

**Statement by the Minister of Foreign Affairs & Head of Delegation of Sri Lanka
Hon. Ali Sabry, at the General Debate of the 77th Session of the United Nations
General Assembly on 24 September, 2022 – New York.**

Mr. President,
Mr. Secretary-General, Excellencies,
Ladies & Gentlemen,

I am honoured to represent Sri Lanka at the 77th session of the UNGA; a session which, after two years, brings together world leaders post pandemic to an Assembly in person.

Permit me the honour of congratulating His Excellency Csaba Kőrösi on being elected President of the current session. Mr. President, Sri Lanka looks forward to working closely with you and your team in the year ahead.

May I also convey our appreciation to His Excellency Abdulla Shahid of the Maldives for his excellent stewardship of the 76th Session. As a close friend and neighbour of the Maldives, we express particular appreciation for his Presidency of Hope that gave us renewed optimism and vigour. Building on this, we move to the vision of our new President of the General Assembly (PGA) of finding solutions through solidarity, sustainability and science.

Mr. President,

Seventy seven years ago, when the battlefield of the Second World War was silent but its horrors revaperated around the globe, a new world order emerged out of the remains of the older one. And that new world order was manifested by the Charter of the United Nations, developed by 50 nations at the San Francisco Conference. The United Nations is a table where every State can sit down, a forum where everyone can be heard and where everyone is equally important. This is the concept of multilateralism, and this is a fundamental political principle of diplomacy. It is said that multilateral diplomacy is similar to gardening; you plant, you wait, you sow the seeds, you wait, you trim and harvest at some point. In multilateralism, we talk to each other, we develop a relationship of trust and confidence and if something was to come up, you have the base to work from.

Excellencies,

The world is facing a multiplicity of complex interlocking challenges. The far- reaching effects of the pandemic have been further exacerbated by the current global crises. These vulnerabilities have been aggravated by the devastating consequences of what the Secretary-General has referred to as the “five-alarm global fire” which has resulted inter-alia in “the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and rising pollution”. We are in addition witnessing extreme weather patterns resulting in loss of life, property and habitat, involuntary human displacement, and an accompanying food and energy crisis.

It is not difficult to imagine that these trends lead to deepening inequalities, both within and between States. Developing countries and their economies are at extreme risk with Governments facing debt-default and financial collapse due to lack of access to adequate capital, while people face rising poverty, unemployment and hunger. As a consequence, nutrition levels especially among children are being affected and their education and intellectual advancement disrupted. Despite our best efforts, our collective ability to realize the Sustainable Development Goals or even to sustain the

gains already achieved is becoming increasingly difficult.

Mr. President,

It is against this challenging global backdrop, that significant changes have taken place in Sri Lanka since the last UNGA. The external and internal challenges we face provide an opportunity for implementing political, social and economic reforms that will lead to recovery and prosperity for our people. Sri Lanka believes that this is the moment to realise our collective vision for the future; an opportunity to build a more just, sustainable and prosperous future for all Sri Lankans, ‘to build back better’. We look forward to the cooperation and support of the international community including the United Nations, as we embark on this journey.

Following prolonged social unrest and protests in the country, President Ranil Wickremesinghe, in his maiden speech in Parliament last month stated, I quote, “I will implement social and political reforms requested by the nation”, unquote. These measures include a review of the present procedures, the strengthening of the institutional framework of democratic governance and adoption of urgent measures to restore long term economic stability. We have understood that this will only be possible if we engage in a strict adherence to fiscal discipline and far reaching economic & institutional reforms.

Mr. President, we are committed to that process.

It is envisaged that through the proposed legislative and constitutional amendments, democratic governance will be reinforced with independent oversight institutions as well as with enhanced public scrutiny. Legal and administrative frameworks are being strengthened to ensure transparency, integrity, accountability and inclusivity in providing access to justice. A greater participation of women and youth will be ensured in this process.

Mr. President,

We remain cognizant of and acutely sensitive to the events that have taken place in the recent past. The Government is extremely sensitive to the socio- economic hardships faced by our people. We are pleased to have reached a staff level understanding with the IMF. We have put in place measures to protect the vulnerable segments of society and will endeavor to ensure that these economic reforms will have a minimum impact on their lives. Our institutions and society have demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of very difficult circumstances.

We unconditionally recognize the fact that one has a fundamental right to the freedom of expression, which we all treat as being sacrosanct. However, it must also be appreciated that, this freedom must be within the constitutional order, and must be exercised having regard to one’s fundamental duty to express oneself within the confines of the law.

Mr. President,

I am pleased to inform this August assembly that Sri Lanka’s nationwide strategy in containing the human health impact of COVID-19 has been largely successful as a result of proactive and non-discriminatory measures by the government, and the effective delivery capabilities of our strong health care infrastructure. Our vaccination drive exceeded WHO targets. However, as a developing country we were highly vulnerable to the economic fallout of the pandemic. The virus has opened a window to the future which we must exploit, highlighting the importance of multilateral cooperation

through global health networks.

Mr. President,

Permit me to briefly turn to the aspect of climate change. As a climate vulnerable country, climate change has had the potential to adversely impact Sri Lanka's socio-economic progress as well as food security and livelihoods. Sri Lanka has pledged to meet the targets of the Paris Agreement and our updated Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) submitted to the UNFCCC last year with the aim of reducing emissions to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. We firmly believe that these commitments should not adversely impact the green economic development objectives. We also appreciate that meeting the NDC targets and executing the corresponding energy transition towards renewable and sustainable energy and energy efficiency measures will require significant climate financing.

Mr. President,

You will appreciate that we cannot do this alone. We believe that in tandem with our own efforts, the world's largest emitters of greenhouse gases must fulfill their commitments and assist developing nations in adaptation and mitigation measures under a common but differentiated framework. We need to work towards a just, sustainable, resilient and inclusive recovery from the adverse impacts of climate change, and the energy transition.

Turning to the ocean, Mr. President, you will appreciate that as an island nation, we are acutely concerned about and sensitive to the impact of pollution and climate change on oceans. With rapid pressure on land resources, the world is turning towards the oceans for sustenance – not only for food security but also as a source of raw materials for industries and energy. We are committed to the sustainable use of the oceans and its resources in consonance with SDG 14. At the UNGA, in May this year, we were pleased to have led a small but significant Nature-based Solution to mitigate the impact of climate change, that led to the UN declaring 1st March as World Seagrass Day. Seagrasses are an important carbon sink and absorb significantly more carbon than tropical rain forests.

Mr. President,

There is a likelihood that the world will not reach the scheduled milestones to achieve 'Zero Hunger' by 2030. It is predicted that food and nutrition security will be at great risk. Sri Lanka is paying serious heed to these warning signs. Sri Lanka supports sustainable transformation of agriculture to a modernized sector and encourages enhanced food production to ensure food security. Sri Lanka has initiated the national food security programme with the dual objectives of ensuring that no citizen should suffer for the want of food and no child should be a victim of malnutrition.

Adequate nutrition is a sine qua non and vital to ensure that children of all socio-economic backgrounds can enjoy good health. The provision of quality education and health care for all, is at the core of Sri Lanka's social protection policies and provided the foundation upon which Sri Lanka was able to mitigate the effects of the 'global learning crisis' during the COVID-19 pandemic. Rapid conversions to digital systems of delivery of education threatened universal access, participation and survival in the education system especially in children of low-income households. Sri Lanka aims to bridge the digital divide, and ensure that no child will be left behind.

Mr. President,

Despite severe challenges, we will endeavor to maintain the significant progress we have made towards achieving the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development. Our efforts have placed us in a leading position in the Asia- Pacific region for SDG data availability, thus enhancing Sri Lanka's capacity for evidence informed policy making for SDGs in future. We recognize that investment in human capital is an indispensable essential for the future of our country. It is no surprise, Mr. President that Sri Lanka is ranked in the high Human Development category, occupying rank 73 out of 191 countries globally, and is the highest in the region.

Having said that, we are nonetheless concerned that current challenges have disrupted progress. The UN Secretary-General has in a serious warning made reference to "rescuing the Sustainable Development Goals". This warning is followed by an observation by the UNDP, that for the first time in 32 years, the Human Development Index has declined globally for two years consecutively.

Mr. President,

Let me say a word about global security. Geopolitical tensions among nations have heightened creating insecurity and polarization among States. Agreed frameworks for arms control, nonproliferation and disarmament have become fragile. At the 10th Review Conference of the NPT concluded recently, which remains the centerpiece of the global nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime, we were regrettably unable to arrive once again at a consensus outcome.

While we address contemporary challenges, we must not forget the lingering issue of Palestine. While restating Sri Lanka's consistent and principled position that the Palestinian people have a legitimate and inalienable right to the natural resources in their territory and to statehood, we further recognize the legitimate security concerns of both the Palestinian and Israeli people and an urgent resolution of the matter on the basis of the UN Resolution on the attainment of the two-state solution.

Mr. President,

The absence of a regulatory supervisory regime concerning the use of new technologies in cyberspace and in Artificial Intelligence needs to be addressed urgently. Their ability to cause large-scale disruption, disinformation and undermine scientifically established findings is of real concern; a danger we all face. Sri Lanka, which is implementing the nation's first Information and Cyber Security Strategy, has identified the importance of establishing a partnership-based approach to protect cyber space in order to confront multinational cyber threats.

Mr. President,

I must make a brief reference to the scourge of terrorism. Sri Lanka was a victim of terrorism for several decades. Terrorists' choice of targets, methods of financing and radicalization as well as the use of new technologies as weapons has been constantly evolving. Legislative measures and law enforcement mechanisms must be put in place to counter radical ideologies leading to violent extremism and to curb the terrorists' use and abuse of the internet and social media platforms. At the same time it is necessary to develop the critical thinking capacity of youth, strengthen community bonds, foster a sense of civic responsibility, and build community resilience to mitigate the effects and influences of violent extremist ideology leading to terrorism.

Mr. President,

As our contribution to maintaining international peace and security, Sri Lanka looks forward to

enhancing our participation in UN Peacekeeping Operations with professional men and women to serve as UN Peacekeepers. I take this opportunity to honour the thousands of men and women who, for decades, have helped countries navigate the difficult path from conflict to peace under the Blue Helmet. We have taken many measures to ensure that Sri Lankan Peacekeepers with a wealth of experience in counter-terrorism and counter insurgency operations, are trained and equipped with theoretical and practical knowledge of all necessary functions of peacekeeping, including the promotion and protection of human rights.

Mr. President,

It is indeed a watershed moment for the international community: a moment of great challenge and opportunity. The complex and interconnected crises that we face cannot be resolved by nations acting on their own. It is an opportunity to demonstrate global solidarity, diplomacy and collective efforts, leveraging the ideas and talents of all of our people and all segments of our society to find transformative solutions which leave no one behind. Multilateralism, Mr. President, is a tool for diplomacy that rises above such challenges. Conflicts, disasters and crises will not stop at passport control. Multilateralism is not without its shortcomings, and undoubtedly it provides a solid framework for resolving contemporary challenges.

Mr. President,

This, I would say, is the mission of this August assembly, and perhaps the singular reason for which it was established 77 years ago. And that perhaps is the reason, why Sri Lanka and many others applied to be members, to participate, to be visible, to be heard, to embellish this organization with our own flavors, perspectives, history, and knowledge to this fine amalgam and grow from the common work discussions and disputes that we join issue with.

I might wind up by citing the observations of one of our late Prime Ministers, who committed Sri Lanka to the way of a socialist democracy, to non- alignment and to an independent foreign policy, based on friendship with all countries, irrespective of differing ideological and social systems, when he said ‘we have to build up a new society for ourselves; one as I have said, which best suits the genius of our country. We should like to get some ideas and principles from this side, and some from the other, until a coherent form of society is made up that suits our people, in the context of a changing world today. That is why we do not range ourselves on the side of this power bloc or that.’

Mr. President,

Permit me to make the observation that, the 193 nations represented here jointly share the responsibility to establish justice, to maintain peace and ensure progress in a world that is in trouble as never before. We have a Charter and a formidable body of international law inclusive of our supreme law of the Constitution of the Republic and other local statutes. We are acutely conscious of the fact that notwithstanding all these sophistications, multipronged challenges remain. The Government of Sri Lanka is committed to overcoming these challenges.

It is to that commitment that Sri Lanka pledges today, in the sincere hope that we will exploit the crisis that is at hand, build back better, leaving no one behind and rise to new horizons of freedom and progress.

I thank you.