

Address by H.E. Maithripala Sirisena, President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka at the 72nd Session of UNGA on September 19th, 2017

I wish you all a good evening,

His Excellency President Miroslav Lajcak, President of the 72 General Assembly of the United Nations,

Secretary-General of United Nations,

His Excellency Antonio Gutteres,

Excellencies, Honorable Delegates and distinguished guests,

It is my greatest pleasure to address this annual assembly for the third time as the President of Sri Lanka. The theme of this 72nd Assembly is 'Focusing on People: Striving for Peace and a Decent Life for All on a Sustainable Planet'. Given the challenges of that the world is facing today, I consider theme highly relevant.

There are a few promises that I made to the people of Sri Lanka when I contested the Presidential election in January 2015. One of the key promises among them was that, because Sri Lanka's Executive President had been vested with more powers than any other leader in the world, I would curtail those excessive powers of the Executive Presidency and would transfer those powers to the Parliament. I have set an example to my country as well as the entire world by duly curtailing those powers and transferring them to the Parliament.

In countries that protect and nurture democracy, it is important that leaders who come to power in them, use their power in a good manner and protect democracy, while building a fair society. Yet, when we look at the last two decades and the world history, we see that, because of their unwillingness leave it to successors, some leaders let their countries lose peace, sometimes even leading to international divisions and disharmony. We have a good understanding of such phenomena at national and international levels. Against a backdrop such as this, I must state to this esteemed audience, that we have been able to complete two and half successful years in protecting and promoting democracy, since ending the rule of a group of people who has kept power to themselves by restricting freedom of the citizens.

In the development vision of our country, we declared year 2017 as the year for freeing the nation from poverty. At present, the whole world is engaged in an attempt to free itself from poverty. In line with declaration of the Year 2017 as the year of poverty alleviation, many development projects have been launched to strengthen the domestic economy.

As you all know, the armed conflict that dragged on for nearly 30 years in my country, weakened our economy. We were able to defeat the armed separatist movement that attempted to divide our country by resorting to terrorism. We could restore peace and democracy and march forward as a free and peaceful country. With the lessons learnt from the bad experiences of the conflict, we could turn a new page in our path to sustainable economic development by focusing on domestic agriculture and local

industrialization. Specially, my government emphasized the protection of our environment in our drive to achieve sustainability of our development.

I must mention that, today, the whole world is facing challenges posed by severe changes in climate. I would like to propose that the community of nations must focus on implementing the Paris Accord that the world reached in 2015, by further improving the unity that we reached by signing that accord. We must remember that the Paris Accord is critically important to future of the entire biosphere and humanity.

In order to incrementally free our nation from poverty, my government has launched the 'Gramashakthi' national programme. We have also declared a clear economic plan until 2025. I believe that the proposed economic plan for 2025 will revitalize our economy and help reduce poverty by further strengthening local agriculture and industries.

Mr President, children all over the world, including in my country, are facing many challenges. We launched a National Programme for protecting the nation's children. They need to be saved from intoxicants, and from abuse. I would like to highlight the need to implement targeted programmes at national and international levels to ensure the safety of our children.

The world has recognized the need to ensure the rights of women. However, there are still countries and societies, where women are not treated equally. In my country, more than 52% of the population are women. New changes in our Constitution protect the rights of women. New measures include the legislation that makes it mandatory that a minimum of 25% candidates at elections should be women.

While it is important to work for the progress of women and children, it is also necessary to fight the menace of drugs and other intoxicants. Sri Lanka has launched a nation-wide campaign to fight drugs and other intoxicants. However, while noting that they pose a threat to the humanity, I underscore the need to implement a broader international response to the threat posed by drugs, and other intoxicants. As I see it, drug prevention and mitigation oriented programmes with a broad acceptance and consensus are the need of the day.

When I came into power having gone through nearly three decades of war, we were facing two main challenges. The first of them was the huge debt burden on the economy. We had to pay insupportable amounts for servicing our debt, emptying our coffers. The other was facing the allegations of wartime human rights violations by United Nations and the UN Human Rights Council. However, in our new programme to revitalize the domestic economy, we have been able to identify a plan to reduce and incrementally free ourselves from our foreign debt while encouraging foreign investments.

At the same time, as a government, we are paying serious attention to the aforementioned allegations and to find solutions to them as a matter of priority. Mainly, my government has performed well in terms of strengthening democracy and protecting human rights. I must mention here that the government will continue to ensure their progress in the future.

My government is committed to work tirelessly to achieving reconciliation by fostering understanding among all ethnic and linguistic groups, while eliminating mutual suspicion and hatred in order to create a society where all can live freely and harmoniously. Further, we are dedicated to ensure that the country will accomplish economic prosperity while promoting a moral and disciplined society. Specially, my government is committed to the creating a fair and just society by strengthening rule of law.

Mr President, I must mention here that, at a moment when Sri Lanka is committed to a course of good governance by strengthening democracy, human rights, and fundamental rights while winning the goodwill of the international community, I look forward to the kind support of the United Nations. We have been a member of United Nations for 62 years. Sri Lanka has always been a country that has respected its treaties and conventions, agreements and rules and regulations while acting to improve such relations further. As such, in our country's journey where we protect our independence and sovereignty, we respectfully request the support of the international community for us to go on a moderate but steady path achieve our targets in order to find sustainable solutions to the allegations leveled against us.

Some extremist groups are expecting a high speed. Some extremist groups want radical solutions. However, as a country that has faced a three decade long war, where deep divisions have been existed, I request the support of all of you to promote peace and fraternity, so that my beloved country and its people can rise from the current situation. That is why I emphasize that it is for a slow and a successful journey that we need the support.

We all have heard that speedy journey is a dangerous journey. Therefore, I believe that you will understand the complex nature of issues that hinder the instant and radical solutions that some impatient groups are asking for. As such, I reiterate with respect the need of support from the United Nations and its member states for my country to ensure the non-recurrence of war by fostering peace and harmony among all communities in Sri Lanka.

I wish to conclude my speech wishing good luck to the President and the membership and by requesting the blessings for Sri Lanka to emerge as an economically prosperous illustrious country in the world where democracy is strong and the gruesome past never repeats.