

(Speech delivered by Hon. Dilan Perera, Minister of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare, on 7<sup>th</sup> December 2011, to the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary meeting of the founding of the IOM and the coincident 100<sup>th</sup> Council Meeting. This speech had to be restricted to seven minutes. It took 6.30 minutes to deliver)

Chairman,  
H.E. William Lacy Swing, Director - General, International Organization for Migration (IOM),  
Hon. Ministers and Deputy Ministers,  
Your Excellencies,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

My participation, today, in the simultaneous 100<sup>th</sup> session of the IOM held on its sixteenth anniversary has special meaning. For me, it is a double celebration. Slightly over an year ago, H.E. the President of Sri Lanka, recognizing the special place migration has in our country, created a dedicated Ministry - the Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare, which I head. Reviewing the performance of this Ministry at the last budget speech, delivered a week ago, he expressed total satisfaction. Many were instrumental for this success. The IOM was a special contributor.

Migrant workers have made a substantial contribution to the economy of Sri Lanka. Their remittances formed Sri Lanka's highest foreign exchange. Remittances financed 80% of our import deficit. The migrant labour stock forms 17% of our labour pool. Migration mops up the entire annual labour increase enabling our unemployed rate to be only 4.2 %. Remittances form 8% of our GDP. Migrants are an economic power house.

Yet, this rosy picture hides harsh realities. Migration in Sri Lanka, is female based, unskilled concentrated and, geographically specified, to the Middle East. The efforts of our Ministry are to re-brand migration, mainlining into it semi-skilled and skilled categories, working in higher valued geographical markets.

One of my first steps was to increase the age of housemaids from 18 to 21 years. In four year's time I expect the maximum age to increase to 30 years. Our policy is to have a creeping discouragement of this feminized market. In this redirection, the IOM has been a firm supporter.

Migrant workers being the center of Sri Lanka's economic sustenance, a higher recognition accorded to them is required. I am happy that the IOM has spotted this global lacuna, and devoted this year's conference to dealing with it. On December 18<sup>th</sup>, which happens to be International Migrant's Day, a national campaign is to be launched, drawing attention to migrants as economic heroes and heroines of Sri Lanka. This campaign is being spearheaded by H.E. the President Sri Lanka and will consist of marches along the length and breadth of Sri Lanka. Among others, there will be a cancellation of a commemorative stamp, the issue of a bank debit card, the offering of scholarships to migrant worker's children and other cultural events. In these activities, the IOM is a close and treasured partner.

Migration has become a globalised economic activity. With the world redirecting its focus as part of a post-modern society, migrant skill specifics have changed. Mr. William Tracy Swing, Director - General of the IOM, in his thoughtful presentation made to this conference, drew attention to possible new areas of migration content. He drew attention to the changing demographics in the primary market for migrant workers, the developed countries. He highlighted the explosive population increase of the developing countries, particularly in the youth cohort. He pleaded for a new contract in employment relations. We have to give serious thought to his recommendations.

I wish to deal with two areas in the migrant market which may not have drawn the attention it deserves. Migration has followed the great economic shifts in the commodities markets. First, there was the huntsman stage. Labour agents went around the country hunting for potential recruits. Ethical behaviors were not too evident. They, very often, forged documents to bait their prey. The next stage is the agricultural stage, where commodities are stage - produced for specified markets. The re-targeting we are at, is the agricultural stage of migrant workers. The means adopted for re-targeting, are MOU's with countries.

I would also like to draw attention to the important role played by labour agents in the migration cycle. In Sri Lanka, they are mostly hunters, not producers. We, in association with the IOM, are developing training programmes to make them entrepreneurs.

An area that has been neglected in our discussion is the vital role played by international groupings involved in the migration process. In our part of Asia, we have the Colombo Process, which is an international grouping of sending countries. The most recent meeting of Colombo Process countries was held Dhaka this year. The IOM was a sponsor of the Colombo Process and continues to give its fervent support. As a counterfoil to the Colombo Process, there is the Abu Dhabi Dialogue, which is a grouping of receiving countries. Here too, the IOM was instrumental in getting this going.

Last, but not least, the significant role played by the IOM office in Colombo, led Mr. Richard Danziger, must be mentioned. He is a sturdy supporter of our initiatives.

In conclusion, may I renew my satisfaction at being present at these coincident anniversaries, both of the 60<sup>th</sup> year and 100<sup>th</sup> council meeting of the IOM. I have benefited, learning of the varied experiences on migration round the globe. These have given us much ground for thought. I assure all here that Sri Lanka will be better, for migration policy formulation and implementation, as a result of this conference.

Thank you,