

Address by Guest of Honour, Hon Dinesh Gunawardena, Foreign Minister at “Shaping our future together” the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations and 65th Anniversary of the United Nations in Colombo, virtual event on 23 October 2020

Hon Prime Minister,
Hon Minister of Youth and Sports
Her Excellency the UN Resident Coordinator in Sri Lanka
Staff of the UN Country Team in Sri Lanka,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen

I am pleased to address you today on this historic occasion of the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations and the 65th Anniversary of the United Nations in Colombo.

The United Nations’ reaching its seventy-fifth year, demonstrates the durability of not only this organization, but also the concept of multilateralism, based on the core principles of sovereign equality of all States, respect for their territorial integrity and non-interference in their domestic affairs. The partnerships fostered between Member States and the UN continues are at their best when based on these principles.

As we are celebrating this milestone, the world is faced with the unprecedented challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic. This virus transcends national boundaries and no Member State can withstand the varied effects of the pandemic nor find solutions alone. The UN plays an important role in fostering multilateral action and mobilizing global solidarity towards addressing this scourge. Sri Lanka appreciates and supports the contributions by the UN and especially the WHO to the global response to address the multiple challenges of the pandemic.

While celebrating the 65th anniversary of Sri Lanka’s membership in the United Nations this year, Sri Lanka is pleased to have contributed significantly to the work of the United Nations, from its peacekeeping operations to its specialized agencies. Sri Lankan nationals have served with distinction in varied roles within the organization.

Historically, Sri Lanka has been closely associated with many of the important discourses in the UN. Sri Lanka served as a non-permanent member of the Security Council in 1960 and as the President of the General Assembly in 1976.

As one of the founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and as a key member of the Group of 77, Sri Lanka has continued to play a significant role in multilateral deliberations at the UN, particularly representing the interests of the global South. Some of the landmark contributions by Sri Lanka in the UN system include:

- Leading the negotiations on the Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which has provided the foundation for a rules-based order for the oceans for over 30 years;
- Initiating the UN General Assembly Resolution which unanimously declared Vesak, the most sacred day in the Buddhist calendar, as a United Nations Observance Day;
- Serving the organisation through high-level professionals, such as the Under-Secretary General for Disarmament Affairs the UN and Secretary General of the UNCTAD.

Sri Lanka has been contributing to the UN Peacekeeping efforts since the 1960s, serving in the Central African Republic, Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Haiti, Lebanon, Liberia, Mali, South Sudan, Timor and Western Sahara, demonstrating our commitment to global peace and security. Having acquired multiple skills after ending nearly three decades of separatist terrorism domestically, Sri Lanka's forces have brought much pride to the country, also being internationally recognized with UN. As we speak Sri Lankan peacekeepers are serving in some of the world's most high intensity conflict regions. As a country providing peace keeping forces, we look forward to enhancing our contribution towards a more secure and peaceful world.

The theme of this commemoration "Shaping our future together" is future focused and reiterates the importance of collective action for the future that we wish for. Youth has been recognized as the centre of the UN 75 dialogues as the role of youth and the way they perceive future is pivotal in this context. I recall that in 2014 Sri Lanka took the leadership to declare 15 July as the World Youth Skills day to celebrate the strategic importance to equip young people to face future with skills for employment, decent work and entrepreneurship. This date is annually commemorated at the United Nations Head Quarters co-hosted by Sri Lanka and Portugal together with UNESCO, ILO and the Office of the UN Secretary General's Youth Envoy.

Sri Lanka has endorsed and committed to the 2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development. The Government has introduced a people-centric national policy and poverty alleviation through an agri-based production economy is one of our major goals.

We appreciate the continued cooperation and assistance of the UN and the UN agencies in implementing the SDGs focusing on these national interests and priorities and the UN's role in the most important inter-generational challenge – protecting our environment and combating climate change and biodiversity loss.

As His Excellency the President Gotabaya Rajapaksa mentioned in his address to the High-Level Meeting of the UN General Assembly to commemorate the 75th Anniversary, Sri Lanka is hopeful that we of the United Nations would rededicate ourselves in efforts to strengthen this great institution to ensure the future we want.

Excellencies,

I also take this opportunity to extend our appreciation to the UN family at large and in particular the UN staff in Colombo for their commitment and dedicated work.

Thank you.