58th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference

Colombo, Sri Lanka

Speech Made By

The Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association

On

Tuesday 11 September 2012

By Dr William F. Shija

Secretary-General

Commonwealth Parliamentary Association
The Hon Chamal Rajapaksa, MP, CPA President and Speaker of the Parliament of Sri Lanka

Hon. Mninwa Johannes Mahlangu, CPA Vice President and Chairman of the National Council of Provinces of South Africa

Rt Hon. Sir Alan Haselhurst, MP., United Kingdom House of Commons and Chairperson of the CPA Executive Committee

Hon. Dr Nafisa Shah, MP., of Pakistan National Assembly CPA Vice Chairperson

Hon Marwick Khumalo, MP., of Swaziland National Assembly and CPA Treasurer

Hon Alix Boyd-Knights, MHA, Chairperson of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) and Speaker of the House of Assembly, Dominica

Dr the Hon Sudharshani Fernandopulle, MP, CWP President

His Excellency Kamlesh Sharma, Commonwealth Secretary-General and Mrs Sharma

Hon Speakers and Presiding Officers

Distinguished Heads of Delegations

Members of the Diplomatic Corps

Distinguished Conference Delegates

Clerks and CPA Regional and Branch Secretaries

Invited Guests, Observers, Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen

(AYU BOWAN)
Mr President and Distinguished Delegates,

I feel very delighted that this 58th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference here in Colombo, Sri Lanka, gives me another privilege to address you this afternoon. I join the Chairperson of the Executive Committee, Rt Hon. Sir Alan Haselhurst, MP, United Kingdom, House of Commons, and you Distinguished Delegates, in the expression of immense appreciation and gratitude to the President of the Association and Speaker of the Parliament of Sri Lanka, the Hon Chamal Rajapaksa, MP, the Parliament and the Government and people of Sri Lanka, for the wonderful reception, hospitality, and excellent arrangements that have been made for all the delegates to this conference. Mr President and Speaker of Sri Lanka, we thank you very much. (Bhohoma Sthuthi)

I believe Delegates will join me in having noted that Sri Lanka now appears to enjoy its peaceful atmosphere after years of conflict as we can see the indications of social and cultural vibrancy.

I am very delighted that the Commonwealth Secretary-General, His Excellency Kamalesh Sharma, is able to join us this year and I wholeheartedly welcome you, Your Excellency, and your Delegation. I am happy to note that as Commonwealth Secretary-General you continue to support the community of Commonwealth parliamentarians through a number of programme activities, including attending our conference, in person, or by representation. Although you were unable to be with us for our Centennial conference in London last year, I am glad that you were ably represented by your Deputy Secretary-General, Mrs Mmasekgoa Masire-Mwamba.

Distinguished delegates,

This year’s conference theme, “Ensuring a Relevant Commonwealth for the Future” and the scheduled workshops, further reflect on our century-old dynamic process to promote parliamentary democracy in the Commonwealth and beyond. Simply defined, parliamentary democracy is governance based on majority rule with minority share. When I addressed you last year in London, I recounted how the CPA at 100 had gone through the thick and thin of peaceful and conflict periods; moved on to eliminate discriminatory laws; strengthened voting systems; reformed the administration and funding of parliaments; established new parliamentary structures; and promoted parliamentary international diplomacy. These activities, facilitated by numerous physical and remote communications, were realized through the various programmes we undertake every year.

Mr President, many delegates will recall that just over ten years ago, the CPA established the system of periodic five-year Strategic Plans; the first being for 2002-2006 and the second being for the period 2007-2012. It is my expectation that the General Assembly will endorse the third Strategic Plan for the period 2013-2017, here in Colombo, on Friday 14 September, having been approved and recommended by the Executive Committee. To improve the implementation of our next Strategic Plan, we will develop annual Business Plans with indicative and measurable objectives for implementation.

In addressing you today, I wish to emphasize that the delivery of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference is a highlight in our programme activities. It is part of the implementation of the current Strategic Plan for 2007-2012. The Conference theme of this 58th conference is meant to enable delegates to reflect on the challenges raised by the Eminent
Persons Group (EPG) which was formed by Commonwealth Heads Government in Trinidad and Tobago in 2009 and reported in Perth last year on what could be done to strengthen the Commonwealth.

For this reason, I feel obliged to once again, thank the CPA Sri Lanka Branch for hosting this conference. The hosting of the Annual Conference is a major exercise and I believe delegates will join me in commending Sri Lanka for hosting the Conference for the third time in the history of our Association, having first done so in 1974, 1995 and this year.

On our part, this conference is therefore a continuation of the programmes kit that we expend considerable resources each year to enable members and parliamentary staff to exchange and debate parliamentary and other global issues. It is through events such as this conference programme that Commonwealth parliamentarians effectively participate in the examination of national, regional and international issues such as terrorism, human trafficking, international trade, climate change and others.

Mr President,
The CPA programme activities reflect the broad categories of our current Strategic Plan; that is, Professional Development for Members and Staff; Technical Assistance for Branches; Assistance to improve Human Rights; Global, National and Personal Security; and Sustainable Development. It is through these broad-based programme areas that we are able to support our Member Branches and respond to branch or regional requests based on the available resources each year.

For example, for decades now, our professional development workshops for members and staff have included the rotational annual Commonwealth Parliamentary Seminar such as the one held in New Delhi, India, last year and the one in Samoa; this year and the Canadian Seminar held in Ottawa each year. We also have been convening several workshops on Benchmarks for democratic legislatures; Post-Election Seminars for Branches; and the Annual and Small Branches Conferences.

There have also been Government and Opposition Workshops in Nigeria for West Africa and Tanzania for East Africa that were held in partnership with the Commonwealth Secretariat; Staff Development Workshops at Regional level, as well as Technical Assistance Programmes to support Branches such as Bougainville, the Solomon Islands, Malawi, Swaziland and Guyana. All these activities significantly contribute to the strengthening of parliaments and elevate the relevance of the Commonwealth.

In the area of gender, the CPA has continued to support the work of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians. Governance programmes to promote gender equality and equity in the workplace have been held in cooperation with the Commonwealth Secretariat and other partners. For example, last year, the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Pacific Region Gender and Democracy Seminar was held in New Zealand.

Also, the number of women elected as Members of Parliament and those who attend CPA events has over the past 10 years steadily increased. The CWP Chairperson regularly writes to CPA
Branch Presidents encouraging them to include more women in their delegations to the Annual Conference because this is a very enriching parliamentary experience. I am happy to recall that we have worked closely with the first CWP Chairperson, Hon Lindiwe Maseko, Speaker of Gauteng, Hon Kashmala, MP of Pakistan as well as the current CWP Chairperson, Hon Alix Boyd-Knights, Speaker of Dominica.

Also, I am happy to note that a recent three-year CWP work programme has provided focus and impetus for the Association. A triennial CWP Conference in the final year of the term of the CWP Chairperson is organized at the Annual Conference; and at its 2010 meeting in Kenya, the General Assembly agreed that the CWP Chairperson become one of the Officers of the Association. I believe that these steps, which promote the participation of women in public service through parliaments, are highly relevant to the future of the Commonwealth.

In the area of global, national and personal security, our programme events have always focused on debates on human trafficking, the rights of women and children, migration, and other related issues. The CPA has had rich discussions and considerable experience to assist Parliaments and countries in post-conflict situations. This type of programme could benefit countries such as Sri Lanka, and the CPA will examine the possibility of planning and implementing a relevant programme for Sri Lanka in the near future, particularly in cooperation with the Commonwealth Secretariat and the parliament of Sri Lanka itself.

Mr President, with regard to Commonwealth Promotion activities, the CPA has an annual Commonwealth Day programme which brings together over 35 Commonwealth citizens aged between 18 and 26 at CPA Headquarters to introduce participants to the Commonwealth, the CPA, democracy and parliamentary affairs, and includes a tour of the United Kingdom Parliament. Commonwealth Day and Youth Parliament activities across branches are usually supported by the Secretariat through modest grants.

Mr. President,

The brief programme activities I have described are usually made possible because of four main factors: that is, programme source, funding, host Branch availability and partners. I therefore kindly request you to continue to identify these areas that your parliaments and legislatures can base a programme request, since this is an important principle in a member-driven organization such as ours.

It is gratifying for me to note that at present our Association is financially healthy to enable an increase in the volume of programme activities through short and medium term proposed events.

The other factor that energises our activities and programmes is our relationship with partners. Over the years, the Association has built close partnerships with almost all organizations that carry out parliamentary work, either through research or issue-based events. The Commonwealth Secretariat and other Commonwealth organizations make up the main partners. We believe that good partners enable us to add new methods of expanding the relevancy of the Commonwealth.
Mr President,

The CPA programme activities are facilities to strengthen the effectiveness of parliamentarians and parliamentary staff. Over the past decade, the CPA and partners have contributed much to parliamentary reform and strengthening. For example, last year, the CPA and the World Bank Institute co-published a major book on Parliamentary Reform in Africa after several years of cooperation on the subject. Earlier in 2006, we introduced the Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures, a programme which continues to assist many developing parliaments to modernise their parliamentary procedures and practices.

Mr President, Distinguished Delegates, let me end my remarks by requesting that every one of us may wish to use the opportunity available at this conference to further expand the fraternity and friendship through the CPA.

We need to continue to overcome our cultural and gender barriers for a better Commonwealth. Let us use the opportunities at this conference in Sri Lanka and future activities to strengthen equality and eliminate divisive elements that could weaken the relevance of the Commonwealth in future. Also, the development partnerships that lead to the reduction of poverty should be maximised in the Commonwealth.

Mr President, the CPA successes have always been made by all in the family. I therefore wish to recognize the extensive contribution and guidance of former and present Chairpersons and Members of the Executive Committee, as well as our Speakers and Presiding Officers. In the period under review and now, they have always provided guidance, encouragement, and clear policy direction based on a democratic process. I respectfully and highly commend our Speakers and Presiding Officers who make decisions for our Branches’ participation in our activities such as this conference in Sri Lanka and several others.

I also wish to thank my colleagues, the Regional and Branch Secretaries for their most valuable, extensive and dedicated contribution and assistance in communicating the essential information that make the life line of our Association. And last but not least, I sincerely thank my colleagues, all the staff of the CPA Headquarters Secretariat, who constantly team up with me to keep the CPA machinery constantly moving.

Mr President, Distinguished Delegates, Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen,
I wish you all a happy and successful conference and look forward to working with you to prepare for the next and 59th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.