Address by H.E. Ravinatha P. Aryasingha, Ambassador of Sri Lanka to the United States of America on the occasion of the celebration of Sri Lanka’s 73rd Independence Day - Washington D.C., 4 February 2021

Ayubowan, Vanakkam, Assalamualaikum, Good Morning

Ven. Members of the Maha Sanga,
Reverend Hindu, Islam and Christian members of the clergy
Acting Assistant Secretary, Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, Dean Thompson and officials from the Department of State
Members of the Overseas Sri Lankan community
‘Friends of Sri Lanka’

Along with my colleagues in the Embassy, I respectfully welcome those present - particularly the Acting Assistant Secretary of State, as well as all of you living across the United States who have joined us virtually, as we celebrate Sri Lanka’s 73rd Independence Day.

Today we remember and pay tribute to all those who fought to regain our independence in 1948, after nearly 450 years under colonial rule. We also similarly pay tribute to all those who fought to protect that Independence - particularly those who laid down their lives since the early 1980s in fighting for nearly 30 years against terrorism that affected almost every citizen of the country and put the entire socio-economic and political fabric of Sri Lanka in grave danger. Owing to their sacrifice, we are fortunate to have been able to turn that page, and notwithstanding the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks by ISIS inspired terrorists, to be able to enjoy a degree of national security, that few nations can claim today.

Sri Lanka
Following the election of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa as the President of Sri Lanka in November 2019, and his party having received a resounding 2/3 majority in the parliamentary elections held in August 2020, guided by his ‘Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour’ and ‘Key Foreign Policy Directives’, Sri Lanka has sought to maintain friendly relations with all sovereign countries as an equal partner. Sri Lanka has pledged to do so, while upholding a policy of neutrality and non-alignment, refusing to be involved in superpower rivalry in our region. Sri Lanka will also support international cooperation and multilateralism, including cooperation with the United Nations for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.
Sri Lanka’s will seek to leverage its geo-strategic location in the Indian Ocean, as well as its natural and human resources, to establish Sri Lanka’s outreach as a maritime, aviation, technological, knowledge and financial hub in Asia. To this end, Sri Lanka supports multilateral efforts for the development of an equitable international rules-based order in the Indian Ocean region, which will ensure sovereign equality and common prosperity.

As we celebrate independence today, we do in a situation where Sri Lanka, like all nations big and small are battling the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID pandemic. As with the rest of the world Sri Lanka enters a period of hope, recovery and renewal. As we remember those who lost their lives and those who remain ill, I want to thank the US Government for the assistance extended to Sri Lanka to curtail the disease and its economic ramifications, which is deeply appreciated by the Government and the people of Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka-US Relations

Turning to our bilateral relationship, political, commercial, military and people-to-people contact between Sri Lanka and the United States has flourished for over two centuries, even though geographically Sri Lanka and the United States are situated far apart.

- Our relationship is based on democracy, the rule of law, the safeguarding of the political, economic and social rights of our people, and ensuring a liberal and equitable economic system. It is guided by the Sri Lanka-US Partnership Dialogue, of which we hope that the 4th session will take place soon.

- The United States has been an important development partner of Sri Lanka, and with a total share of exports of 26.3% in 2019, is the single largest destination for Sri Lankan exports during the last four decades. Our challenge is to diversity our products basket to the US, and I hope the next session of the U.S.-Sri Lanka Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) also due later this year, will pave the way in easing some of the bottlenecks and in further enhancement of our economic relations with the US, in a more tangible manner.

- The United States ranks the 10th largest investor in Sri Lanka, and the overall value of FDIs Sri Lanka received from the US from 2005 to 2019 stands close to US$ 500 million. Sri Lanka is hopeful that more US investors will seek out Sri Lanka as an investment destination, and benefit from the new government’s policies.

- The United States is gradually also becoming an important partner in Sri Lanka’s tourism sector. With tourist arrivals from the US growing on average by 20% each year over the past decade, it has become one of the fastest-growing tourist arrival countries and was ranked 8th in terms of tourist arrivals in 2019.

- Similar to the United States, Sri Lanka considers national security as the highest national interest and takes all measures to ensure the security and wellbeing of our people. We also remain committed to support efforts at regional peace and security. In this context, we appreciate the expanding defence cooperation with the United States, especially to strengthen maritime security cooperation and to ensure the protection of sea-lanes in the Indian Ocean from all types of traditional and non-traditional threats.
- Across the globe, we also cooperate multilaterally, on a number of issues ranging from disarmament and climate change to youth empowerment and refugees. We remain committed to bilateral and plurilateral consultative arrangements for combating terrorism and violent extremism in all its forms and manifestations, as well as measures to interdict other forms of transnational organized crime, including narcotics and human trafficking. We believe that intelligence sharing on such issues must be explored assiduously for our common benefit, and we remain firm in our resolve to work with the United States in this regard.

As you would see, the Sri Lanka-US relationship today is multifaceted. The recent visit to Sri Lanka by the then Secretary of State Michael Pompeo on October 28, 2020 and discussions held, at which Acting Assistant Secretary Thompson from the US side and I on the Sri Lanka side were participants, is testimony to the importance placed by the US Government on Sri Lanka and the robust partnership that exists between our two countries. This visit provided a platform to discuss a number of areas of bilateral and regional importance to both countries at the highest level. It also gave an opportunity to brief the Secretary of State of the initiatives undertaken by the new Government to address the Sri Lanka's economic and national security challenges, to strengthen reconciliation, and to promote and protect human rights through domestic mechanisms – the details of, including that of the Commission of Inquiry (COI) pertaining to human rights, has subsequently been placed before the country and the world.

As President Gotabaya Rajapaksa was to observe in his congratulatory message to President Joe Biden on 21 January 2021, "Sri Lanka, under my leadership, based on the mandate received from my people, is committed to further strengthen and consolidate this multifaceted partnership with the United States, grounded in mutual respect, shared values and common interests".

**Overseas Sri Lankan Community**

As we move in this direction, people-to-people contact will be of prime importance, with the United States now becoming home to over 350,000 persons of Sri Lankan origin. These folks, whom I like to refer to as Overseas Sri Lankans (OSL) - Sri Lankan Americans, as well as those temporarily studying, working or residing in this country - spread across the US, belonging to all ethnicities, religions, and professional groups, contribute to the US economy in various fields including science and technology, space applications, communication, bio technology, medical and research.

Sri Lanka also deeply appreciates the important role played by OSLs over the years, in protecting Sri Lanka's image, keeping Sri Lankan socio-cultural practices alive far away from home, and in contributing to charitable causes in Sri Lanka – mainly benefitting rural children and women in the field of education and livelihood. I particularly appreciate their support in raising funds to help Sri Lankans affected by the COVID 19 pandemic in more recent times.

Conscious that an important responsibility of the Embassy is to serve the OSL community that lives across the USA, we are constantly seeking to upgrading our consular service, to be of greater benefit to the Community - both directly, and in collaboration with the Sri Lanka Consulate in Los Angeles, the Sri Lanka Permanent Mission to the UN in New York, and the Honorary Consuls spread through the country.
In keeping with Sri Lanka's multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-cultural tradition, the Embassy recently revived the tradition of celebrating the important religious events of the 4 major religions practiced in Sri Lanka. We celebrated Christmas in December, Thai Pongal in January, and will similarly celebrate Vesak in May, and Ramadan shortly after.

Last week, on 31 January, the Embassy took an ambitious step in launching the 'Pan US Overseas Sri Lankans (OSL) Network', aimed at supporting OSL activities and to leverage their support towards realizing the interests of Sri Lanka in the US. Core areas of focus of this Network will be – advocacy of Sri Lanka, economic advancement and socio-cultural engagement. I was encouraged to see the participation of OSLs from 27 States across the US and their commitment towards this new initiative. The Embassy is in the process of expanding this ‘network’ to cover all States in the US. We will also be developing ‘nodal clusters’ across each State, in order to bring together OSLs to work collectively on the areas of focus identified. This network will also have overarching ‘interest clusters’ - including to engage with OSL entrepreneurs, youth, and academics, as well as to reach out to non-Sri Lankan ‘Friends of Sri Lanka’ throughout the USA.

I am hopeful that this network will be a powerful vehicle in serving the interests of the OSL in the US, keeping them connected with their motherland, and in ensuring that they become a ‘catalyst’ in taking the US-Sri Lanka relationship to greater heights. I urge the State Department to support us, as we seek to engage the totality of the US based OSLs, so that they become a strength to both their host country, as well as to their home country.

In conclusion, as we celebrate our hard won independence today, as President Gotabaya Rajapaksa remarked this morning at the Independence Day ceremony in Colombo, in the face of efforts by some to vilify Sri Lanka and its leadership that upholds an indigenous way of life and the country's sovereignty, I ask that all pay heed to the facts without being misled, recognize the difficult tasks the government of Sri Lanka has embarked upon in a short time notwithstanding grappling with a global pandemic that has crippled most of the world, and to work towards unity and development, so that our country will prosper and Sri Lanka - US friendship will grow.

I thank you.