

## **19<sup>TH</sup> COUNCIL OF MINISTERS MEETING OF THE INDIAN OCEAN RIM ASSOCIATION (IORA)**

### **Country Statement by Ravinatha Aryasinha, Secretary/Foreign Affairs- 7 November 2019**

Chairman,  
Excellencies,  
Fellow Delegates,  
Ladies & Gentlemen

It gives me great pleasure to address the 19<sup>th</sup> Council of Ministers Meeting of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) today. Allow me to begin by thanking the Government of the United Arab Emirates on behalf of the Government of Sri Lanka, for the excellent arrangements in hosting this meeting and for the hospitality extended to my delegation. I want to congratulate the Chairperson on the UAE's assumption of the leadership of the IORA, and welcome the announcement by the UAE on the creation of the IORA Development Fund to promote tangible outcomes.

I would also like to commend South Africa, the outgoing Chair, for the exceptional leadership over the past 2 years which saw the elevation of IORA's stature and effectiveness as a pan- regional organization. I am sure all of you would agree that IORA, under the leadership of South Africa, indeed *'united the people of Africa, Asia, Australia and the Middle East through enhanced cooperation for peace, stability and sustainable development'*; true to the chosen theme. As a country strongly committed to youth empowerment, Sri Lanka reiterates its commitment and contribution to the IORA Nelson Mandela *'Be the Legacy'* internship programme, which is fully supporting the IORA cause.

I would also like to extend my sincere thanks to the Secretary General Dr Nomvuyo Nokwe and her team for their untiring efforts in championing the cause of IORA.

I would also like to congratulate Bangladesh, the new Vice Chair, and also welcome our neighbor the Republic of Maldives, as a member of IORA.

#### **Historic role of Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean**

The theme, *'promoting a shared destiny and path to prosperity in the Indian Ocean'*, chosen by the United Arab Emirates for the coming biennial particularly resonates with the aspirations of the people of my country.

Being citizens of an island nation, Sri Lankans are fully cognizant of our dependence on the Indian Ocean. We are well aware that the sustainability of the prosperity we seek for our people depends on the safety, stability and health of the waters beyond our land borders. Due to the intimate

interconnectedness of our region, the ripple effects of any instability in one area can have an impact on the entire region.

Sri Lanka has long realized the importance of a stable and secure maritime environment for national and regional prosperity, even when there were few takers for Sri Lanka's grand vision for the region.

- It was first conceptualized by Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranayake in 1971 through the Indian Ocean Peace Zone (IOPZ) proposal at the UN
- This vision took material form under Sri Lanka's Chairmanship of the Third UN Conference on the Law of Sea in 1973, which led to the adoption of United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).
- In 1981, at the Asian-African Legal Consultative Committee (AALCC) – a general platform which covered issues with regard to the Indian Ocean – Sri Lanka voiced the necessity of a dedicated forum where Indian Ocean marine affairs could be properly addressed
- These initial discussions prepared the launching pad for the First Conference on Economic Scientific and Technical Cooperation in the Indian Ocean in Marine Affairs in the context of the New Ocean Regime (IOMAC-I), which was held in Colombo, in July 1985.

In this way, Sri Lanka has been in the forefront in promoting cooperation within the Indian Ocean region in numerous international platforms and work towards tangible measures to ensure same through the established mechanisms.

### **Dynamics of the Indian Ocean Region and Challenges**

In this Asian century, as with global dynamics turning eastward, the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean region is augmented. The Indian Ocean economy amounts to approximately 14% of the Global Economy and it is expected to rise to 16% by 2025. It is one of the most critical trade corridors, carrying two-thirds of global oil shipments and a third of bulk cargo. 22% of the world container port traffic is in ports around the Indian Ocean and 23 of the world's top 100 ports are hosted by the Indian Ocean. With the estimated doubling of the world's energy needs by 2030, the Indian Ocean also known as the energy super highway, transporting 72% of world energy, will come into even greater significance. These trends provide ample testimony to how influential a role the Indian Ocean Region will play in the future.

With this rising importance, comes bigger threats. The region has recently become increasingly vulnerable to threats that arise from the expansion in shipping and ports including piracy, military presence and pressure on the balance of power. We also find ourselves facing a plethora of unconventional security threats such as maritime terrorism, climate change, IUU fishing, illegal immigration, smuggling of arms & drugs and modern piracy as well. It would not be an

overstatement to say that the host of challenges we face today will only intensify in future, fueled by persistent and ever-evolving global dynamics.

In this light, sound regional cooperation is not only important but pivotal. While regional platforms are of the essence in this regard, we should understand that they only provide a legal and a policy framework, which, in the absence of practical execution would be rendered redundant. This calls for a holistic and comprehensive approach in strategy formulation and active participation in implementation. I would like to emphasize the necessity of doing away with token gestures and encouraging extensive cooperation exercises especially in the fields of security and technology. Our region is placed at even greater risk due to the absence of an overarching security architecture tasked to mitigate regional security challenges in the Indian Ocean Region, giving priority to the littoral states and sensitive to the interests of all maritime users of the Indian Ocean.

Having understood the gap of information sharing in the maritime domain, strong cooperation is essential to foresee and tackle maritime security threats and ensure the shared prosperity in the Indian Ocean.

### **Sri Lanka's Contemporary Contribution to Indian Ocean Maritime Safety and Security**

Sri Lanka which emerged from a prolonged conflict which deprived our country of the opportunity to reach its full development potential, is determined to ensure non-recurrence of conflict. This is an aspiration that Sri Lanka would strive to ensure for the region as well. Keeping in mind that being trapped in unilateralism or isolationism will not help in resolving any of the challenges our States face, Sri Lanka has taken the responsibility spearheading the IORA Working Group on Maritime Safety and Security. Sri Lanka brings its experiences of facing numerous maritime security threats during the conflict as we coordinate the IORA Working Group on Maritime Safety and Security.

In this context, Sri Lanka set a clear road map to achieve crucial objectives. Subsequent to the workshop hosted in Colombo on the establishment of the IORA Working Group Maritime Safety and Security (WGMSS) in September 2018, the First Meeting of the IORA WGMSS was also held in Colombo in August 2019. This meeting focused on establishing an integrated policy approach and a coordinated regional vision on maritime safety and security. It also provided a platform to discuss shared priorities of Member States in the sphere of maritime safety and security, mainly focusing on tackling maritime criminal activities in the Indian Ocean, evolving maritime security challenges with existing maritime legal jurisprudence, drug trafficking, transnational crime and the global fishing industry.

The workshop finalized the draft WGMSS Work Plan in which 54 short term, ongoing and long-term projects were identified. It is encouraging to note that Member States have already taken up

the responsibility as the lead country for the implementation of 16 projects with the assistance of the IORA Secretariat.

The WGMSS Work Plan is a blue-print which outlines individual as well as collaborative responsibilities of the Member States in addressing the increasingly complex security threats that defy borders and dominated by traditional and nontraditional transnational challenges. Sri Lanka and the other members of the IORA MSS core group are committed to follow-through the progress and achieve the targets set in the Action Plan, working in tandem with IORA Dialogue Partners in order to ensure safety and security in the Indian Ocean.

In the weeks ahead, Sri Lanka will be organizing a seminar on maritime safety and security, to launch the thematic study group on the same subject. Further, Sri Lanka wishes to take this opportunity to announce that it is in the process of organizing “Visit, Board, Search and Seizure (VBSS) Course” for IORA Member States. Another Maritime Safety and Security Workshop is planned for early 2020 with the support of the United Kingdom, a Dialogue Partner of IORA. Sri Lanka wishes to continue as the lead coordinator for IORA Working Group on Maritime Safety and Security, and is committed to fully implement the Work Plan of WGMSS, together with the Member States, IORA Secretariat and Dialogue Partners.

With only 2 years left in the overall Action Plan, we must all look back, assess and refine our efforts to ensure its full implementation. It is imperative that the outcomes and solutions to issues that we reach are people centred, and the best opportunities are secured for the people of our region to benefit from the region’s resources.

Sri Lanka’s commitment towards Maritime Safety and Security in the Indian Ocean is not limited to IORA. For the past decade, Sri Lanka has provided a vibrant forum to all stakeholders to contribute, interact and exchange expertise for the common good of seafaring in numerous ways that would further our national interests and shared common goals, to make the seas safer for all - through the annual international conference “Galle Dialogue”, hosted by the Sri Lankan Navy. This year, the Galle Dialogue was based on the theme ‘Refining Mindset to address Transnational Maritime threats: A Review of the Decade’, brought together 148 participants from 54 countries and 17 International Organizations to deliberate on the safety and security in navigating the oceans.

Further, in line with Sri Lanka’s commitments towards preserving freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean, while ensuring sustainable use of its resources, Sri Lanka commenced a multilateral engagement, involving not just the Indian Ocean littoral states but all maritime users of the Indian Ocean in 2018. Its first lead up Conference, a Track 2 academic event, was organized with Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia in April 2018. In October 2018, “The Indian Ocean: Defining Our Future”, a Track 1.5 dialogue was held in Colombo bringing 300 senior officials representing 40 countries including IORA Member States to discuss the future of the Indian Ocean, focusing on the

potential of it becoming a growth pole in the world economy in the future. Sri Lanka is scheduled to convene the “The Indian Ocean: Defining Our Future”, Track 1 Ministerial Conference next year, aimed at formulating a “Statement of Understanding” by the participating nations.

### **Maritime initiatives in Sri Lanka’s domestic efforts**

The Sri Lankan government’s Vision 2025 Program, where Sri Lanka adopted a **Blue-Green Development Strategy** with the aim of fostering sustainable economic development. With the world increasingly turning to the oceans for food security and mineral resources, the emergence of the concept of blue economy, has brought about a new challenge which is managing resource extraction in a fair, equitable and a sustainable manner. Fisheries and related industries are critical in ensuring food security and the impact of overfishing and climate change has accelerated the reduction of major fish stocks. On this front, Sri Lanka is in the process of developing fisheries management measures, sustainable strategies of employing oceanic resources and eco- friendly development strategies.

The Prime Minister of Sri Lanka continues to chair the Organizing Committee of the **Indian Ocean Conference series** commenced by the India Foundation, a think tank, of which the 4<sup>th</sup> Conference was held in September 2019 in the Maldives. This illustrates the importance accorded to the Indian Ocean’s well-being and regional cooperation on matters related to the same at the highest levels of the government.

Sri Lanka is also active in “Our Oceans Conference” series initiated by the USA. As part of Sri Lanka’s voluntary commitments to “Our Oceans” , Sri Lanka has fulfilled **several commitments especially in the fisheries sector**. Few of those commitments are; establishment of a robust fisheries information system, introduction of environmentally friendly fishing gear as well as prohibition of destructive fishing gear, installation of vessel monitoring devices on board of all vessels operating in high seas and establishment of land based VMS monitoring center, incorporation and implementation of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) resolutions into national legislation and achieving an annual compliance rate of 87% in respect of IOTC resolutions.

Moreover, legal provisions to combat Illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing is incorporated into the amended Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Act in 2013 and the National **Plan of Action to combat IUU fishing** and National Plan of Action for the **Conservation and Management of Sharks** were formalized. Sri Lanka has also implemented a verification programme to identify IUU fishing violations in order to ensure IUU fish are not processed or re-exported.

In addition, Sri Lanka has promoted a blue economy initiative under the ‘Sri Lanka NEXT’ programme since October 2016. The most recent development of this initiative was “Sri Lanka Next 2019- Blue Green Era” – an International Conference which was held in October this year

with the main *focus on Sustainable Nitrogen Management*. The two-day event by the Government of Sri Lanka and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in partnership with SACEP, INMS and many other international organizations launched the United Nations Global Campaign on Sustainable Nitrogen Management 'Nitrogen for Life', adopting the "Colombo Declaration" with an ambition to halve nitrogen waste by 2030. As part of the Declaration, officials representing the governments of more than 30 countries endorsed the proposed Roadmap for Action on Sustainable Nitrogen Management.

Sri Lanka is also the lead of the Action Group on *Mangrove Ecosystems and Livelihoods* (MELAG) under the Commonwealth Blue Charter, signed in 2013 calling for fair, equitable, inclusive and sustainable approach to ocean economic development and protection. Accordingly, Sri Lanka hosted the first meeting of the MELAG in October this year, activities of which included developing a database of mangrove ecosystems in the Commonwealth, sharing technical expertise on mangrove restoration, and strengthening community partnerships and legal frameworks.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, our region has come a long, arduous journey towards prosperity, overcoming the disadvantages of a shared past of exploitation and division. As littoral states of this 'Ocean of the Future', on our shoulders rests a responsibility towards our collective community. We must ensure that our people can reap the maximum out of the dynamics and synergies of the region, while supporting sustainable growth.

Given the importance of the Indian Ocean to all our countries, Sri Lanka will continue to champion our common aspirations towards the region, and continue to work for IORA's objectives to bear fruit. Let me take this opportunity to reiterate the commitment made by Sri Lanka at the 17<sup>th</sup> Council of Minister's Meeting in Durban that Sri Lanka is looking forward to serve the organization as the Vice Chair of the coming biennial 2021-2023.

Thank you.