

**Joint Press Conference after Talks with FMDG
(6 January 2021; 1300 hrs; MFA)**

OPENING REMARKS BY EAM

My esteemed colleague and friend the Honourable Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka Dinesh Gunawardenaji,

Senior officials, Friends from media, Good afternoon.

Let me begin by wishing all of you and all our friends in Sri Lanka a very happy 2021. I am delighted to visit Sri Lanka once again, and to be amidst you today. A visit to this beautiful country, with which India has civilizational ties going back thousands of years, is always a matter of great pleasure – both professional and personal.

2. I am grateful to my counterpart for his invitation and for welcoming my delegation and me with typical Sri Lankan hospitality. He extended this invitation to me when he was in India almost exactly a year ago. But due to the disruption caused by the Covid pandemic, it was not possible for me to visit earlier. But I am glad that I am starting 2021 with a visit to India's closest maritime neighbour and partner.

3. I visit Sri Lanka at a time when both our countries are faced with daunting and common challenges from the Covid-19 pandemic. At the same time, I think Covid has given us an opportunity to collaborate even more closely. Reflecting our *Neighbourhood First* policy, India has supported Sri

Lanka's efforts to tackle Covid through timely medical assistance. I should also place on record my appreciation to the Sri Lankan Government for its assistance and facilitation in evacuation of Indian nationals who were stuck here. We are now looking at post-Covid cooperation and I carry back with me Sri Lanka's interest in accessing vaccines from India.

4. It is also gratifying to note that Covid has not been able to dent our bilateral cooperation. High level contacts were maintained and indeed strengthened during the past year and the Virtual Bilateral Summit between PM Modi and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa was a high watermark for us in 2020.

5. This morning, I had the honour to call on H.E. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. My counterpart and I have just completed our discussions, reviewing in detail the progress in our partnership. This evening, I look forward to calling on H.E. Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa. In line with our shared democratic traditions, meetings are also planned with other important political and community leaders. There is also an interaction with the business community. To all of them, I carry the message of an India that will always be a dependable partner and reliable friend, open to strengthening its relationship with Sri Lanka on the basis of mutual trust, mutual interest, mutual respect and mutual sensitivity.

6. Right now, India and Sri Lanka both face the immediate challenge of post-Covid recovery. This is not just a public health issue but equally, a crisis of the economy. Where India is concerned, you are aware that our Covid numbers have come down sharply and the prospect of mass vaccination is in sight. The Indian economy has also shown strong signs of recovery in the last few months. We are very confident that this will be full-blown by the next quarter. These developments will obviously have a positive impact on Sri Lanka. At the same time, there are specific challenges that need addressing, whether it is in finance or in trade. My visit is aimed at facilitating that process.

7. As two close neighbours with such obvious synergies, the potential for further strengthening our cooperation is enormous. Some of that may help provide immediate relief; others would have very positive medium-term implications for Sri Lanka's development. There are many proposals under discussion, including in infrastructure, energy, connectivity, etc. Their early implementation is obviously in mutual interest and would definitely accelerate Sri Lanka's economic recovery. Let me stress that Indian business is strongly interested in investing in Sri Lanka. We have discussed some important opportunities including in special zones for pharmaceutical manufacturing as also in tourism. I will ensure an early follow-up.

8. India has a solid record as a development partner of Sri Lanka in the social, community and human resources

sectors. Whether it is in mass housing or ambulance services, heritage conservation or education, our partnerships have made a real difference to the lives of the people all over the island. Our Lines of Credit have re-built connectivity, facilitating the restoration of normalcy. We are cognizant of the domestic priorities of the Sri Lankan Government, including in agriculture and technology, education and skill development and urban development. In particular, we understand the importance H.E. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and the Government of Sri Lanka attach to the establishment of vocational training centres. We will naturally be guided by these priorities in our future endeavours.

9. As we promote peace and well-being in the region, India has been strongly committed to the unity, stability and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka. Our support for the reconciliation process in Sri Lanka is longstanding, as indeed for an inclusive political outlook that encourages ethnic harmony. It is in Sri Lanka's own interest that the expectations of the Tamil people for equality, justice, peace and dignity within a united Sri Lanka are fulfilled. That applies equally to the commitments made by the Sri Lankan Government on meaningful devolution, including the 13th Amendment to the Constitution. The progress and prosperity of Sri Lanka will surely be advanced as a consequence.

10. As maritime countries in the Indian Ocean, India and Sri Lanka have a shared interest in ensuring maritime security

and safety. We have a long history of cooperation in this regard. India has been the first responder in emergency situations. I am confident that this domain of cooperation will continue to expand in the days ahead. We stand ready to enhance Sri Lanka's capabilities to meet growing maritime and security challenges.

11. With regard to matters covering fisheries, you would be aware that the India-Sri Lanka Joint Working Group on this issue has met recently where all outstanding issues were discussed in an open and candid manner. We naturally look forward to an early return of our fishermen. I will also be meeting Fisheries Minister Mr. Douglas Devananda later this afternoon to discuss this further.

12. Sri Lanka has assumed leadership of BIMSTEC and we look forward to participating in the next BIMSTEC Summit here.

13. I once again thank my esteemed colleague and friend Foreign Minister Gunawardena for the opportunity to visit Sri Lanka and for the constructive and forward looking discussions.

Thank you all for your attention.

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