



Special Address by President James Michel
On the occasion of his first state visit to Sri Lanka

22-23 August 2012

Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute

“The role of the small island states in the Global tapestry”

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Sri Lanka and Seychelles share a lot of similarities and we can share a lot of ideas as two island countries of the Indian Ocean. We have much to learn from each other.

I would first of all like to express my appreciation for the kind invitation extended to me to address you on “The role of the small island states in the Global tapestry”.

It is a particularly relevant topic to discuss on the occasion of my first state visit to Sri Lanka.

This visit is symbolic of the way in which islands should work together and develop synergies to complement and support each other's development in an extremely volatile global economic environment.

I would thus like to record our thanks to President Rajapaksa for creating the opportunity for us to meet as leaders of island nations, as leaders of Indian Ocean states, and as two partner countries that have a lot to offer each other and the world.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The poet John Donne once wrote: “No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main”.

Donne is saying that we are all connected.

But he is also saying that within the idyll represented by an island, there is also an implicit risk of isolation- the risk of disconnection.

Islands are often seen as separated from each other and mainland countries by the ocean.

On the map of the world, Seychelles is rarely represented by more than a few dots lost in the ocean.

This physical separation can even sometimes translate into a feeling of political separation in the global tapestry.

Sri Lanka is a much larger island than Seychelles. But we share an outlook which is based on a shared vision. A vision which rather than seeing islands as isolated- positions islands as being connectors in the world economy. We provide connections in terms of trade. We provide connections in terms of our oceanic spaces. We provide connections in terms of ideas.

Thus from the North of the Indian Ocean to the Equator, Seychelles and Sri Lanka offer an ocean of opportunity. By working together, we are connecting those dots to create a new space for prosperity.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Shared prosperity requires shared responsibility.

And there is a great responsibility shared by islands in terms of protecting our oceans and sustainable development of our oceans.

For us, protection and development must go hand in hand. In the post Rio landscape, we have to prioritise the global attention given to the blue economy.

We must first of all assess how to better develop our respective fisheries industries. In the current structure of the world economy- the majority of the wealth from fishing activity is still earned in the developed world, even if the majority of the fish caught actually comes from the Southern oceans, including the Indian Ocean.

I am pleased that many Seychellois entrepreneurs have for several years now, been building their own vessels in Sri Lanka, and this has helped to empower our own locally owned fisheries industry.

I believe strongly that by boosting the capacity of the islands of our region to exploit their own resources, we will multiply the opportunities for each other.

Sri Lanka's expertise in ship building also offers an opportunity for us to strengthen maritime trade routes between the islands of the Indian Ocean.

Again, most maritime trade routes do not prioritise islands- we are rarely destinations- although we may benefit from being on the way to somewhere else!

We must encourage entrepreneurs from our respective islands, and from our region to gradually build a 'right-size' maritime trade network. All islands of the Southern Indian Ocean suffer from an under-developed maritime trading network. There are real opportunities to enhance the flow of goods in this region. This will improve the trading prospects of both our countries.

When we speak of our ocean, we must also think of it as a space for research and environmental protection.

The roles of island nations as guardians of this space is globally recognized.

Islands and their oceans represent one-sixth of Earth's total area.

Islands support many of the most unique and isolated natural systems including:

- more than half the world's marine biodiversity
- 7 of the world's 10 coral reef hotspots

- 10 of the 34 richest areas of biodiversity in the world

It is regrettable that up to now, oceans have primarily been regarded as spaces for exploitation. We must make them spaces for sustainable development.

Island nations must take ownership of the blue economy to ensure that it delivers benefits not only for their own people- but so that it also enhances the benefits for the planet.

Our nations must also work together to define the parameters for sustainable tourism at a global level. Both our countries have continued to improve the wealth creation potential of this industry. Through tourism, we are again connecting our island spaces to the world. There is a lot more we can do in this regard, and I look forward to working with President Rajapaksa towards that end.

Excellencies ladies and gentlemen,

Seychelles is one of the smallest countries in the world, with only 85,000 people. While Sri Lanka's population of 20 million may appear much bigger- we share a vision for development which is people centred.

All islanders know where the land ends. We know at the outset that there are limitations to our terrestrial resources.

With such limits in mind, it is obvious to us that our greatest resource will always be our human resource.

Both our countries have placed great importance on educating our people, and on investment in education.

I am thus also very excited and encouraged by the opportunities that have arisen in my visit to strengthen cooperation between our countries in terms of education, as well as technical exchanges in the health and legal sectors.

There is a long tradition of Sri Lankan professionals contributing to our development in these sectors. I believe that our future cooperation will further offer an example of cooperation based on shared ideals.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I also strongly believe that islands have a critical role to play in relation to the reform and development of the world's multilateral architecture.

Islands are often at the epicenter of global geopolitics.

And so we have to continue to work closely with partners with whom we have shared interests, and with whom we can stand together to work towards a more egalitarian global order.

Sri Lanka and Seychelles provide a partnership to work towards this.

We have always said- just because our country is small- does not mean we must think small.

Our partnership with Sri Lanka based on connecting islands, is an example of like-minded nations standing together to provide leadership on a global level.

Today, many islands are demonstrating global leadership and rapid progress in addressing sustainable development challenges and inspiring others around the world to do the same.

The 'Western Indian Ocean Coastal Challenge' is an initiative for example by the Government of Seychelles, that is a regional "call to action" to address the threats posed by climate change and to ensure sustainable national economies, coastal livelihoods, food and human security, and marine and coastal ecosystems.

In this challenge we invite all the countries that share the western Indian Ocean's vast, resource rich waters and coasts to come together and commit to actions based on a shared 25 year vision.

As part of this call, 50% of Seychelles land area has been declared a nature reserve.

Seychelles therefore stands today as the country with the highest percentage of its land territory declared as protected areas under conservation. This is the gift we are giving to humanity.

Seychelles has also been at the forefront of the fight against piracy in the Indian Ocean. Piracy has become one of the biggest impediments to global trade, and also has threatened the way of life of the people who depend on the Indian Ocean for their livelihood. As we speak, every Seychellois continues to pray for our two compatriots that are still being held hostage in Somalia. I know there are also Sri Lankans being held in Somalia and we pray for their early release.

As an island nation in the Indian Ocean, we also look to Sri Lanka, as a partner in the effort to ensure that the Indian Ocean can be a zone of peace and development, and not of anarchy.

Sri Lanka's years of experience in combating terrorism and armed insurgents are invaluable in relation to strengthening our ability to keep our ocean safe, for the development of our people.

As fellow custodians of our ocean, we also look to Sri Lanka as partners in the preservation of biodiversity, in the protection of our environment and in sustainably developing tourism and fisheries in the region.

The world can also learn from Sri Lanka's leadership in fostering an environment of peace in a post conflict situation. The achievements of Sri Lanka in this respect are remarkable.

There are of course still challenges ahead- but Sri Lanka's rapid emergence as an economic success story illustrates the importance of leadership to bring stability and growth.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our two island nations, by connecting to each other through the Indian Ocean, offer a compact to better preserve the stability of this region.

We are also strengthening our partnership in the context of the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation.

Regional integration can provide us with a strong tool to secure new market access and investment opportunities. In the era of global economic crisis and fierce global competition for market access, it is important for South-South partnerships, especially among like-minded island nations, to enhance economic cooperation to promote trade and investment with each other.

Within IOR-ARC, the islands of the Indian Ocean can be the key connections between continents.

We also look forward to the next Commonwealth Summit that will be held in Sri Lanka in 2013. The Commonwealth underlines our common history, and our shared experience. For Seychelles, the fact that the summit will once again be in the Indian Ocean, after Perth last year, is a strong indicator of the rise in importance of this region..

Earlier this month, I announced Seychelles' intention to seek a non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council for the year 2017. Many have remarked that this is a particularly bold move considering our country's small size.

We see our candidature as a means of conveying that all nations matter- whether big or small.

We see our candidature as a means of strengthening the role of islands in the global tapestry.

Together, the islands of the Indian Ocean are leading a narrative of growth and opportunity within the region. Sri Lanka and Seychelles are at the forefront of this narrative. I believe we should establish a circle of friendship in the Indian Ocean.

This is a narrative based on shared appreciation for the potential of our ocean, and the need to protect it. Based on our shared desire to increase trading opportunities for and between island nations. Based on our shared investment in our peoples. Based on our shared prosperity..

Together, we represent a movement towards more equitable and sustainable development.

We are proud to stand together to champion this movement.

I thank you.