

**Address by H.E. the President Mahinda Rajapaksa
at the Inauguration of the Commonwealth People's Forum 2013
(Galle, Sri Lanka, 10th November 2013)**

The Secretary General, Honourable Prime Minister, Cabinet Ministers, Members of Parliament, distinguished guest, Chairman of the Forum Dear Friend

It is my pleasure to welcome you all, who have travelled here from across the Commonwealth, to the Commonwealth Peoples Forum 2013. You are unique in that you represent the voices, aspirations, visions, and ambitions ... of your fellow citizens in each of the countries represented here. You also portray their present and their future. It is in this backdrop, we take pride in hosting this Peoples Forum associated with CHOGM, held in Asia, for the first time in 24 years.

We share a lot. The language, the art and the sciences we enjoy today are so much inter connected and are outcomes of many sacrifices and hard work of our people. We have fought many wars together, and we have enjoyed peace together. Despite many differences among us, we find many common things too. While sustaining our differences to the extent needed, we have worked together for the common good of our people.

The Peoples Forum has always provided space for pressing issues to be discussed, through multi-stakeholder approach. It allows us to harness the diversity amongst us and this year's discussions could not have come at a more opportune time, with the post-2015 development agenda upon us. A global commitment for Millennium Development Goals has had successes as well as failures, for some of our countries in the Commonwealth.

All of you present here today, are fully involved at the grass-root level. I am certain that you have the capacity and the mandate, to work with your communities, as well as your leaders, to address the key issues, presently affecting our peoples. Your ability to contribute positively, will improve and enrich the lives of our peoples on a daily basis.

Let me now turn to the theme of the Peoples Forum this year, "Equitable Growth and Inclusive Development: beyond 2015." The vision for the world beyond 2015 will be to progress beyond poverty reduction, towards achieving holistic development that encompasses human rights, equality and sustainability. It would also have to incorporate the four dimensions: ensuring peace and security, inclusive economic development, inclusive social development, and environmental sustainability.

World leaders in governments and businesses have now realized that the post-2015 goals need to be carefully designed. All policies, mechanisms and the commitments must create a positive environment for people to achieve their fullest potential. This positive policy environment should also provide the facilitations ... to protect, promote and sustain collective human capital and the effective provisions of global public goods.

Taking our own example, Sri Lanka is emerging from an era of nearly three decades that saw destruction, bloodshed, mayhem, brutality, resultant economic reversals, and human suffering, all due to separatist terrorism. This sad period of our history was destructive not only in a materialistic way, but also in a way that affected the very soul of our people, and our nation. We are finding our way once again, though there is many an obstacle.

I am glad to note that the recently published Commonwealth Compared 2013, a report of the Royal Commonwealth Society places Sri Lanka at the 15th position among the Commonwealth nations, and at the 68th position among nations of the world, 168 in all. I am certain that in years to come, we will be doing better, as we address the related core parameters such as competitiveness, press freedom, inequality, democracy, gender gap, peace, human development, youth and environmental performances.

My country and my people are now searching not just peace but sustainable peace and harmony. It is only with sustainable peace that we could envision development. As I have stated before, there cannot be peace without development and equally, there cannot be development, without peace. We have to ensure that the fruits of development reach every individual. The poor, in particular, needs to be specially catered for, simply because they are vulnerable to the slightest change, in economy and society. Everyone must have space to grow, and flourish. In other words, what we are striving for is people-centric progress.

You would rightly observe that this journey is not easy. The same could be said of struggles and feats that all Commonwealth States and its people face. With the post 2015 agenda fast approaching, the current discourse nationally and multi-laterally, has been one of passion and concern. It is not about just what we should achieve post 2015, but also what we have neglected thus far and what requires our immediate attention. The task may sometimes seem onerous, but these shortcomings of our societies cannot be left to the next generation to resolve. I firmly believe that our children and grand children, should be free from these age-old problems. Such freedom will enable them to be creative and innovative and work for the common good of the people, wherever they live.

It is heartening to see that during the next few days, each of you will be able to air your views and concerns. More importantly, the environment will enable you to come together, collectively as one voice, to explore solutions the best way forward on the post-2015 development agenda. I look forward to seeing your Civil Society Statement, which will provide a solid foundation to facilitate this work, as people centric agenda. One cannot underestimate the creativity, insight and the specialized knowledge of the civil society that will add to the successful outcome of the CHOGM, and subsequently aid its members in the implementation process.

Your continued commitment towards the people of the Commonwealth has already been illustrated by your presence here today, and I wish you all success on the extensive programme of work before you're Lanka is experiencing a time of change, of creativity, and expectations of a bright smiling future for all its citizens. And, it is my sincere wish that you will be able to experience at least a fraction of that transformation, and that the positive spirit which it brings, would guide all our work during the next few days.

While diversity of opinion is natural in civil society, it is important that one basic quality should underpin the work and the thinking of all civil society organizations. This quality without doubt should be feeling for one's motherland and commitment to her well-being. The stature and territorial integrity of the country is the crucial consideration.

My dear Friends, it now gives me great pleasure to declare the 2013 Commonwealth Peoples Forum, officially open.

May the Noble Triple Gem Bless you all.

Thank you.