

Statement by Hon. Mangala Samaraweera, Minister of Foreign Affairs at the IORA Ministerial Meeting, in Bali, Indonesia on 27th October 2016

Hon. Ministers
Excellencies
Distinguished Delegates

I wish to first express my deepest condolences to Her Excellency Madam Retno Marsudi, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, on the passing away of her beloved father. Our thoughts are with Her Excellency and the family at this time of grief.

It gives me great pleasure to be amidst a distinguished gathering of the 16th Ministerial Meeting of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) in this idyllic island of Bali.

I convey our deep gratitude to the Government of Indonesia for the warm hospitality and excellent arrangements.

We are confident that the meetings will be fruitful and would take us closer to our common objectives and collective vision for IORA under the effective and able leadership of Indonesia. The contribution made by the previous Chairs is much appreciated while the Secretary General and his staff also deserve our appreciation for their efforts.

I am pleased to have just signed the IORA MoU on Coordination in Search and Rescue Services in the Indian Ocean Region.

Excellencies

Notable progress has been made during the past year, in the areas of the blue economy, women's economic empowerment and institutional strengthening of the IORA.

On this occasion, I wish to share a few thoughts on some matters which are of interest to the IORA member states.

Naturally, in a direct line from the south of Sri Lanka, where I come from, to the Antarctic, there is little land but a vast ocean. The Blue Economy has emerged as a sector of seminal importance to IORA members including Sri Lanka. The ocean based resources in the Indian Ocean are amongst the greatest assets we possess and Blue economy-related initiatives have the potential to tremendously uplift the economic conditions of our peoples.

Therefore, the establishment of the Centre of Excellence on Ocean Sciences and the Environment in Sri Lanka, is timely. Although not fully functional, this Centre would, inter-alia, build capacities of the associated institutions and specialists/experts in the region and serve as a knowledge hub.

The IORA Whale and Dolphin Watching Workshop held in Colombo this year facilitated networking among IORA member States and partners and helped to expand our expertise in sustainable whale and dolphin watching tourism.

We also look forward to the participation of all IORA members at the Second Water Working Group meeting and Ocean Forecasting Workshop to Build Capacity for Indian Ocean Operational System, in Colombo, on 15-16 and 17-18 November respectively.

Excellencies,

Vast changes have taken place across the political spectrum in Sri Lanka with the establishment of the National Unity Government following the Presidential and Parliamentary elections in 2015. The consensus based governance forms the basis of our pursuance of an open, transparent agenda to strengthen democracy and its structures, and economic progress.

Outreach and engagement remain the hallmark of our new foreign policy and in this context Sri Lanka has sought to share our expertise in sectors such as education, human resource development and health - areas in which we have achieved a level of particular excellence.

Sri Lanka remains open to international trade, offering an investor friendly atmosphere, and encouraging foreign direct investment aimed at achieving greater integration into the world economy.

Distinguished delegates,

We look forward to the first IORA Summit in Indonesia in March 2017 commemorating the 20th Anniversary of IORA. We step forward in confidence aiming to further strengthen IORA's role as a dynamic forum in maritime safety and security, trade and investment facilitation, tourism and culture, academic, science and technology, fisheries and disaster risk management, among others. We need to measure progress and chart a course for a more dynamic, action oriented regional collaboration. We believe that the Concord should be a visionary document with the Action Plan providing concrete initiatives.

Sri Lanka wishes to see IORA moving into a new era of dynamism. Accordingly, we must take collective steps to:

- Ensure the security of the Indian Ocean, including the freedom of navigation, freedom of overflying and adherence to international law including UNCLOS.
- Enhance scientific and academic cooperation amongst IORA countries.

- Protect, preserve and use sustainably the valuable ocean resources, guided by international law and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.
- Enhance preparedness to deal with ocean based disasters and un-assessed impact of climate change on ocean weather.
- Establish mechanism for development finance within IORA.
- Expand and broad base IORA's partners for more intense and meaningful cooperation.

As IORA is at the threshold of its 20th Anniversary, it is timely that a process be set in motion with a view to setting up a new vision to chart the organization's future. This should include engaging our dialogue partners more constructively and exploring mechanisms to encourage more interaction and participation.

Excellencies, Distinguished delegates,

I look forward to a constructive dialogue and greater interaction on the ways and means to further strengthen IORA, assess its place in the network of international organizations and the possibilities of greater engagement for the mutual benefit of all the Member States with renewed optimism and vigor.

Sri Lanka will continue to play its part in taking IORA forward into a new era of dynamism.

I thank you.