
Sri Lankans are ready to move forward – President at Doha Summit

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Today, the people of Sri Lanka are ready to move forward and sustain peace and achieve economic prosperity, which will be possible, only if we stand together as one country, President Mahinda Rajapaksa said. Addressing the 12th Doha Forum and Enriching the Middle East's Economic Future Conference at the Doha Sheraton Hotel on Sunday morning as an international Guest of Honor, the President said the Government is committed to go that extra mile to achieve permanent peace through reconciliation and economic empowerment of the people, and I am glad to say that we have already embarked on that national endeavour. President Rajapaksa said the government is also committed to empower the rural economy and agriculture in the island as well as the IT sector. The three-day international Forum will offer a sweeping overview of issues regarding Democracy, Development and Free Trade in the Middle-East, the Arab countries and the world. The meeting will broadly discuss critical political, economic, social, financial, strategic and human matters of pressing concern for the region. Over 610 participants representing 84 countries and organizations are attending the Forum. It will conclude on May 22. President Rajapaksa is attending the Forum as an International Guest of Honor at the invitation of the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al Thani. Following his address, the President paid a courtesy call on the Emir, who visited Sri Lanka with a business delegation in January this year, and discussed bilateral relations between Sri Lanka and Qatar. External Affairs Minister Prof. G.L. Peiris and Secretary to the President Lalith Weeratunga were also present at the discussion. Full text of the speech President at Doha Summit:

His Highness Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al Thani, the Emir of Qatar

His Excellency, Hamad bin Jassim bin Jaber Al Thani, Prime Minister

and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen. I sincerely would like to thank His Highness the Emir of Qatar and the Government of the State of Qatar for the invitation extended to me to address the 12th Doha Forum and Enriching the Middle East Economic Future Conference. I particularly welcome the opportunity to address this august body at a time my country, Sri Lanka, the oldest Democracy in Asia, which gained Universal Franchise in 1931, is emerging into a new era of peace and prosperity. After being under the menace of terrorism for thirty years, Sri Lanka is looking once again to re-positioning itself as an important economic and commercial hub in the region. This forum is of special importance in the context of the current global financial crisis; the emphasis on education, training and development. It also looks at the importance of foreign investment and international aid in achieving national development. Sri Lanka is no stranger to the Arab and Muslim world. Well known among ancient maritime traders from Arabia as Serendib, Sri Lanka's relations with this part of the world dates back many millennia. Arab travellers who visited Sri Lanka wrote of it in their works. Al Masudi, the famous Arab geographer, visited Sri Lanka in 970 AD. Ibn-Batuta visited Sri Lanka in 1344 and gave a detailed description of Jabal Adam or Adam's Peak. All Sri Lankans irrespective of being a Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim, Malay or Burgher, suffered immensely from terrorism for over thirty years. However, I am proud to say that their resilience has enabled the country to maintain a healthy growth rate of around 5% even during the conflict years, while today, it is at an impressive 8%. Sri Lanka has managed to survive the economic crisis observed in many parts of the world, and the post-conflict growth rate in the Northern Province, has been a remarkable 22%. Today, the people of Sri Lanka are ready to move forward and sustain peace and achieve economic prosperity, which will be possible, only if we stand together as one country. The Government is committed to go that extra mile to achieve permanent peace through reconciliation and economic empowerment of the people, and I am glad to say that we have already embarked on that national endeavour. When many countries are facing an economic slowdown, we have been able to drive our economy through a policy of rural economic and agricultural empowerment. Sri Lanka is poised to fast becoming self sufficient in food, and we are determined to move towards becoming an economic hub of export driven trade and commerce in the region. The production centres in the rural and urban areas are being linked through major expressways, good highways and new rail tracks. Some of these links have already been opened while others are under speedy construction. The Colombo International Airport will soon be further expanded to meet a bigger demand and a second international airport in the Southern heartland of Sri Lanka which will be commissioned later this year, will also contribute to the building of the new aviation hub in the region. Similarly, in addition to the Port of Colombo, South Asia's premier trans-shipment port that is already being expanded, a Free Port at Hambantota in the South of Sri Lanka, will provide added facilities to the vastly increased ocean trade demand in the region, establishing a maritime hub as well. It is also noteworthy that our emphasis on education has brought Sri Lanka to rank among the highest in literacy and the widest spread of education in the South Asian Region. Aware of the needs of new technology we also have moved very fast in the progress of Information Technology, which will soon make us a Knowledge Hub in the Asian Region. Significantly, our infrastructure development projects also extend to the energy sector with new power stations commissioned and being constructed, to meet the new demand for power and energy by industry and commerce and other domestic needs. In all our economic prospects, the Middle East assumes a particularly prominent place. It is home to over 1.7 million Sri Lankan migrant workers, both skilled and unskilled, whose remittances rank among the highest foreign exchange incomes for the country. A major percentage of our energy requirement is supplied by the Gulf countries. While we endeavor to achieve economic prosperity, Sri Lanka is keenly conscious of the need for due consideration, to be given to the environment. Twenty years after the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, we are more than ever reminded of the need for

joint action in preserving our planet for the future generations. This cannot be done by one section of the world community alone. The developed countries that have contributed most to damage the environment, cannot pass the burden of saving the environment , to countries which are seeking sustainable economic development. In conclusion, I wish to add that while maintaining Sri Lanka's traditional commercial links with this part of the world, we are committed to building upon these ties for further enhancement of our economic cooperation. I wish a successful conclusion of the discussions at this Forum and take this opportunity to express our hope for the consolidation of our historical links with the Arab world. Thank you.Source: PRIU