

President Mahinda Rajapaksa's opening remarks at the press conference this (14 Nov) morning ahead of the commencement of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) 2013 taking place in Colombo, Sri Lanka, this week.

It is my pleasure to welcome you all.

We meet just before the 22nd Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting 2013, which begins tomorrow, in Colombo. This is the flagship event of the Commonwealth and takes place every two years.

As one of the eight founding members of the modern Commonwealth, Sri Lanka remains committed to upholding the fundamental values of the organisation.

As such, we are honoured to have the privilege to host this prestigious summit, providing a forum for Commonwealth leaders to discuss matters of common interest and priority.

While the Commonwealth is unique in its diversity, we as Member Countries must ensure that it remains relevant to its 2.2 billion people.

Collectively, we make up one-third of the world's population. Over 60 percent of our citizens are under the age of 30, making the Commonwealth family, home to the largest number of young people. In this context, it is fitting that we commenced CHOGM week with the Commonwealth Youth Forum in Hambantota.

The theme for the CHOGM 2013 "Growth with Equity: Inclusive Development" is relevant to all Member States. Equitable growth and inclusive development must cut across all segments of society.

We, in the Commonwealth, must unite to achieve rapid, sustainable and inclusive economic growth, especially in developing countries, to ensure that no one is left behind.

This theme also connects directly to the Post 2015 Global Development Agenda. As an organization that cuts across all regions of the world, the Commonwealth should contribute towards advancing this global dialogue. This is one of the areas that my fellow Heads of Government and I, will be discussing at this summit.

We also intend to cover a wide range of other equally important issues.

These include :

- The challenges of small states;

- The role of civil society in development;

- Public – private partnerships for wealth creation;

- Commonwealth values and principles;

- Enhancing participation of youth in development.

- International trade

In addition to the main CHOGM meetings, three parallel events are now taking place simultaneously.

In view of investor confidence in Sri Lanka and enhanced business opportunities available after the eradication of terrorism, the Commonwealth Business Forum has attracted over one thousand six hundred (1600) registered participants. This Forum has the theme, "Partnership for Wealth Creation and Social Development".

The Business Forum commenced on 12th November, and it is expected that this event would give way to greater economic activity both in Sri Lanka and the wider Commonwealth.

There is a sizeable number of non-Commonwealth countries also participating. Some Heads of Government will engage with a group of Business leaders in Hambantota later today.

In recognition of the vital role young people would play, in achieving sustainable and inclusive development, the Commonwealth Youth Forum convened on 10th November, on the theme "Inclusive Development Stronger Together".

Undoubtedly, investing in young people and enabling them to contribute meaningfully towards national development, is the foundation for a prosperous tomorrow.

Therefore, it is important that the national policies, plans and programmes of the Commonwealth member nations make youth, partners in development, and take into account their interests.

The hosting of the World Youth Conference in Sri Lanka in 2014 is an indication of my country's commitment to our young, as they are the future of our countries.

It is understood that the Youth Forum is pursuing the establishment of a Commonwealth Youth Council, which is another positive initiative. Sri Lanka has offered to host the Secretariat of the Council.

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The Commonwealth Peoples' Forum is taking place in Hikkaduwa, since 10th November, on the theme "Growth with Equity and Inclusive Development beyond 2015."

Representing the face of the Commonwealth, the Peoples' Forum will enhance connectivity and people-to-people contact among the Member States. It is for this reason that we decided to take the Commonwealth to the non-urban population of Sri Lanka.

This is the vision of Sri Lanka for the orientation of the Commonwealth during its term as Chair. Undoubtedly, this vision is based on securing betterment for the peoples of the Commonwealth.

Outcomes of the CHOGM discussions will be reflected in the final Statement, which will be released on Sunday 17th November.

Let me conclude here, and take this opportunity to thank all of you for your presence here.

As CHOGM returns to Asia after 24 years, I hope that you will give fair coverage to all events connected with the Summit, and will convey the outcomes of the meeting to international and local audiences, in a balanced and professional manner.

Thank you.