

SPEECH BY THE HON. R. PREMADASA, M.P.
PRIME MINISTER OF SRI LANKA

Mr Assistant Secretary-General, Honourable Ministers, Your Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen, I have looked forward to this opportunity of being with you here this morning to share with you some thoughts on one of the most critical issues facing mankind today - that of establishing a New International Economic Order based on peace and social justice, and the contribution you, as Young Leaders of the Commonwealth could make towards achieving this objective.

But before doing so, it is my pleasure and privilege, on behalf of the people of Sri Lanka, to extend to all of you a warm welcome. I hope that you will find the time to see something of our country and get an insight into the life-styles and aspirations of our people, particularly those of our own young people who represent about 60% of the population.

We are indeed happy that our country has been selected to host, what I understand is, the Second Meeting of the Young Commonwealth Leaders. I should like also to commend the Secretary-General and the Commonwealth Secretariat for again taking the initiative to arrange this Meeting of Commonwealth Youth Leaders under the aegis of the Commonwealth Youth Programme to focus attention on a problem which is engaging the minds of peoples, both in the developed and developing countries, today.

Young people in leadership positions is a phenomenon which should be encouraged. In Sri Lanka we have a large number of young people in leadership positions as ministers, deputy ministers, parliamentarians, professionals and also in womens' organisations. Sri Lanka, therefore, is perhaps a suitable venue for a meeting of Young Leaders.

It is my firm conviction that the youth of any country, given the opportunity, will not shirk the responsibilities. They will be able to fulfil the obligations that society places on them. I sometimes wonder whether the youth unrest throughout the world, so much spoken of a decade ago, was not partly the result of the fact that the energies of youth were not properly channelised. For almost thirty years since the end of the Second World War, we have had no major international conflict. Could it have been that the energies of youth, so often wasted in fruitless warfare, found its release in the unrest of that period? Youth has energy, youth has vision, youth has a spirit of high adventure. It is our duty to find the tasks of great endeavour to grapple with and to accomplish.

Many of you delegates present here represent countries which share a common historical background and also common aspirations. Your peoples have recently achieved political independence and you have set yourselves the goal of making this a reality by achieving economic independence. You have

recognised, from bitter experience, that the achievement of these objectives has been retarded, if not thwarted, by external economic factors beyond our control.

Even among those of you representing the developed countries, there has been increasing recognition that to revive the process of growth in the global economy, measures have to be taken to generate economic growth in the developing countries. A perception is emerging of the interdependence of nations and inter-relationship of issues in the fields of trade, money, finance and development.

Recent developments in the world economy have clearly demonstrated that the existing international economic order is not only inequitable, but that it is also incapable of coping with the changing circumstances. The framework and structure established in the post-war period to govern international economic relations is under threat of disintegration and it is becoming increasingly difficult for Governments of even developed countries to solve their problems within the existing system. There is also deep disappointment and grave concern that the negotiations in the North-South dialogue in different international fora have not yielded the expected results so far, and that no significant progress has been achieved in the implementation of the Programme of Action on the establishment of the New International Economic Order.

In the face of the inequities of the present international economic order, what should our expectations be of the Commonwealth? I am mindful, in asking this question, of the impending Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting to be held in Lusaka, Zambia in August this year. In looking towards Lusaka I feel sure that many of you will agree with me that a special interest should be taken in the problems and needs of the smaller and particularly the poorest countries in the Commonwealth.

Your task at this meeting, if I may say so, can be described as threefold. The first is to evaluate the economic policies of national governments and identify the factors and areas in which they have failed to respond to the needs and aspirations of the people, particularly those of the youth. The second is to analyse as to what extent this failure has been the result of external economic factors beyond the control of national governments; and the third, to see what constructive role the youth in these countries could play to bring about those changes which will lead to the improvement of the physical quality of life of the people and usher in a new order based on equity and social justice.

At the same time, I should like to suggest that you ask yourselves these questions; In a world which has witnessed in recent times a greater awareness for each others problems, massive technological advances and which has committed itself, in principle, to the pursuit of human rights, how is it that we allow thousands of men, women and children in poor countries to die of starvation every day? How is it that almost half the labour force of the developing countries is condemned to remain permanently unemployed or under-employed? What has caused the accelerated urbanisation, poverty in rural areas, slums in cities and deprivations of basic social amenities for the masses?

As I mentioned earlier, developing countries when they achieved political independence worked out economic development programmes. These programmes would undoubtedly make their political independence meaningful by eradicating hunger, disease, poverty and illiteracy. Despite their efforts to expand production and increase exports, they found themselves being called

upon to bear the burden of inflation in the developed countries by paying more for their imports. This was owing to adverse terms of trade, receiving less earnings although they produced more.

Even where they had a competitive advantage in certain exports, they found themselves against a wall of protectionism which deprived them of access to developed-country markets. The aid which they have received with appreciation from developed countries has, unfortunately, been inadequate and irregular. They have continued to get into serious debt situations, and many countries spend about 20 to 30% of their external earnings on debt servicing. In short, what we have witnessed is a worsening situation whereby the rich have become richer and the poor have become poorer.

The developing countries have waited with patience hoping that ad hoc piecemeal measures taken by the developed countries to readjust this imbalance would be productive. It was this recognition that led to the call for the establishment of the New International Economic Order at the VIth and VIIth Special Sessions of the General Assembly.

I believe this meeting also offers you an opportunity to have an exchange of views on your own national experiences on this problem. In fact, this exchange is in itself a form of co-operation among countries which is an important element in the strategy for development and employment generation.

It is appropriate, therefore, that I should share with you our own experiences in approaching this problem. The country paper prepared by Sri Lanka will, no doubt, provide detailed formation, but I shall try to put, in broad perspective, our own approach to these problems.

The Government of Sri Lanka, under the leadership of President J.R. Jayawardene, is committed to the establishment and maintenance of a just and fair economic, social and cultural order in which the dignity and freedom of every individual is fully realised and where he enjoys equal basic human rights and opportunities under a Parliamentary form of democracy. To achieve this objective, the Government oriented its economic strategies and created the necessary institutional framework.

One of the major problems which the Government was faced with was that of unemployment, particularly among the educated youth, which has arisen under the system of free education that obtains in Sri Lanka. Whilst evolving a strategy for the future generations, the Government has had to work out a programme to absorb the 1.2 million who were unemployed or under-employed and the 200,000 or so joining these ranks annually. The Government established a separate Ministry of Youth Affairs and Employment entrusted with the important task of integrating the youth in national development and preparation of youth for employment. The Government recognized that the youth in this country was an important national resource which should be harnessed to its full potential for the development of the country.

At the same time, the Government gave priority to certain development schemes which were employment-oriented. The most important of them is the Multi-Purpose Accelerated Mahaweli Development Scheme. This will not only develop 900,000 acres of land, but provide for the opening of new settlements involving 225,000 families constituting a population of 1.2 million, the opportunities in agriculture and agro-based industries.

Although we have been encouraged by the initial success in that we were able to register a growth rate of 8.2% as a result of these new economic policies, we are fully aware of the fact that much more remains to be done for the poorer sections of the community. We can take pride in the fact that we have provided everybody an equality of opportunity to better his economic situation just as at the international level we have been seeking equality of opportunity to develop. We have not sought to socialize poverty but, within the framework of an equitable income distribution system, we have provided incentives and opportunities to the poorer sections of the community to better their economic prospects. It is encouraging to find that already many of them have made use of these opportunities not only to help themselves but also in the country's economic development.

As I said earlier, it is not my intention to give you a detailed account of our development programmes which the Sri Lanka delegation to your meeting will provide you. However, I have tried to give you an insight into our economic thinking and strategies.

During the next few days, you will be addressing yourselves to the problems of economic development and employment. I need hardly say how momentous will be the final results if success crowns your deliberations. We shall all look forward with great keenness to the conclusions you arrive at, the programmes you work out and suggestions you make. It has been my fortunate experience never to be disappointed when I have watched young people entrusted with tasks. It is therefore with confidence that I wish you every success in your endeavours.