



Address at the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs

*Sri Lanka – Egypt Relations
and
Strengthening Sri Lanka’s Relations with the African
Continent*

by

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Sri Lanka – Egypt Relations and Strengthening Sri Lanka’s Relations with the African Continent

Ambassador Mounir Zahran, Chairman of the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs
Ambassador of Sri Lanka to Egypt Damayanthie Rajapaksa,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is indeed an honour to speak to you at the prestigious Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs. I must thank the Ambassador of Egypt in Sri Lanka Hussein El Saharty for encouraging me to visit the Council and address you.

As you know, I am in Cairo to inaugurate the First Bilateral Political Consultations between Egypt and Sri Lanka, and as important as our diplomatic engagements are, so is scholarly exchange. This has always been a key underlying principle of our interaction since ancient times and has enriched both our countries and mutual understanding.

There are two reasons at this juncture, that make my remarks particularly timely from a Sri Lankan perspective, which I trust will resonate with my largely Egyptian, but also other African and Arab brothers and sisters.

First, I am here today less than a month since the election of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa on 16 November. President Rajapaksa has pledged to nurture an independent, neutral foreign policy, centred on Sri Lanka’s national priorities in relation to the development and security of our country and its people, while not compromising our core values and aspirations. In his inaugural address to the nation on 18 November, President Rajapaksa proclaimed:

“We want to remain neutral in our foreign relations and stay out of any conflicts amongst the world’s powers. In maintaining relations with us, we request all countries to respect our sovereignty and territorial integrity”.

Sri Lanka and Egypt both have been colonized by European powers. In our case we were colonized by three: the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British. In this historical context, and the tussles being played out in the international arena to date among these powers, as time-tested and ancient civilizations, our countries understand the merits of remaining neutral and allowing for the countries to grow, according to the wishes of our peoples, who have endeavoured to rebuild divided societies. Sri Lanka looks forward to working with all our friends and partners on this journey towards social and economic progress, prosperity and stability.

Secondly, since earlier this year the Ministry of Foreign Relations has embarked on an intensified policy focus on the African region, and together with relevant line agencies, in October 2019 set out a ‘**Revitalized Africa Policy**’ - a set of initiatives to enhance our engagement across the political, economic and cultural spheres in Africa. These initiatives provide the framework of our engagement with the African region and focuses on creating the multiple symbiotic linkages that will augment the Sri Lanka-Africa nexus through an expansion of our diplomatic presence, enhanced economic cooperation, and close cooperation in multilateral fora and regional organizations. I look forward to sharing some perspectives in this regard, in the latter part of this presentation.

We are fortunate to have rich histories to draw inspiration from, and a shared world view on many issues that have evolved through the post-independence spirit of South-South collaboration. I have no doubt these will help us diligently navigate the prevailing global political currents.

Historical Context

Although formal diplomatic relations were established in 1957, the friendship between Sri Lanka and Egypt goes back many centuries.

The first known map of the Island of Sri Lanka (named Taprobane) was drawn by the Alexandrian Greco-Egyptian geographer Ptolemy in the Second Century A.D. Ptolemy’s world map prominently showed Sri Lanka in the centre. G. C. Mendis, in his book *Early History of Ceylon* published in 1932 states that Ptolemy named Sri Lanka ‘Salice’, with products being sent from Sri Lanka to Egypt ranging from rice, ginger and barley to sapphire, silver and elephant tusks. He also states that King Buwanekabahu I (1273-1284) signed a trade agreement with the Sultan of Egypt in 1283 for the export of Sri Lankan products such as cinnamon, precious stones and elephant tusks. I must of course mention here that Sri Lanka does not deal in or profit from elephant tusks anymore. The King’s delegation traveled by sea to the Head of the Persian Gulf and then by land to Cairo through Baghdad and the Syrian deserts¹. The Mahavamsa, the recorded chronicle of Sri Lankan history, states that King Buwanekabahu I, sent several envoys to the Sultan of Egypt in the 13th Century A.D. This is also mentioned in contemporaneous Egyptian chronicles.

Arab traders were pivotal for the trade ties between Sri Lanka and Egypt. They called my country *Serendib*, from which you may know the word *serendipity* is derived. These trade ties expanded with the broader African region thanks to the Indian Ocean trading routes and common colonial history.

¹ Historical relationship with Egypt <http://www.asiantribune.com/node/8718>

Sri Lanka's interactions with Africa are as old as the country's history. Sri Lanka welcomed frequent visitors from Africa in ancient times, including at the royal courts. Some of the visitors settled down in Sri Lanka and descendants of these early settlers still live in Sri Lanka today. These are distinctive communities concentrated mainly in areas such as Sirambiadiya, Trincomalee, Batticaloa, and Negombo. They try to preserve their unique culture, through their cuisine, and particularly their music. Their contribution to the Sri Lankan culture is indelible and part of our proud diversity.

Africa also comes to be mentioned in historical chronicles, when under British rule, members of the Kandyan nobility, including Ehelepola *Maha Adikaram*, the prime ministerial equivalent of the Kandyan Kingdom, were exiled to Mauritius in 1818.²

Sri Lanka's support to Egypt and to African independence struggles

Our citizens have been comrades in arms against colonial rule from the early days. We honour the Egyptian freedom fighter Colonel Ahmad Orabi Pasha who in 1883 was deported to Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), by the British colonial rulers. He was warmly received by the Sri Lankan people and won their love and respect until his return in 1901 to his home country. 1983 was declared the Orabi Pasha Year in Sri Lanka, in commemoration of a century since the arrival of Colonel Ahmed Oraabi Pasha. As part of the commemoration, a section of the Maradana Road in Colombo was renamed "Oraabi Pasha Street". Reciprocally, Cairo's Yehiya Ibrahim Street which houses the Sri Lanka Embassy, was renamed "Sri Lanka Street". While living on the island following his exile from Egypt, Colonel Orabi Pasha supervised the construction of the first modern Islamic school in Colombo in 1891 under the name *Zahira College*. His home in Kandy has been transformed into a museum – *the Orabi Pasha Cultural Centre* and features his personal belongings, paintings, and documents.

Sri Lanka's independence in February 1948 and Egypt's Revolution in July 1952 paved the way for further strengthening bilateral relations. In the post-independence era, Sri Lanka's relations with the African nations also strengthened further, notably through Sri Lanka's support to their independence struggles. This principled support to African liberation struggles was built on the post-independence, particularly post-1956, foreign policy of the late Sri Lankan Prime Minister S.W.R.D Bandaranaike.

It is said that when news came of Egypt's late President Nasser's decision to nationalize the Suez Canal Company in 1956, then Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike instructed Sri Lanka's Permanent Representative to the United Nations Ambassador R.S.S. Gunawardena to uphold

²dailynews.lk. (2019). *Ehelepola Maha Adikaram of the Kandyan Kingdom*. [online] Available at: <http://archives.dailynews.lk/2005/04/23/fea10.htm> [Accessed Sept. 2019].

Egypt's rights to nationalize the Suez Canal Company. In November 1956, the Suez issue came to the UN General Assembly for the first time and Sri Lanka voiced her support of Egypt. There were no less than eleven resolutions related to the Suez issue and Sri Lanka voted for all of them. The Prime Minister attended the UN General Assembly not only in that capacity, but also as the representative of the Colombo Powers. His efforts to resolve the Suez crisis pleased all the Arab nations, and Sri Lanka was treated as a great friend. Consequently Sri Lanka was appointed as a member of the Suez Advisory Board.

Egypt was the first African, Arab, Middle Eastern country to open a diplomatic mission in Sri Lanka in 1957, following the former's independence in 1952³. The late President Gamal Abdel Nasser Hussein took this initiative following Sri Lanka's strong support to Egypt during the Suez Canal crisis in 1956. Sri Lanka's representation was upgraded to a full-fledged embassy in 1958.

In turn, when Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike nationalized the British/U.S. owned oil companies in 1961 to establish the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation, there was an oil embargo imposed on Sri Lanka by the affected parties. Hearing about this critical situation, President Gamal Abdel Nasser wasted no time in sending us a ship load of oil which assisted Sri Lanka in averting a domestic crisis.

This was buttressed by the steady friendship between our leaders which set the tone of cooperation and support: Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike visited Egypt in October 1963 on the invitation of President Gamal Abdel Nasser, in 1964 to participate in the 2nd Non-Aligned Conference and again in October 1970 to attend the funeral of President Gamal Abdul Nasser. Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake visited Egypt in May 1969 and President J.R. Jayawardene paid an official visit to Egypt in 1983. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat visited Sri Lanka in 1976 for the Non-Aligned Summit held in Colombo.

On the passing of President Nasser, Prime Minister Bandaranaike declared two days of national mourning, and the day of his funeral was declared a holiday. The Prime Minister's statement at the commemoration ceremony of the late President, noted that he was not only a leader of the Arab world, an Afro-Asian leader, and a leader of the NAM, but also "someone who fought against foreign domination".

Partnering in NAM and South-South Cooperation

Sri Lanka and Egypt's greatest contemporaneous collaboration no doubt has been through the genesis, growth and continuing spirit of the Non-Aligned Movement founded in 1961. However, its origins could be traced to the 1955 Bandung Conference of Afro-Asian countries – in which both Egypt and Sri Lanka played a prominent role.

Sri Lanka has been at the forefront of supporting the liberation struggles in Africa, particularly the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. Sri Lanka's position was clearly manifested during its Chairmanship of the 5th Non Aligned Summit held in Colombo in August 1976. Under Sri Lankan Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the world saw one of the strongest collective positions taken by the Movement against the policy of apartheid. The African National Congress (ANC) attended this Summit as Observers, at the invitation of the Government of Sri Lanka.

Addressing the session, Prime Minister Bandaranaike was to observe;

“We stand resolutely behind the peoples of Africa in this struggle, the outcome of which will determine whether humanity can progress in peace and brotherhood”

Referring to South Africa in her inaugural address at this conference Madam Bandaranaike observed:

“Racism in Southern Africa is a residue of old colonialism elaborately entrenched on the myth that some people are born superior to others on grounds of colour. With a macabre inventiveness all their own, racist regimes in South Africa and Rhodesia have instituted policies directed towards the systematic erosion, not only of the democratic rights of the majorities in these countries but also of the fundamental human rights enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations”

Attending the 31st session of the UNGA in September 1976 as the Chairperson of the NAM, Prime Minister Bandaranaike reiterated her support and that of the Non Aligned Movement to the African people's struggle in the following terms:

“What the Colombo documents seek to convey, is that the river of history cannot flow backwards and that the longer the racist regimes take to realise this, the more serious would be the consequences for peace on that continent and elsewhere”

She added,

“All initiatives towards a just solution of these problems are naturally welcome as long as they are genuinely designated to expedite the transition from, obduracy to reason. At the same time, I should make it clear from this forum, that if reason were to fail and the peoples of Africa were forced to resort to the ultimate solution through armed struggle, every Non-Aligned nation will stand solidly behind them”

In later years, in July 2009, addressing the 15th NAM Summit in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, President Mahinda Rajapakse in his address was to emphasize the importance of all NAM members standing together to defeat terrorism, and rally against the use of sanctions against individual countries.

“Our society is a caring society, and people from all parts of the country have come forward to assist those who were displaced. We are confident that our Government, together with our civil society, and with the support of our international friends, will ensure that all displaced persons resume their normal lives very soon, and partake fully in the social, political and economic development on which my government has embarked. We have noted the comments made by our colleagues with regard to the use of sanctions against individual countries. Sanctions, whatever the cause, only punish the people of that country. Punishing a people must never be endorsed by the international community”.

As a student of History and Political Science, I have sought to detail this historical context somewhat copiously, for many - both in my country, as well as yours, have forgotten it.

Cooperation in other Multilateral Fora

Throughout more than six decades, Sri Lanka and Egypt have worked closely in all international forums to disseminate peace and stability - regionally and globally. Decision makers in Cairo and Colombo have not spared any efforts to mutually support each other on a wide range of international issues including **combating terrorism and organized crime, establishing a culture of peace and tolerance, supporting territorial integrity and rejecting all forms of separatism**, as well as rejecting attempts of foreign interference in the internal affairs of our respective countries.

We have also collaborated in **disarmament and in sustaining world peace and security**. An example of this is the UNGA Resolution “Prevention of an arms race in outer space”. Sri Lanka and Egypt have been tabling this annual resolution for over two decades at the UN General Assembly. As per the practice, our two countries take turns to introduce this resolution at the UNGA First Committee and leads in the coordination of the draft resolution.

Sri Lanka and Egypt have also continued to support each other at the **Human Rights Council**. We have worked together on many resolutions moved by Egypt in support of the standards we wish to see upheld for the benefit of all peoples all over the world, such as Protection of the family, Access to medicines in the context of the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest standards of physical and mental health and **r**ight to work.

Sri Lanka and Egypt can remain confident of mutual support in the international fora, especially in human rights, which, while created for the betterment of our peoples, is unfortunately, getting

ever more politicized, with domestic politics and vote bases affecting the conduct of international relations. In the face of such situations South-South solidarity, as exemplified by Sri Lanka and Egypt has played a pivotal role to stand up to outside pressures, although we have not always been successful. It is important that our countries continue to stand together to overcome our shared challenges.

The **UN Conference on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)** in which our countries have played a pivotal role continue to remain the core of the Global Ocean Governance Regime. New issues and challenges require collective reflection and deliberation by nations to find effective solutions. Cross-sectoral, rules based approach in pursuance of this objective, demands understanding on the critical role the Indian Ocean region plays in driving the global economy as well as of the impact on the environment and climate change.

Together with Sri Lanka, Egypt was one of the eight founding States of the Indian Ocean Marine Affairs Cooperation **IOMAC** through the then African Asian Legal Consultative Committee (Now AALCO) first in Colombo at the 1981 Sessions. This was a pioneering ocean management movement initiated by countries of the region, joined by extra-regional user states.

Sri Lanka is eager to cooperate with the maritime nations of the Indian Ocean towards greater maritime security in the region. Sri Lanka is committed towards promoting freedom of navigation and unimpeded maritime commerce in the Indian Ocean region. Sri Lanka considers strengthening of security, safety and sustainability of activities in the Indian Ocean as an important objective in the context of expanding ocean activities and the rise of geo-political complexities.

In furtherance of this objective Sri Lanka heads the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) Working Group on Maritime Safety and Security (WGMSS). Last year the Terms of Reference of the Working Group were prepared and on 7th to 9th August 2019, IORA members gathered in Colombo and finalized the Work Plan for 02 years. Egypt is an important dialogue partner in IORA and almost all 9 dialogue partners of IORA have shown willingness to get involved in the suggested activities of the Work Plan of IORA Maritime Safety and Security Working Group.

Bilateral relations – current status, prospects and challenges

Egypt and Sri Lanka are bound by more than twenty bilateral Agreements and Memoranda of Understanding covering the fields of trade, investment, culture, arts, education, civil aviation, political consultation and security.

It would be presumptuous of me to unilaterally try to surmise on our current status of bilateral relations, which is the subject of the deliberations that are due to take place tomorrow at the

Foreign Ministry; however, from a Sri Lankan perspective, let me attempt to summarize some priority areas, as I see them.

Trade:

As we said, trade is where our relationship started and therefore should remain a centre of attention. I am told that the first agreement we had was a fascinating tripartite agreement between Ceylon, Egypt and Japan, where we gave you tea, you gave them oil and they sent us machines. Trade between Egypt and Sri Lanka has been transacted in free convertible currencies up to 1954. From 1954 to 1977, a 'Barter System' of trade was conducted through a Trade and Payment Account. In 1977, a new Bilateral Trade Agreement was signed. Under this agreement, hard currencies were used as the medium of settlement of trade balances.

In more contemporary times, the 1987 Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation provided a broad framework which eventually paved the way to establish a Joint Commission. The objective of the joint commission was to expand relations on trade and economic development, facilitating exchange of information on trade and trade missions. However, the Egypt-Sri Lanka Business Council originally founded in 2004 has become dormant, while we urgently need to reconvene the Joint Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation which last met in 2002.

As for product categories;

-Egypt is a large **tea** consuming country, and is one of the ten leading importers of tea in the world. While in the 1980s Sri Lanka provided 60% of your requirement, following the imposition of high tariffs and later the emergence of regional trading blocs, this market share was to dwindle to 5%, particularly at the public level. However, I am advised that our premier tea brands such as Dilmah, Superfine, Akbar, Impira and JAFF continue to offer gourmet speciality tea to the discerning tea connoisseurs in Egypt. We must expand this to also reach your super markets and cafes through better market facilitation, because many of your people when they meet us tell that they used to love to drink our tea, but that they now can't ~~now~~ find it in the Egyptian market.

-It is also a noteworthy feature that Egypt is the largest market of **desiccated coconut** from Sri Lanka for the purpose of the confectionary industry.

- In addition, Sri Lanka has been exporting **rubber products, leather products, spices, coir products, confectionary, cocoa and cocoa based products, porcelain and ceramic ware.**

- Sri Lanka's imports from Egypt are mainly **chemical and plastic products, metal-based products, fertilizer, oils and fresh fruits.**

- We are also trying to get a few of your major **investors** interested in coming to Sri Lanka and getting more involved. Egypt has requested Sri Lankan investors to invest in the field of agriculture, tourism, textile and garment industries, communication & information technologies, and oil refinement, while Sri Lanka welcomes Egyptian investors to the Colombo Port City.

Agriculture

Egypt is an intensive user of modern technology to improve productivity of **agriculture**, and we seek opportunities for Sri Lanka to learn from the expertise knowledge of the Agriculture Research Institute of Egypt on cultivating citrus fruits, pomegranate, mango and date palms and cultivating rice in the saline water. The Egyptian side may also obtain from Sri Lanka technical support to obtain plant materials of pineapple and selected mango varieties, using tissue culture technology.

Defence:

Terrorism is no stranger to either Sri Lanka or Egypt. Both our countries have lost presidents on account of **terrorism**. This scourge has continued to harm our peace-loving people and hamper the development of our nations. Having defeated one of the world's most organized and ruthless separatist terrorist groups – the LTTE, after almost 30 years, Sri Lanka was resolutely on the path of rebuilding and reconciliation, when the ISIS inspired attacks of Easter Sunday took place, in April this year killing over 250 persons in churches and luxury hotels within a span of a couple of hours. It is to the credit of our security forces and intelligence services that normalcy was restored and law and order re-established. However, it has awakened the law enforcement agencies to this new phase of violent extremism based on religious belief, and adjust to the demands of this new face of terror to protect Sri Lanka's citizens. We are very conscious that you fight the same battles and it is very important that we try to understand and get whatever help we can from your country, so that we could do this much better, because we have a 10% Muslim population of which 99% are peace loving and who have had nothing to do with any of this. In fact, it is because of them that the perpetrators of this crime were pointed to and we could neutralise the second and third layers who were also ready to carryout terror attacks. So we feel that we have to help the Muslim community of Sri Lanka by insulating them from the spread of extremist ideology, because there is a lot at stake for them, as much it is for our country.

Culture:

Another area which is important to look at is the cultural aspect. Sri Lankans and Egyptians have influenced each other in the **arts, music, literature and architecture** for centuries. Evidence suggests mutual influences between ancient civilizations in both nations from the dawn of recorded history. In the modern era, these exchanges have been dominated by the youth of our countries, with mutual participation in folk festivals and cinema competitions. How you handle artefacts might also be a useful area in which we could exchange expertise, given that it is an important area in the global south, and expertise is limited.

Academic Exchanges:

The final area in this regard that I want to focus on is Academic Exchange. Our academic exchanges unfortunately in recent times, have been largely focused on scholars exchanged on religious basis. We need to **diversify the areas of cooperation and academic exchanges** to include other areas, because that will make the exchange more equitably beneficial to all social and religious groups in Sri Lanka.

The other area which I would like to see develop is in the exchange of diplomats, and I have been discussing this with your Ambassador in Colombo; for some of your cadets to come to our diplomatic training institute and for ours to come to Cairo.

I say this, because yesterday I was interviewed by a young Egyptian journalist, who I gathered did not know of Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike. I told him, not to feel too bad, because my guess is that most of his Sri Lankan counterparts would possibly not know who President Nasser was either. We have not done justice to that rich history of the 60's, 70's and the 80's, in the successive decades and we must try to find our way around it and get back to a stronger footing. Else people will forget the very closeness of the relationship which we have had – that you stood by us and we stood by you - and I think we must not let that be forgotten.

Sri Lanka's broader Relations with Africa

If I may turn now to Sri Lanka's broader relations with Africa reinforcing Sri Lanka's longstanding relations with the region, in 2014 Sri Lanka was accorded Associate Membership status in the African Union (AU) as a non-member State, which was in keeping with Sri Lanka's desire to maintain close relations with the African region. I take particular interest regards this decision, because as PRUN/Geneva, my voice was probably one of the strongest advocating that we should do so, and ever since I have advocated broadening and deepening that relationship. We opened a resident mission in Addis in 2016 which has given renewed impetus to strengthening our cooperation with Africa. The Foreign Ministry in Colombo has been actively taking part in activities promoting African culture organised through the resident missions. These included the Africa Day celebration under the chairmanship of Egypt this year, and the event organised by South Africa to pay tribute to the African slaves brought to Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) by colonial rulers in the 1800s to build the Galle Fort, with the participation of the descendants of those slaves who made Sri Lanka their home and who continue to preserve the cultural practices of their forefathers. However, at the political and economic level, in a pan-Africa sense, so far, we have done little.

Of the 54 African States recognised by the UN, at present, Sri Lanka enjoys formal diplomatic relations with 45, and has resident missions in six of these, specifically Nigeria, Egypt, Ethiopia,

Kenya, Seychelles and South Africa. Furthermore, Sri Lanka has concurrently accredited our Ambassadors from these resident Missions to cover most of the African countries we are having relations with. Additionally, Sri Lanka has appointed 10 Honorary Consuls in the African Region where we want to go deeper and where concurrent accreditation is not sufficient. We also have the benefit of 4 Missions from the African Continent in Colombo, concurrent accreditation of a large number of Ambassadors from New Delhi, as well as a number of Honorary Consuls of African countries based in Colombo.

The current decade has witnessed a reasonable growth in Sri Lanka's economic engagement with a number of African countries. Yet there is a great potential to increase trade and investment in a manner beneficial for both Sri Lanka and Africa.

- In 2018, bilateral trade in goods amounted to USD 466 million, accounting for 1.4% of Sri Lanka's total trade, maintaining a modest trade surplus with the region. Sri Lanka's exports to Africa in 2018 amounted to USD 249 million (2.1% of Sri Lanka's total exports), while imports from Africa stood at USD 217 million (1.1% of Sri Lanka's total imports). Tea, rubber, electrical machinery, and paper account for 63% of total goods exported by Sri Lanka to the African Region, while minerals and fuel, edible fruit, beverages, and perfumes add up to over 80% of Sri Lanka's imports from Africa.

-Sri Lankan companies are also engaged in a number of investment projects in Africa, notably in the areas of garment manufacturing, construction, IT and confectioneries. Particularly, as a major exporter of apparel, Sri Lanka's private sector has invested in a number of African countries in this sphere, optimising on the African labour market, raw materials and access to western markets through preferential tariff schemes such as African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) and Everything But Arms (EBA). Their technological advances and healthy labour practices exemplified through 'garments without guilt' has been the selling point. This must be emulated in other areas as well, and Sri Lanka and Africa can work together through the private sector to be economic drivers, employment generators and contributors to the development story of African economies. In this regard, I am happy to note that *Hela Clothing*, a Sri Lanka based apparel manufacturer with factories across Kenya and Ethiopia is being awarded the Most Inclusive Employer of 2019 Award, by the Ethiopian Centre for Disability and Development (ECDD), for its efforts to promote "disability inclusive development" in Ethiopia.

-Recent developments in Africa in terms of intra-regional economic integration particularly with the coming into force of the AfCFTA (Africa Continental Free Trade Area) in May 2019, have created attractive pull factors for our private sector to be interested in the huge potential of the African market due to its relative proximity, while also providing an alternate market in the context of mounting uncertainties in the global economic environment particularly in the west; one of the main markets for Sri Lanka. Once fully operational, the African

Continental Free Trade Agreement will add further stimulus to the trade and investment relationship between countries in Africa and Sri Lanka.

Vision and a new policy for Enhanced Cooperation with Africa

It is clear that there is considerable need, as well as space, for our relations to grow and in fact to thrive. I strongly believe that based on our historical linkages with Africa, and in view of the rapid changes taking place in this great continent which holds much prospect for growth, as well as in Sri Lanka given its strategic location in the middle of the Indian Ocean, it is in our interest to maximize these for mutually beneficial economic and political gain.

It is this consciousness that led the Ministry of Foreign Relations to recently operationalize a '**Revitalized Africa policy**' that aims to address convergences and opportunities towards a more fruitful and mutually beneficial relationship between Sri Lanka and our Africa partners.

It is noteworthy that this policy document has been prepared in consultation with the relevant Sri Lankan line agencies, as well as Colombo based Heads of Mission from Africa and Honorary Consuls representing African States, and Sri Lanka's Missions and Honorary Consuls in Africa. I must appreciate here that your Ambassador in Colombo Hussein El Saharty was also very involved in this process and participated in all our discussions. In the coming years, this policy document is expected to guide our relations with African nations more concerted and consistently.

It comprises a set of initiatives to enhance our engagement across the political, economic, cultural spheres in Africa. Key Recommendation Areas include;

- Strengthened Bilateral Engagement through High Level Visits, Political Consultations and Joint Commissions. We believe the first round of the Political Consultation between Egypt-Sri Lanka will pave the way to further enhance our bilateral engagement in Africa. While Sri Lanka also have similar on-going political consultations with South Africa, we look forward to commencing political consultations with other African countries including Ethiopia, Uganda and Seychelles in the coming years;

- The Expansion of Diplomatic presence and political integration from its current six resident missions and 12 Honorary Consuls to facilitate the envisaged future expansion of relations between Sri Lanka and Africa;

- Enhance Economic Cooperation through greater trade and investment as well as by strengthening the trade facilitation frameworks such as through bilateral agreements in

investment protection, avoidance of double taxation, enhancing air and sea connectivity, harmonizing of standards;

- Leveraging cooperation in Multilateral Fora including regional and international organizations in a mutually beneficial manner, especially through greater engagement with the departments of the African Union. In this regard, Sri Lanka looks forward to working in close collaboration with the African Group of countries through its Missions in Africa, Geneva, New York and New Delhi, to further solidify friendly relations in multilateral fora mainly in the United Nations and in other multilateral bodies such as the Human Rights Council, International Organization for Migration, IOMAC etc. Also, Sri Lanka expects to broaden our partnerships with Africa in finding solutions to cross-cutting issues that affect both our societies such as climate change, combating terrorism, transnational crimes including illegal migration, and drug trafficking.

Having created better awareness of Africa and its emerging opportunities in terms of social, economic and political opportunities within Sri Lanka, and of Sri Lanka within African countries, we hope to work with our African friends to build on our longstanding links towards more substantive and productive outcomes.

It is hoped that through these endeavours, we will be able to expand Sri Lanka's foot print in Africa, and tangibly increase Sri Lanka's economic engagement with Africa which is currently at a nascent stage, significantly in the areas of trade, investment and people-to-people ties in a mutually beneficial manner. It is expected that the operationalization of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement will add further fillip in this endeavour.

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Conclusion

The bonds that tied us in the past are still very relevant. The problems that we faced then might have changed from the fight against colonialism, to its modern day manifestations of dominance, but we have to fight it the same way. The new enemies of separatism and extremism are common enemies to both of us.

This visit comes at a time when we have appointed a new Ambassador of Sri Lanka Damayanthie Rajapaksa who assumed duties in Cairo just a month ago. She presented credentials only last week, but has hit the ground running and together with her team has prepared to ensure that the first ever Bilateral Political Consultations between Egypt and Sri Lanka will be successful. As we seek to re-invigorate this relationship with Egypt and with broader Africa, we must do so in the same spirit that we have each contributed to one another's struggles from the times of the Bandaranaikes and Nassers. Our children and students of international politics must understand that when our countries and leaders took those bold steps, there were consequences we faced. But we did it nevertheless, because we believed in the principles we were fighting for- whether on the Suez Canal issue, whether against apartheid or whether as we continue to unwaveringly do to this day, in support of the Palestinian cause.

So, I wish to conclude by assuring you that Sri Lanka will be steadfast in its support to your country and towards Africa, and we hope the Bilateral Political Consultations will generate momentum at the diplomatic and political level, that will be carried forward and sustained by our respective business leaders, civil society, academics, journalists and most importantly by our peoples at large.
