

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ



**Speech by  
His Excellency Mr. Maumoon Abdul Gayoom,  
President of the Republic of Maldives,  
at the State Banquet hosted by the  
President and the First Lady of the Maldives,  
in honour of His Excellency Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa,  
President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka,  
and Madam Shiranthi Rajapaksa**

Sunday, 11 February 2007  
Dharubaaruge, Male'

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

*Your Excellency Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa, President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, Madam Shiranthi Rajapaksa, Honourable Ministers, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:*

It is my great pleasure, first of all, to extend once again a very warm welcome to you, Mr. President, and Madam Rajapaksa. Let me assure you that my Government and people are most eager to ensure that your stay here is both comfortable and fruitful.

*Mr. President:*

On the 19th of September 1947, a young, homesick and frightened Maldivian boy arrived in Colombo, on a schooner crossing from Male'.

Colombo was for him a whole new world. Male' had only a few two-story houses. Colombo had many multi-storey buildings. The buildings, cars, double-decker buses and well-paved roads were all remarkably different from what he had seen in Male'. It was an experience that had remained etched in the little boy's mind ever since.

It was also on his first day in Colombo that he had his maiden experience of journeying in a car – a Hilman. It was a most scary experience!

He also stayed for some months in the southern city of Galle, to learn some basic Arabic.

Sixty years on, these first impressions of your beautiful country and its friendly people are still as vivid in my mind.

As vivid, Mr. President, as my delightful visit to Temple Trees last August to dine with you.

*Mr. President:*

With your present State Visit, you have added yet another milestone to a long-running chain that symbolises the Maldives-Sri Lanka bilateral relations and development cooperation. This chain was strengthened remarkably by

the visit of the late President Jayawardene over two decades ago, followed later by the late President Premadasa and President Kumaratunga, and Prime Ministers Wijetunga and Wickremasinghe.

We also cherish the memory of the visit of the late Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike in 1974, and the visit to Sri Lanka the following year by our late Prime Minister Ahmed Zaki.

Your visit has certainly paved the way for even closer collaboration in the time ahead. The two agreements that were signed in our presence earlier today underline the high priority that our two governments attach to enhancing close friendly relations.

Indeed, relations between the Maldives and Sri Lanka are on a very strong footing. The generous assistance that the Sri Lankan Government has extended towards the construction of the Central Library of the Maldives College of Higher Education is a symbol of our close friendship and evidence of the continued development co-operation between our two countries.

Trade between the two countries, cultural ties and bilateral cooperation in many other areas have also been constantly on the rise for many years. Sri Lankan investments in the Maldives and Maldivian investments in Sri Lanka have increased significantly as well.

The biggest share of Sri Lankan investments has been in our tourism industry, where top Sri Lankan companies such as John Keels and Aitken Spence are operating a number of resort properties in the country.

Also, some of the biggest names in the Sri Lankan insurance and chartered accountancy industry, including KPMG, Pricewaterhouse Coopers, Ernst & Young and Ceylinco Insurance Company are conducting successful operations in the Maldives.

Bank of Ceylon has been operating in the country for more than 26 years, and the Bank's contribution to the development of trade and other industries has been noteworthy. In addition, the National Development Bank of Sri Lanka is a key shareholder of the Maldives Finance Leasing Company.

Similarly, top Maldivian entrepreneurs like Universal Enterprises, Cyprea Private Limited and Mr. Hussain Afeef have invested in Sri Lanka's tourism and travel industry. Other reputed Maldivian companies like DAMAS and Novelty are investing in areas such as manufacturing and processing of paper and the bottling of mineral water in Sri Lanka.

The volume of exports and imports between the two countries has been increasing steadily over the past two decades. We are pleased that our fishery and marine export products are still very popular in Sri Lanka.

In fact, our dried skipjack tuna or 'maldive fish' has long been a delicacy among Sri Lankans. The term 'maldive fish' was certainly coined by its faithful consumers, the Sri Lankan people.

*Mr. President:*

No two countries can forge cordial ties without people-to-people contact at different levels. In the case of the Maldives and Sri Lanka, it is this collaboration that forms the very foundation of our age-old relations. With numerous daily flights between the two countries, Maldivians and Sri Lankans are associates, friends and collaborators in various fields.

There are over 7,500 Sri Lankans who are gainfully employed in the Maldives, many in important sectors such as tourism, construction, education, health community and social services.

Similarly, many Maldivians are living in Sri Lanka, and hundreds of our youth are attaining their education in Sri Lankan institutions.

*Mr. President:*

As partners in SAARC, and close collaborators in numerous global arenas such as the UN, the Commonwealth and the Non-Aligned Movement, our two countries have been responsible members of the international community.

Indeed, I had the pleasure of meeting you at last year's NAM Summit in Cuba and the UN General Assembly in New York.

As a staunch defender of human rights in Sri Lanka, you will be pleased to learn that the Maldives is undergoing a major transformation, as we vigorously pursue a wide-ranging democratic reform agenda.

A very important feature of the reform agenda, which is now in its third year, is the advances that we have made in promoting human rights protection in the country.

We now have a national Human Rights Commission established by law and based on the Paris Principles. The Maldives has also joined all major international human rights protection instruments, including the ICCPR, the ICESCR and OPCAT.

We have also tabled before the People's Majlis a package of media reforms, including bills on media freedom, freedom of expression and information and the registration of newspapers and magazines.

The judiciary too is undergoing major changes as part of the reform agenda. One of the key milestones has been the establishment of a Judicial Services Commission.

*Mr. President:*

Peace is essential for progress. Over the past many years, we have been distressed to see the pain and agony that your compatriots have been going through due to communal violence in your country. As brothers, as

neighbours, as friends, we wish speedy success to your efforts to bring lasting peace to your beautiful country and its friendly people.

*Mr. President:*

Let me conclude by wishing you good health and success. May the friendly people of Sri Lanka enjoy peace, prosperity and happiness, and may the warm ties of friendship and co-operation between our two peoples be further strengthened in the years to come!

*Thank you.*