



Speech of Hon. Mahinda Rajapakse, Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, at the opening session of the 17<sup>th</sup> Commonwealth Forestry Conference on 'Forestry's Contribution to Poverty Alleviation' on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2005 at 8.30am at the BMICH Committee Room- A

*Hon. Minister of Natural Resources and Environment – Mr. A.H.M. Fowzie, Your Excellencies the High Commissioners for Commonwealth countries, Chairman of the Commonwealth Forestry Association, Conservator-General of Forests, Distinguished Participants from Commonwealth countries, Ladies and Gentlemen.*

I am indeed happy to participate in the opening session of the 17<sup>th</sup> Commonwealth Forestry Conference. I thank the organizers for inviting me, and for giving me the opportunity of sharing some of my thoughts with you.

A hundred years ago, 80% of the land area of our country retains a forest cover. Of course, forest lands need to be cleared for establishing new settlements and farms for a growing population. Sri Lanka's population, which is around 20 million today, was only 3 million a hundred years ago. Can it be said that in our approach to forestry management, we have struck a healthy balance between the needs of an increasing population for new homesteads and farm-lands on the one side, and the ecological imperatives of the country for conserving our natural resources for sustainable living, on the other?

The answer, most certainly, is 'No'. If we needed any proof at all, the extent of the destruction of life and property that accompanied the tsunami of December 26<sup>th</sup> provided it in a cruel but dramatic way. If we had protected our mangroves, not dug out the corals along the coast and if we had conserved our sand-dunes, the impact of the tsunami on our coastal communities would have been significantly less damaging.

Forestry mismanagement is also known to result in the drying-up of water sources, and in soil erosion, and in the alteration of rainfall patterns. These in turn affect the productivity of agriculture in the long run, and thereby increase poverty. Forestry mismanagement also results in the destruction of wildlife habitats, which in turn leads to conflict between communities and wild-animals and the damage to agricultural crops by wild animals such as the elephant. It has also affected hydropower production by rapidly silting the reservoirs that are used for the generation of electric power. This in turn contributes to the increase of poverty in the long run, by increasing the cost of power for domestic lighting, the service sector and industry.

Your conference will focus more sharply on the use of forests, - in an immediate short-term perspective-, for the alleviation of poverty in rural communities. In various parts of different developing countries, villagers living near forests are known to derive on average 50% of their income or more from forest products. These include timber used for house-building, various vegetable products, fuel-wood, forest for distilling wine and liquor, bees honey, cane and rattan for furniture and other uses, medicinal plants for health care, and leaves such as the 'tendu' leaf for local cigarettes such as 'beedi'. Forests were also the grazing ground for village cattle.

This no doubt is true for several parts of India such as parts of Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and UP where communities are very dependent on the forest for their

livelihood. It would also be so for several parts of many other Commonwealth countries in Africa and Asia as well.

A generation back, the situation in several parts of Sri Lanka resembled this reality in many respects. Today, however, the Sri Lankan villagers today are not dependent on the forest for their food items, for their timber for house-building, for fuel-wood or for their medicines, in any significant way.

If the forest has any immediate use for them, it is indeed marginal, except in some very few localities where recent developments in eco-tourism have provided employment to a small number of village families whose livelihood is thus indirectly related to the conservation of a forest or mangrove environment. This is also the reality in several parts of other developing countries, such as the States of Tamilnadu and Kerala in India.

Let us define our problem. Sri Lanka needs to conserve the present forest cover in the country. In fact we need to also re-forest some other de-forested areas as well. From a national perspective we need to protect our ecological environment and preserve our bio-diversity. The government is committed to this goal. What elements must we put in place, in order to achieve this objective?

First of all, Sri Lanka must have a clear policy on forestry management. Since independence we have – most of the time – been felling our forests and mangroves without a plan, in a purely ad-hoc manner. Next, our policy must define and recognize our forests as the ‘common property resource’ of the nearby village communities. Next, the government – which legally owns the forests – must hand over its management to the nearby local communities. At the same time it must evolve a mechanism to work in partnership with them, so that long term national objectives and the immediate short term objectives of the local communities are continuously negotiated and resolved. Next, the government must not undermine the forestry management responsibilities of local communities, by permitting interference from higher levels – both political and administrative. And finally, the action plan must be implemented with a strong political will.

We hope these perspectives will be of some relevance to your discussions. We look forward to the outcome of your deliberations, and to the advice and guidance that you may offer, - in particular to our Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, - in the challenges that lie ahead. I thank you once again for inviting me.

Thank you.