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Secretary Michael R. Pompeo and Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Dinesh Gunawardena

REMARKS TO THE PRESS

MICHAEL R. POMPEO, SECRETARY OF STATE
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FOREIGN MINISTER GUNAWARDENA: Honorable Michael Pompeo, Secretary of State of the United States, (inaudible) minister of state, madam ambassador, members of the delegation.

Mr. Secretary, firstly I must welcome you and your delegation to Sri Lanka with warm and pleasant weather and (inaudible).

Tomorrow, the 29th of October, 2020, marks the significant milestone of the 72nd anniversary of the establishing of diplomatic relations between Sri Lanka, then Ceylon, and the United States of America. So indeed, it's a very important day (inaudible), Secretary of State, (inaudible) taken to be with us.

From over 70 years, our two countries have nurtured a strong relationship founded on shared values of democracy and socioeconomic (inaudible). The relations between our peoples go back to (inaudible), (inaudible) establishment of diplomatic relations.

Over the years, this engagement has significantly matured into a multifaceted relations covering political, economic, educational, cultural, defense shares including maritime matters. Even important, the people-to-people interaction between our two nations.

In this context, it gives me immense pleasure in extending to you, my esteemed counterpart from the United States, Honorable Michael Pompeo, a warm and cordial welcome to Sri Lanka. The fact that you have chosen to visit Sri Lanka despite formidable challenge presented by the COVID-19 and dedicating your time and sharing your insight is heartwarming, Excellency.

In a wide-ranging discussion with His Excellency, the President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and our own discussions have generated a renewed momentum to the conversations with key American interlocutors have had with Sri Lankan leaders over the past months this year.

And so Secretary, you're visiting Sri Lanka at this current moment the world is challenged with COVID-19 pandemic of unimaginable proportions affecting our lives, livelihoods, relations across the borders.

In the 1930s, Johns Hopkins University in the United States commissioned a study to develop (inaudible) public and community health system which contributed toward Sri Lanka's successful health system.

Mr. Secretary, Sri Lanka is the oldest democracy in Asia. We are citizens who have enjoyed universal enfranchisement for almost 90 years. From a more dynamic perspective, there's also time in Sri Lanka where the democratic efforts and practice have stood strong with the Sri Lankan people resounding expressly their free choice through two major electoral processes of presidential and parliamentary elections.

These elections reflect the people's mandate to safeguard the unitary state sovereignty, territorial integrity, national security, economic progress, presenting a clear opportunity for all our friendly nations, especially the United States, to join in our forward journey for a stable, secure country with economic advancement.

The United States is one of Sri Lanka's major development partners with over U.S. dollar 2 billion worth of development assistance in wide-ranging areas including agriculture, environment, natural resources, health, education, research development, trade, and humanitarian assistance. The U.S. remains Sri Lanka's largest single market with exports of U.S. dollar, 3.1 billion in 2019, and even in the present context of COVID-19, related market downturn remains in a smaller position with U.S. dollars 1.1 billion for the first half of this year.

The U.S. has been a friend and assisting Sri Lanka in times of difficulty, and we remain deeply grateful for your support. U.S. assistance to Sri Lanka after the Asian tsunami in 2004 was significant. I recall the visits of former President George Bush Sr. and former President Bill Clinton, their assistance in the aftermath. Also in the recent times of Easter Sunday terrorist attacks in April 2019 and also most recently for the COVID-19 mitigation. Especially, I also extend my sincere thanks and appreciation once again for proscribing the LTTE terrorist organization even before 9/11 attacks and up to now.

And as we go along, Secretary, today's discussions are a continuation of interactions of His Excellency President Gotabaya Rajapaksa with key U.S. interlocutors, dialogue which took place virtually between myself and Secretary Pompeo a few months ago. It does mean an opportunity for both sides to understand each other's priorities, sharing sides, and consider steps to further elevating bilateral engagement on agreed areas of cooperation.

In furtherance of making our bilateral engagements more robust, we have agreed to convene the next sessions of the U.S.-Sri Lanka Partnership Dialogue for – in early 2021, and also progress on several areas including economic, defense, and research through intensified coordination.

Next sessions of the joint council of the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement will also be convened on the earliest possible timeframe. It was also considered opportune to broaden our bilateral engagement in areas such as ICT, cybersecurity, agriculture, science, technology, innovations, and trade and investment business, and climate change.

As a sovereign, free, independent nation, Sri Lanka's foreign policy will remain neutral, non-aligned, and friendly. Conscious of the opportunities and responsibilities that come with our strategic location, we see the importance of maintaining the freedom of navigation in our seas and airspace, also protecting sea lines of communication and the undersea cables.

We believe all countries should be – adhere to and respect international law, including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. We share views on the potential multifaceted maritime cooperation with Sri Lanka is keen to progress. Secretary Pompeo's visit and the discussions have further enhanced our warm and friendly relations. And once again, I extend my grateful thanks to you, Secretary Pompeo.

Finally, let me wish Secretary Pompeo and Mrs. Pompeo, who is joining him on this visit, a pleasant stay in Sri Lanka and safe travel in Asia in the next few days.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you.

FOREIGN MINISTER GUNAWARDENA: On behalf of the people of Sri Lanka, I wish you *ayubowan*.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you very much.

FOREIGN MINISTER GUNAWARDENA: And I give the floor —

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

FOREIGN MINISTER GUNAWARDENA: — to the Secretary of State.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Minister. Hello, everyone. It's wonderful to be in here, Colombo. It's most special because indeed, as you said, we're one day short of 72 years of our diplomatic relations between our two countries, a remarkable anniversary for each of us.

The foreign minister and I had a great conversation. I had a chance to congratulate him on his reappointment – well done – and had a very positive conversation with President Rajapaksa a bit earlier this morning as well.

My overall message in both engagements was very clear: The United States seeks to strengthen our partnership with democratic, peaceful, prosperous, and fully sovereign Sri Lanka. Our new embassy, for instance, is nearing completion. It's a sign of our

commitment to the country and to the people of Sri Lanka, and we of course spend a good deal of time talking about our cooperation in defeating the pandemic that came from Wuhan, China.

The United States has donated now just over \$6 million in COVID assistance to Sri Lanka, and early in the pandemic, Sri Lankan factories and garment manufacturers quickly filled hundreds – hundreds of orders for high-quality PPE, and we are grateful for this output which saved American lives. Thank you so much.

President Trump is working hard with our private sector to develop vaccines and therapeutics to beat this virus and benefit our peoples and indeed the peoples of the entire world. We'll need the power of private industry to regain our economic footing now and in the future, and we look forward to working with the people of Sri Lanka on that matter.

We talked about this a great deal. We talked about our economic relationship, great American companies that are here today. Brands like Coke and Oracle and IBM are here certifying – or excuse me, creating high-quality jobs. These American companies are the most reliable partners on the planet. They're accountable to the law, they're transparent, they're assets to the communities in which they operate.

And as I conveyed today, good governance, transparency in policy consistently will attract even more American investment. Those principles are deeply consistent with Sri Lanka's history, its heritage as the oldest democracy in Asia.

We also had a wide-ranging discussion on our security cooperation which helps keep some of the world's most vital sea lanes open, as the minister recognized, in addition to our joint trainings. I'm proud that Sri Lankan officers received training at the United States institutions like West Point, my alma mater, and I'm also proud the United States has donated two Coast Guard cutters that are now Sri Lanka's navy patrolling your waters.

Indeed, a strong, sovereign Sri Lanka is a powerful and strategic partner for the United States on the world stage. It can be a beacon for a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Look, that's quite a contrast to what China seeks. We see from bad deals, violations of sovereignty and lawlessness on land and sea, that the Chinese Communist Party is a predator, and the United States comes in a different way. We come as a friend and as a partner.

Finally, this afternoon, I'll travel – it's important for me to take a moment to go and visit the Shrine of St. Anthony, one of the five sites that was attacked by ISIS on Easter Sunday of 2019. I'll shortly have the chance to pay my respects to the hundreds of victims of evil terrorists, including five Americans. I'm proud that the State Department has offered substantial counterterrorism assistance to help Sri Lankans bring killers of Americans and their own people to justice. These Easter Sunday attacks represent the kind of sectarianism that Sri Lankans are ready to leave behind forever. Sri Lankans of all backgrounds – Buddhists, Hindus, Christians and Muslims alike – want a peaceful nation where their human rights are respected.

In his victory speech last year, President Rajapaksa stated that he is the president of all citizens, not of only those who voted for him. And as our two nations move forward, the United States is counting on those words to hold true. We fully expect that Sri Lanka will fulfill its pledges to take meaningful, concrete steps to promote accountability, justice, and reconciliation.

Let us all stand together, Mr. Minister, shoulder to shoulder. We've seen some of the good that we can achieve for our citizens when we do. And let's do even more together on the strength of our partnership marked by democratic values.

Thank you, Mr. Minister, for hosting me here today.

FOREIGN MINISTER GUNAWARDENA: Thank you.

MODERATOR: We will now open the floor for questions from the media, and we request the local media to present their question.

QUESTION: Thank you very much for giving this opportunity. My name is Chavika Gunasekara and I'm representing (inaudible) News in Sri Lanka.

My question is to you, Secretary of State, Mr. Pompeo: Why have you chosen to visit Sri Lanka at a time when the U.S. is going in for elections? Is the purpose of your visit to move Sri Lanka towards an alliance against China? I mean, is U.S. attempting to offset Beijing's influence by signing new agreements like MCC, SOFA, through the Quad group in Sri Lanka?

And also, you all have imposed sanctions against our present army commander, one of the war heroes in our country, Lieutenant General Shavendra Silva, from entering United – from entering United States of America based on independently unverified information. What is the current status on that? And did the Government of Sri Lanka request you to reconsider the imposition of travel ban on Lieutenant General Shavendra Silva in terms of the Geneva resolution? Thank you.

SECRETARY POMPEO: All right. Thank you. I think there were three questions there. The last one, look, it's a legal process in the United States. We'll always continue to review it. We want to make sure we get it both technically, factually, and legally right. We'll continue to do that.

I think your first question was about timing. Foreign Minister reminded me I owed you. I was scheduled to come here previously and events around the world caused me not to be able to make that stop here. This was a time when I was able to make it. I am thrilled to be here. It's a wonderful opportunity, and on the eve of our 72nd anniversary of our relationship, I think it was an important time for me to be here, and I'm glad that I was able to make it.

Your final question was about what we're trying to accomplish here. We want the people of Sri Lanka to have sovereignty and independence. We want them to be successful. We want sustainable development for them. We think the United States, as a friend and partner, offers just exactly that, and we want that. Look, we have a shared vision. Democratic nations always do, right? So I'll travel – I traveled to India, I'm here, I'll be in the Maldives this afternoon, I'll head on to Indonesia. We know that these democracies have a shared vision for free and open shipping lanes, the capacity to trade, for people to travel wherever they want to go.

These are visions that the people of Sri Lanka share with the people of the United States. And so my visit today was to talk about those things, to figure out good ways that we can continue to build and develop our relationship so that American private sector companies will see the opportunity that's here and come invest and train Sri Lankans and build up those communities too. These are the kind of things that America offers. There is a different vision. The Chinese have a very different vision.

We want to make sure that the people of Sri Lanka have the capacity to execute their sovereign rights to remain independent, to have the freedom to hold elections just like the ones that you all have held. Those are the things that democracies work on together. Those are the vision that we share. And it's why I was excited to be able to make it here today.

Thank you. Thanks for all those questions.

MODERATOR: Okay. And from the U.S. media, we go to Nike Ching with VOA.

QUESTION: Good day, Mr. Foreign Minister. Colombo is indeed a beautiful place, glad to be here. If I may ask, this is the first time in many years a U.S. secretary of state visits Sri Lanka. Do you welcome more U.S. presence in the region? Is the (inaudible) U.S.-Sri Lanka relationship an irritant to Sri Lanka's relationship with China? Thank you very much.

FOREIGN MINISTER GUNAWARDENA: Sri Lanka-U.S. relations, as I mentioned earlier, it is 72nd anniversary, very happy that Secretary of State has picked the anniversary to be with us. It's long years of cooperation that we have come forward, and we look forward to go to the future too.

As we have Secretary of State with us today, there will be many U.S. dignitaries even in the future visiting Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is a neutral, non-aligned country committed to peace, as I mentioned earlier. On that principles, we hope to continue with our relations with the United States and other countries.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Great. Thank you, everyone.