

Address by the State Minister of Foreign Affairs Tharaka Balasuriya, at the 4th Ministerial Meeting (MM-4) of the Archipelagic and Island States (AIS) Forum on 6 December, 2022

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Excellency Luhut B. Panjaitan, Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs of Indonesia,

Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the outset, I wish to extend my deep appreciation, on behalf of the Government of Sri Lanka, to the Government of Indonesia for the exceptional hospitality and courtesies extended to me and my delegation. I also congratulate His Excellency Luhut B. Panjaitan, Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs of Indonesia, the UNDP Office in Indonesia and the AIS Secretariat for their tireless efforts in organizing this high-profile event.

Sri Lanka, similar to other island states, is rich in biodiversity, as well as ethnic and cultural diversity, which sets us apart from the rest of the world. However, climate induced disasters, biodiversity depletion, over-exploitation, pollution, ocean acidification and rising sea-levels are looming ahead of us now more than ever and we need collaborative and concerted efforts to safeguard the archipelagic and island states.

Excellencies and Distinguished delegates,

Sri Lanka is uniquely positioned within the Indian Ocean and remains committed to preserve ocean health while sustainably utilizing maritime resources in a manner that would yield intrinsic benefits. Sri Lanka is conscious that a lack of capacity on the part of global hegemony to address concerns of an international scale would have an intense impact on the AIS countries whose wealth of resources extend across land and sea.

Sri Lanka welcomes the initiative to convene the 1st High Level Meeting (HLM) next year with the participation of Heads of States. We strongly maintain that the High Level Meeting will be able to draw increased global focus on the AIS Forum. This would promote AIS objectives, serving the purpose for which this Forum has been established. It would also make a greater impact by voicing a strong collective opinion that would be heard at the highest decision-making level.

Excellencies and Distinguished delegates,

The President of Sri Lanka revealed his plan, at the recently concluded UNFCCC COP27, to establish an International Climate Change University in Sri Lanka to enhance the capacity of the region. This will be a global center for blue green studies – for researchers, academics, bureaucrats, youth and media personnel, to exchange knowledge beyond national and disciplinary boundaries.

This initiative will also provide an opportunity to disseminate and manifest the vision of the AIS Forum as the University will focus on oceanic natural capital, health, governance and related concerns as these are vital components in climate change. I invite this Forum to collaborate with Sri Lanka in this effort, moving forward.

Excellencies and Distinguished Delegates,

Each sovereign country is responsible for its own marine resources and sustainable development. The need for structured international cooperation underpins all aspects of the blue economy. As an open-ended, inclusive, and development-focused ocean cooperation platform, this Forum should utilize this unique opportunity to strengthen and elevate collaborative efforts to identify the most efficacious strategies in allocating resources effectively and efficiently.

During these times, when economies are under more strain than ever, it is imperative that we work together to identify, develop, and accelerate the use of innovative and sustainable financial instruments of the blue economy and demonstrate insightful foresight. The blue economy presents an opportunity for archipelagic and island states to make a “blue” recovery which places us on a trajectory to achieving SDG 14.

Excellencies and Distinguished delegates,

Being intimately aware of the importance of ocean ecosystems in order to take suitable climate actions, Sri Lanka has, thus, recognized investments in reef restoration to preserve marine biodiversity, sustain fisheries and ocean-centric livelihoods to sustain food production and food security. The **Country Prosperity Plan** which was recently launched during the COP27 will be the roadmap for Sri Lanka to attract foreign investment to boost economic growth, contributing to post-pandemic recovery, accelerating climate adaptation, and bringing down greenhouse gas emissions. Sri Lanka is willing to share our experience with member states of this Forum to ensure that we leave no one behind.

Excellencies and Distinguished delegates,

The destruction of the marine environment due to ill-considered spatial policies has continued to deteriorate the health of our oceans. This is why Sri Lanka has commenced the development of a holistic **Marine Spatial Plan (MSP)**. Sri Lanka is currently scoping out the principles, approach, and governance of the MSP process to contribute to elevating the blue economy of Sri Lanka.

In our efforts to create a sense of importance surrounding the preservation of blue carbon ecosystems, Sri Lanka has spearheaded the UNGA Resolution to designate March 1st as the “**International Day on Seagrass**”. In our efforts of continuing to raise awareness, Sri Lanka takes this opportunity to invite all other archipelagic and island states to join us as we commemorate this day on the **1 of March, 2023**.

Excellencies and Distinguished delegates,

While focusing on enhancing our blue economy and raising awareness on the importance of marine ecosystems, we cannot disregard the impacts of trans-boundary air/plastics/chemical pollution in the Indian Ocean and the atmosphere. In recent years, Sri Lanka’s efforts in addressing ocean pollution stems from a result of accidents such as the MV X-Press Pearl disaster of 2021, which disrupted the region on an unprecedented scale.

While there have been marine disasters before, Sri Lanka has never confronted one with such poisonous cargo. Marine pollution is a transboundary issue that affects us all. It was evident, when scientists predicted that the ecological effects of the MV X-Press Pearl would affect the entire region, including Indonesia.

Excellencies and Distinguished delegates,

This level of interconnection is the crux of why regional and international coordination will be pivotal in order to ensure a successful outcome in addressing ocean pollution. In order to address the lack of coordination during maritime disasters and marine pollution incidents, at the UN Ocean Conference in 2022, Sri Lanka has proposed that an International Maritime Disaster Recovery Mechanism be developed to deal with oil spills, chemical spills as well as spills of hazardous and noxious material and plastic nurdles and other maritime disasters.

To this end, a collective initiative of a rapid response mechanism is an urgent need. Sri Lanka invites the AIS Forum to work towards establishing a concrete mechanism to respond swiftly and assist in post-disaster recovery.

Excellencies and Distinguished delegates,

In conclusion, let us have faith in the goals of AIS Forum, confidence in our vision and a commitment to a programme of action in pursuit of them. We must strengthen our institutional framework to facilitate effective collaboration within the AIS Forum. Sri Lanka is confident that we as a Forum can achieve our collective goals for the future by sharing our experiences and best practices.

I thank you for your kind attention and I wish this forum every success!