

SRI LANKA LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

Address by
Hon R PREMADASA
Prime Minister of
SRI LANKA
to the
World Affairs Council of
Los Angeles (WACLA)
on 4th April 1983



HON. R. PREMADASA

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Mr. President
Excellencies
Ladies & Gentlemen

Let me at the outset express my thanks to the Management of the World Affairs Council of Los Angeles for providing me with this opportunity to say a few words about my country, SRI LANKA. I wish to thank all you distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen who are present here today at this luncheon. It is a pleasure and privilege to meet you and to have this dialogue with you.

Sri Lanka is not a strange place for most of you. As you know earlier, 10 years ago, our country was known as Ceylon. I find that many of you are well acquainted with our part of the world. Some of you may have even visited our country. Through your contacts with Sri Lankan nationals resident in your great city, you may have acquired some knowledge of our country and the place it occupies in the world community. I shall try in my brief remarks to paint in a few bold strokes, if I may, a picture of Sri Lanka which may give you some insights into a country, which is in some ways different from your's and in other ways, bears strong similarities to the United States.

Sri Lanka is an ancient land. We have a recorded history which goes back over 2,500 years. The ruins of an ancient civilization are visible in many parts of our island. After a long period of freedom in which the arts and culture flourished, we were, in the sixteenth century overtaken by the tide of European expansion. We were conquered by the Portuguese, the same intrepid sailors who discovered the New World, and ruled by them for almost one hundred and fifty years. The Dutch followed and thereafter the British. So that for four hundred and fifty years until 1948, we were part of a colonial empire.

We emerged into freedom again in 1948 and since then have been striving both to improve the lot of our peoples internally, and to live in peace and friendship in the world community at large.

Four and a half centuries under foreign rule, have left a deep imprint on our economy and society. We have a modern commercial sector superimposed on our traditional rice economy. Sri Lanka became an important producer of Tea which we export to the United States in great quantity, Rubber, which is an important strategic import and Coconut products. We developed a plantation style economy which is still dynamic growing and has formed the basis for many of our new industrial ventures.

We have moved from the export of primary products to their processing and for any prospective investors here, the agro-based industrial field is something which should prove attractive. Socially too, the impact of western rule for such a long period of time was considerable. English is spoken widely throughout the country. This greatly assists tourists to our land who can feel at home and move with ease in any part of the country. Most of all, exposure to the West for so many years, has made our people sensitive to the needs and tastes of the West. That is why our people can so easily adapt to live in the West and why they assimilate styles of speech and living so easily. The Sri Lankan is an easy person to get on with and I think those of you who know Sri Lankans living in the States will agree with this remark.

There is also another similarity between us which I should mention on an occasion such as this. You too as a people were under foreign rule 200 years ago. You fought for your freedom and you won it. And now you preserve it through a form of Government which has stood the rest of time. We too had a similar history. We are a Parliamentary democracy, holding elections periodically and governing with the consent of the people. We take special pride in the fact that in a world where increasing authoritarian and military rule seem to be the order of the day, the flame of democracy still burns brightly in Sri Lanka. We also believe in individual freedom. We believe in the

enterprise of free men and our economic policies are fashioned on this premise that the State should provide the opportunity and the framework within which a man can earn his due reward through his own toil and labour. This I believe, is the American ethic too. We have found, as you have found, that it works. We believe that one of the purposes of the State should be to preserve and safeguard the freedom and dignity of every person who lives in it.

All the major religions of the world, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam are practised freely by our 15 million people. One of the basic objectives of our policies is the creation of a society which is Just and Free. We try in all our endeavours to keep that ideal firmly in mind.

Let me now turn to some of the reasons which impelled me to make this present visit to your part of the country. I shall touch on broadly two topics. One, our present programme of Reawakening our Villages, and the other, our invitation to you, especially those who are of a business turn of mind, to come visit us and work with us in the development of our country.

Sri Lanka is a country essentially of villages—of rural people. We have 20,000 of such village units and 80 percent of our people live in them. I know that the rural—urban proportion in the United States is quite different. But I also know that the values and life styles of the village are very close to the heart of the average American. Especially, you in California, are well known for your frontier spirit. We are seeking through the Village Reawakening Movement to remove some of the inequalities and iniquities which exist between town and village.

One of the concomitants of development is that by history, much of the wealth of the country has moved to the towns. Town dwellers have access to many of the good things of life. We are trying to develop our villages so that people who live there too can live in decent houses, have nutritious food, drink good, clear water, educate their children,

have access to health facilities and so on. At the same time, we want to do so, while maintaining and continuing those valuable village traditions of cooperation, self-help, mutual support and good neighbourliness which are such a distinct part of village communal life.

This is no easy task, as you would readily admit. But it is something that we have consciously been following as a basic policy in the last few years. We have a local term for this idea. It is GRAMODAYA—a word which comes from Sanskrit, one of the ancient languages of the Indian Sub-Continent. It means literally, the reawakening of the village—the dawn of a new life for all. It is important that the concept relates to the good life for All, not for a few, not only for the majority, but for all. I think that is one of the essential aspects of our movement.

The Gramodaya Movement rests on self-help and one of the pre-conditions of Government support to it is that there must be an effort by the community themselves to help themselves. We have set up almost 4,500 Gramodaya units throughout the country. We have, like you, a great number of voluntary organizations in our country. We believe that the voluntary association of People in either specific or general interest groupings is an essential feature of a democratic society. The right to meet together, to cooperate in achieving common goals, the right to express a point of view clearly and frankly, are all treasured rights guaranteed by our Constitution. Through the Gramodaya Movement, we have sought to give a new strength and infuse life into the large number of voluntary organizations active at the village level. In fact, we have identified as much as 35 voluntary organizations which are alive and well in village society. They range from credit societies, youth clubs, youth farmers' clubs to religious groupings. The Chairmen of each of these organizations join together to form the Gramodaya Mandalaya or Village Council. This was the traditional pattern of organization in our villages. We are hoping that the resurrecting this institution, so meaningful to our village dweller, we will be releasing new energies and a new dynamism throughout rural Sri Lanka.

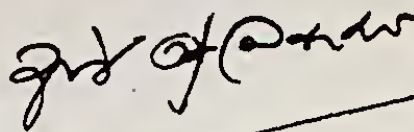
Many of the Sri Lankans in this audience will be aware of this new Movement we have started. I personally wrote to every Sri Lankan living outside our country, informing him or her of what we were doing and inviting their support. I must tell you that the response we have had, has been extraordinary. From all parts of the globe where Sri Lankans live, either as permanent residents or as temporary migrants, we have had a wonderful response. All levels, be it the professional doctor from America, the skilled worker temporarily sojourning in the Middle East, the permanent emigrant to Australia, all of these Sri Lankans have responded with a generosity which has surpassed all expectations. I believe they have been moved by the idea and they have been touched by the fact that an opportunity has been given to them to give back to their native land, and specifically to their own village, a little part of what their village and their country gave them.

Let me end with a few words which will be of particular interest to you as leaders in the world of business here. Our Government which just received a mandate from our people for a further six year term of office has adopted a package of economic policies which makes our economy liberal, outward looking and growth oriented. In fact, we have an "open economy" providing an opportunity for innovation and enterprise and stimulating investment. Our growth rate in the past three years has been 6.8 percent in real terms. Several major foreign banks have opened branches in Sri Lanka. The inflow of private foreign investment within our Free Trade Zone, as well as outside, has increased in a dramatic manner. With the stable Government we have, a climate of confidence has been created ideally suited to investment by both local and foreign investors. We offer many advantages on account of Sri Lanka's, close proximity to the growing markets in the Middle East, Near East and Africa. We have available a large pool of highly skilled workers. Our labour costs are relatively cheap. There are many raw materials suitable for industrial processing. I have brought with me some literature which you are welcome to have which will indicate the various concessions and attractions which Sri Lanka offers.

I therefore wish to offer a warm welcome to any of you who wish to invest in Sri Lanka. You can be assured of a safe haven on your capital and a very reasonable return on your investment.

I thank you once again for the opportunity you have provided me of speaking to you and wish you every success in your endeavours.

I thank you,



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'M. A. M. M.', is written above a horizontal line that extends to the right.



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