address by President of Sri Lanka, H.E. Mahinda Rajapaksa
at the opening ceremony of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting 2013
(Nelum Pokuna 'Lotus Pond', Mahinda Rajapaksa Theatre, 15 November 2013)

Most Venerable Maha Sangha and other religious dignitaries
Your Royal Highnesses, the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall,
Fellow Heads of Government,
Commonwealth Foreign Ministers,
Secretary General of the Commonwealth,
Excellencies,
Ladies & Gentlemen,

A warm welcome, to the opening ceremony of the 22nd Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. It is my pleasure to welcome to Sri Lanka, Your Royal Highnesses, the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall, fellow Commonwealth Heads of Government, Foreign Ministers, spouses of visiting dignitaries, delegates and special invitees.

Your Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales, representing the Head of the Commonwealth, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second, is no stranger to Sri Lanka. In fact, Your Royal Highness's Trust has funded several social development projects here. I am sure Your Royal Highness will carry pleasant memories of this visit to our country. I also wish to thank the outgoing chairman of Australia for extending all the support to make this CHOGM a success.

Hosting this meeting is a historic occasion for Sri Lanka and also privileged to Asia as CHOGM returns to this region after twenty four years. As one of the eight founding members of the modern Commonwealth, Sri Lanka is deeply honoured to host this event and extremely thankful to all of you who have been firm in your support and understanding of the related complexities in Sri Lanka's post conflict phase. This confidence reposed by you in my country will greatly assist me in steering the Organisation's future in the best interest of our peoples.

We in Sri Lanka are stepping into a new era of peace, stability and renewed economic opportunities that have been long denied to my people, due to the menace of terrorism that existed for nearly three decades. In ending terrorism in 2009, we asserted the greatest human right, the right to life. I am happy to state that in the past four years, there has not been a single terrorist related incident, anywhere in Sri Lanka.

Excellencies and Friends,
There is a multitude of global challenges, arising from the uncertainty of the socio economic conditions, faced by our nations today. We, in the Commonwealth, must therefore collectively find means of effectively addressing these challenges to safeguard the values we hold dear.

It is in recognition of the urgent need to address the burning issues connected to growth and development, which directly impinge on the lives of our peoples, that Sri Lanka proposed the theme, "Growth with Equity: Inclusive Development" for this CHOGM.

We believe that this theme has broad relevance to the larger Commonwealth, and highlights the importance of equity in economic development, particularly in view of the existing disparities in the distribution of wealth, and economic benefits. Inclusive development promotes progress and contributes towards achieving Millennium Development Goals.

In the case of Sri Lanka, our current policy agenda, the Mahinda Chinthana, Vision for the Future, spells out clear strategies of improving the livelihoods of our people, ensuring that economic and social benefits reach every strata of society, and more importantly, taking Sri Lanka into the future, by aiming to be the 'Wonder of Asia'.

I am happy to say that Sri Lanka has achieved success on a range of social indicators that comprise the MDGs, despite being a lower middle income country. Absolute poverty in Sri Lanka declined from 15.2 per cent in 2007 to 6.5 per cent in 2012, surpassing the MDG mid-term target. While reaching out to care for all our people's needs, the Government has also taken a pro-active approach, to post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation.

Your Royal Highnesses, Fellow Heads of Government, Excellencies, and friends,
Faced with tough challenges, we, in the Commonwealth, need to ask ourselves, a few questions.

First, Can we realistically say that the need for basic facilities, healthcare, education, productive employment, access to food and safe drinking water, eradication of poverty and hunger, are of lesser importance than political concerns?

Second, Should not the Commonwealth, collectively strive towards the realization of development goals, to enable its member countries to reap economic benefits?

Third, shouldn't we be addressing more vigorously the issue of 'common poverty' before we talk about 'common wealth'?

As a matter of priority, we, in the Commonwealth, should focus on development challenges, confronting the majority of our member nations. I see a compelling need for those who guide the destiny of the Commonwealth to give serious thought to practical modalities, focusing on social and economic issues. This will greatly enhance the relevance and value of the Commonwealth.

Particular emphasis on the well-being of women and children is necessary. There is, as well, the acute need for awareness of both the potential and the risks attendant on Information Technology.

Although economic priorities take centre stage, let us not forget that people are the greatest wealth of our nations. Strengthening the quality of human capital will help countries to achieve sustained growth. Greater people-to-people contact within the nations of the Commonwealth, as well as taking the objectives of the Commonwealth to the most remote sections of our populations, is also important.

CHOGM 2013 will provide the opportunity for us to assess the Commonwealth's achievements with regard to development goals. If the Commonwealth is to remain relevant to its member countries, the Association must respond sensitively, to the needs of its peoples and not let it turn into a punitive or judgmental body.

We must also collectively guard against bilateral agendas being introduced into the Organization, distorting Commonwealth traditions and consensus. The strength of the Organisation lies in keeping the member countries together, helping one another in a spirit of partnership, making the Commonwealth truly unique.

Excellencies,

Our deliberations in Colombo must lead to the greatest practical benefits for the peoples of a renewed Commonwealth, one that is engaging, collaborative and unifying, rather than prescriptive and divisive.

In December last year, the Charter of the Commonwealth comprising the values and aspirations shared by all members of the Organization was adopted. To us in Sri Lanka today, they continue to be relevant,

as we usher in a new era and also because all religions we follow in Sri Lanka have taught us to uphold the highest human values.

Finally, I wish to quote the words of the Buddha, the Enlightened One:

“Na pa resan wilomani,
Na pa resan katakatan,
Attanova avekkeiya,
Katani aka thanicha”

‘Let not one take notice of faults of other’s or what they have done or not done. Let one be concerned only about what one has done and left undone.’

Whilst looking forward to a fruitful and constructive engagement, I wish all of you, a very pleasant and an enjoyable stay in our country.

May the Noble Triple Gem Bless you all.