

Good evening.

Principal Deputy Asst. Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, Ambassador Alice Wells,
Chief of Protocol, Ambassador Sean Lawler,
Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence for Policy, Dr Joseph Felter,
Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of South and Central Asian Affairs, David Ranz
Executive Director of the World Bank for South Asia, Aparna Subramani
Your Excellencies and Heads of Mission
Honorary Consul of Sri Lanka in Pennsylvania, David Bruce Sherman
Distinguished Guests, Dear Ladies and Gentlemen, and Friends

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you all this evening to join me, my wife and staff to celebrate the 71st Anniversary of our Independence. We are indeed honoured by the presence of Ambassador Alice Wells, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs and a large gathering of distinguished guests on this occasion which is a manifestation of the close friendship between Sri Lanka and the United States. Incidentally, 2019 also marks the 71st Anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between our two countries.

Today, fellow Sri Lankans, both, at home and abroad, are united in celebrating their 71st Anniversary of Independence with a sense of pride, optimism and renewed hope as we mark yet another important milestone in our country's destiny. Lasting peace and stability restored in post - war Sri Lanka has ushered in a new era for all Sri Lankans in which far reaching progress has been made towards promoting ethnic reconciliation and harmony, political and constitutional reforms, fundamental freedoms and democratic rights of all sections of the society.

Excellencies, Dear Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Over the last decade, Sri Lanka has embarked on what has the potential to become a hub for trade, finance, maritime, shipping and transport. Given its geo - strategic location along the busiest international sea lanes in the Indian Ocean and its close proximity to the Indian subcontinent, Sri Lanka serves as the gateway to South Asia which is home to one - fifth of the world's population. This seems to resonates well and complementary to the United States Indo Pacific partnership for greater harmonization of resources in promoting peace and security, open trade and maritime cooperation for the common benefit.

On the bilateral front, relations between Sri Lanka and the United States established in 1948, have been on an upward trajectory based on shared commitment, common values and mutual respect. Suffice it to say, US- Sri Lanka Partnership Dialogue, cooperation in defence, security and maritime domains, assistance offered under USAID, Foreign Military Financing, US Peace Corps and House Democracy Partnership programmes form key components of our bilateral partnership and cooperation with the United States. Moreover, supporting institutions and rural communities, training opportunities and capacity building, disaster mitigation and relief, mine clearance are some of the priority sectors that continue to receive US assistance that have been of significant benefit to Sri Lanka over the years. Such notable assistance include, donation of the US Coast Guard Cutter, The recent Foreign Military Financing grant of 39.5 million dollars and the Millennium Challenge Corporation Compact Programme 5 year grant which is in the pipeline. Sri Lanka also has benefitted substantially from its exports to the United States which is Sri Lanka's largest export market accounting for over a quarter of exports which continue to grow exponentially over the years. We are ever grateful to all our friends in the international community including the United States for supporting Sri Lanka towards the realization of our national goals and aspirations.

Excellencies, guests, dear ladies and gentlemen,

Sri Lanka – US multifaceted relations have reached a milestone and can be further harnessed to its true potential in the years to come. For instance, the number of Sri Lankan students coming to the United States for further studies is clearly on the rise. There is a steady flow of Sri Lankans embracing United States as a land of opportunities. On the other hand, the number of American visitors to Sri Lanka has surpassed the 75000 mark in 2018 which continues to grow in all probability. The largest ever trade delegation from the United States in 3 decades is scheduled to visit South Asia including Sri Lanka in May 2019. This ever growing people to people contact bears testimony to the close friendship enjoyed by the two countries and their peoples, which goes without saying that the U.S is a friend indeed.

While, we continue to engage our interlocutors and friends here in Washington DC, our Honorary Consuls serving elsewhere, do a fantastic job as Sri Lanka's Honorary ambassadors to promote relations between our two countries in all spheres of interest.

Your Excellencies, dear guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Our Chief Guest, Ambassador Alice Wells is an accomplished and versatile diplomat with a proven track record. Ambassador Wells has had two diplomatic assignments in South Asia and has been a regular visitor to the region including Sri Lanka. So she is no stranger to Sri Lanka and its terrain and dynamics. But for those less familiar with Sri Lanka - we are an island nation with a recorded history of over 2500 years. It prides itself as being the oldest democracy in Asia having introduced universal adult franchise for both men and women in 1931. In 1960 late Sirimavo Bandaranaike made history as the first woman Prime Minister in the world after being elected the first female head of government in Sri Lanka. On the spiritual front, Sri Lanka is proud to call itself the home to the world renowned sacred mountain "Adams Peak" which is venerated by people of all major faiths from all over the world. Sri Lanka is also home to the 2600 years old-oldest Bodhi Tree in the world, which is a sapling of the sacred Bodhi Tree, under which the Lord Buddha attained Enlightenment in India 2600 years ago.

Coincidentally, Sri Lanka has been chosen by the Lonely Planet Travel magazine last October as the top tourist destination for 2019 and just last month, the capital Colombo has been picked up as the most photogenic city in the world. All this seems to indicate that the destination Sri Lanka has so much to offer to our friends from around the world. Hope our valued guests here in the audience would plan out your next holiday in my country and enjoy its beauty, warmth and hospitality.

Excellencies, dear guests, ladies and gentlemen and friends,

Please join me in

1. in thanking leaders, officials and people of the United States who have worked tirelessly to strengthen the relationship between our two countries, Sri Lanka and the United States and elevating our partnership to unprecedented heights and
2. in wishing the leaders and people of the two countries, the strength, wisdom, and commitment to work towards progress and prosperity of our two nations.

May Long Live that Sri Lanka – United States friendship.

Before winding up, let me once again extend my most sincere appreciation to Ambassador Alice Wells, Excellencies and all the distinguished guests for your gracious presence this evening and sharing your friendship and joy with us on our 71st Anniversary of Independence.

Please join us now for a Sri Lankan buffet. Enjoy and Good Evening !