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வெளிநாட்டு அமைச்சு
FOREIGN MINISTRY

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**47th Consultative Committee Meeting of The Colombo Plan Inaugural
address by the Hon. Dinesh Gunawardena, Foreign Minister of
Sri Lanka**

Mr. President, Hon. Ministers, Chair of the 46th CCM, Heads of Delegations, Secretary General of The Colombo Plan, Heads and Representatives of International Organizations, Foreign Secretary Admiral Colombage, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends.

It is a pleasure to be here amongst all of you, albeit virtually, and I thank you for taking the time to be with us notwithstanding the immense challenges of these times. This is a clear demonstration of your commitment to advance the cause of The Colombo Plan. Given that the global climate calls for even more focus on economic and social development, our meeting today and tomorrow is timely. Home to about 40% of the global population with a combined GDP of approximately US\$ 37 trillion, I believe this is where our collective strength lies and from where we can and should derive our inspiration and drive.

The Colombo Plan was conceived at the Commonwealth Conference on Foreign Affairs held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in 1950, launched by seven founding members (Australia, Britain, Canada, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), India, New Zealand and Pakistan) on 1st July 1951, chaired by the Late Hon. D.S. Senanayake, Prime Minister and Minister of External Affairs of Ceylon (Sri Lanka), now includes 27 members.

Our discussions today and tomorrow will be key in shaping The Colombo Plan's development cooperation trajectory in the post-COVID era. Sri Lanka is confident that this Consultative Committee Meeting will serve as a more effective platform for knowledge sharing, innovation and collaboration to implement novel and useful programs for our collective benefit.

In the next two years, Sri Lanka offers to take leadership within The Colombo Plan on the topical issue of building sustainable green cities and increasing green spaces, in keeping with the President H.E. Gotabaya Rajapaksa's vision of 'Green and Smart' cities within our government's sustainable environmental policy, *Vistas of Prosperity & Splendor*.

COVID-19 has introduced a host of unforeseen challenges. Our thoughts and prayers go out to the millions of people in our fellow member nations and across the world who are suffering from the pandemic in numerous ways. Our fellow member states need to be commended for their tireless efforts to combat the pandemic and its far-reaching impact. Global interconnectedness has ensured that developments in one corner of the world – no matter how small or seemingly insignificant – will have a multiplying effect reaching on the rest of the world. If there is anything that the pandemic has taught us, it is that we are in this together, and that to overcome the pandemic we will have to come together as a global community. International cooperation, therefore, is more important today than ever before, and in this context, The Colombo Plan has an important role to play. Our organization's work and experience in the areas of socio-economic development, including health, education, infrastructure and human resources, will be a source of strength as we grapple with the challenges of the post-pandemic world. Together we must build upon existing cooperation and explore new avenues to work towards socio-economic development in a new and challenging global environment.

The success of the cause of our organization depends on the commitment, contribution and meaningful action of all member states. But contextual challenges and individual realities in the countries can inhibit their contribution at full capacity. This has posed a challenge to the organization in sourcing funds and other resources for its initiatives and programs. Sri Lanka is concerned that this constraint in turn has hampered the organization from serving its membership at the ideal potential. We would like to request advanced member states to continue extending their valuable support to The Colombo Plan so that it may sustain and further develop meaningful programs for the developing member states, ensuring shared prosperity for all.

A fully functioning secretariat is also of utmost importance as we navigate these challenging times. Mutual cooperation between the secretariat and the member states is key. The pandemic has affected us all, barring none. Sri Lanka is pleased to have been able to implement a strong vaccination drive with the help of our international friends and partners. We are happy that many of you chose to stay back to see your duties through.

Allow me to take this opportunity to touch on a topic - *Sustainable Green Cities: Increasing Green Spaces* - that will be discussed at length when we present our country theme paper later in the morning.

Increasing Green Spaces indeed contributes to increasing Greenery in Cities, creating Green Cities and strengthening their sustainability as such for posterity. I trust our country theme paper will share peculiarities specific to our past such as landscaping alterations inspired by Lankan Creativity in South-east Asian Cities of the 14th Century AC, our aspirations and our way forward.

According to the United Nations, for the first time in global history, the global urban population surpassed the rural population in 2007 – marking what we call the Urban Millennium. Urbanization, or the migration of people to cities and metropolitan areas, is a phenomenon of the past 200 years. For the better part of human history, people lived in sparsely populated rural areas. It is projected that by 2050 the global population will increase to 9.8 billion and two-thirds of that population - close to 7 billion people - will live in urban areas.

This issue and its connection to global development efforts, engendered the stand-alone goal in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, SDG 11: Make inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities.

Urban areas contribute to about 70 per cent of the global GDP making these areas driving forces of the economy. They also account for about 70 percent of global carbon emissions, thereby worsening air pollution, and 60 percent of resource use, as increasing urban populations overstrain infrastructure and exert pressure on public services and limited resources. Rapid and unplanned urbanization also results in the deterioration of the environment and shrinks green spaces.

The adverse effects on the environment, health and wellbeing of populations demand immediate action and call for innovative approaches to promote access to nature, to reduce pollution and mitigate extreme weather patterns and promote sustainable lifestyles. The pandemic has increased the gravity of the situation in densely populated urban areas, and has driven home the importance of access to nature and open spaces.

While grappling with rapid urbanization is a global requirement, the severity of its effects have a greater impact on developing countries and poorer nations who are constantly playing technological catchup. Building sustainable cities calls for investment. Therefore, these

countries need support and resources to improve capacity building, to access green technology, energy and infrastructure, to design and develop sustainable and reliable public services such as housing, electricity, water, waste recycling and public transportation, to name a few.

Prof Ranil Senanayake a leading global environmentalist of Sri Lanka proposes a paradigm shift in the green environment climate discussion. His insights are that urban sector is the real spoiler of the air we breathe. Oxygen is burnt every single time an engine ignites in a car, bus, train, plane, factory or generator. The only reintroduction of Oxygen is done by our rural green areas. Thus our focus should also be on Oxygen.

When the time the UN is ringing warning alarms on climate, it is important that we recognize countries that have shown positive ecological contribution and commitment. A recognition in form of a positive return to offset financial debt or difficulty. Thanks to their contribution and commitment, we the world are still breathing.

In this respect it is important to keep in mind the trends of dynamics of the Generation Changes amongst the youth where through fast tracked technological innovations - methodologies are being renewed and replaced within shortened time lines.

We remain committed to assisting the organization to grow while it endeavors to cope with the challenges of our time and pursues social and economic prosperity for our region.

I wish you all two fruitful days of discussion and deliberation.

Thank you!