

**UN Ocean Conference, 27 June to 1 July 2022, Lisbon, Portugal**

**Sri Lanka Country Statement**

Chairman,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. For over two millennia, Sri Lanka has played a vital role in international trade and commerce, principally connecting the east to the west through the ancient silk route. These ancient trade routes have now been replaced by the many sea lines of communication that pass near Sri Lanka essentially enabling the country to continue its historic role in facilitating international trade and commerce. As a pioneering country of the non-aligned construct Sri Lanka has helped connect states with each other and long since established a respect for the universality of international law and peaceful settlement of disputes.
2. Sri Lanka strongly believes in the sanctity of sustainable development and the common heritage of mankind and advocates that Governments should act only as a steward *ad interim* that holds in trust all its natural resources for the benefit of generations yet unborn. As a friend of all and an enemy of none, Sri Lanka has played an important role in the region to promote peace and stability. Through the many tribulations and challenges, this is a role this island of serendipity will continue to fulfil.
3. As reiterated above Sri Lanka remains firmly committed to uphold its international commitments and promote a greater focus on the Indian Ocean, in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and international law. Sri Lanka also remains strongly committed to conserve and sustainably use the ocean and its resources for sustainable development in line with UN Sustainable Development Goal 14. Sri Lanka hopes to achieve significant progress in this regard by 2030. It is imperative to highlight the numerous challenges and obstacles Sri Lanka faces in moving towards achieving these goals, nevertheless, Sri Lanka is honoured to place before this august gathering some of the significant milestones that have been achieved.

4. Sri Lanka reiterates the importance of the oceans as an essential element for the very survival of humanity. Sri Lanka also reiterates the critical and vital importance of the oceans in ecological, climatic, social, economic, and cultural aspects. Its indispensability has been established since time immemorial and many cultures attribute a status of divinity to oceans.

#### Policy documents and corresponding legal frameworks

5. Sri Lanka is a pioneer in Asia for developing a national Framework for Submarine Cable Protection and Resilience. Other key policy documents and corresponding legal frameworks cover matters concerning environment, climate change, fisheries, marine pollution, and Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement, all having substantive elements connected to full filling obligations under SDG14.

#### Mangroves and Seagrass

6. Sri Lanka is indeed honoured to lead the Mangrove Ecosystems and Livelihood Action Group [MELAG] under the Commonwealth Blue Charter, connecting member countries across continents sharing expertise, best practices, and extensive capacity building opportunities.
7. Furthermore, in May 2022, Sri Lanka took the lead to co-sponsor the UN Resolution to declare 1<sup>st</sup> March as the World Seagrass Day.

#### Marine Spatial Planning and Marine Protected Areas

8. Sri Lanka takes this opportunity to highlight two key issues that require urgent attention, climate change and the loss of biodiversity and calls on member states for immediate action to alleviate the consequences.
9. Sri Lanka has endorsed the Global Ocean Alliance: 30x30 initiative. Towards fulfilling the commitments connected under this initiative, Sri Lanka has, *inter alia*, commenced the process to formulate Marine Spatial Planning encompassing marine conservation,

exploration and sustainable utilization of marine resources, fisheries, tourism, shipping, offshore renewable energy, and national security in a holistic manner.

10. Within the realm of Marine Spatial Planning, Sri Lanka is committed to increase its MPAs and the process has commenced to declare Fisheries Management Areas (FMAs) connected to all the 15 coastal districts, extending up to the edge of Sri Lanka's Territorial Sea (12 nautical miles or 22.2 km). The declaration would create a managed area of 32,550 km<sup>2</sup>, which is equal to 6.30% of Sri Lanka's EEZ. Areas requiring higher levels of protection will be identified and gazetted within these larger FMAs to incorporate threatened species such as dugongs, cetaceans, and sharks and critical habitats such as seagrass and coral reefs.
11. This move would greatly enhance the management of fisheries at a district level and bring Sri Lanka significantly closer towards achieving SDG14 commitments.

#### Fisheries Sector

12. Sri Lanka has also achieved many advances in the fisheries sector. Sri Lanka has installed Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) devices in all its multi-day fishing vessels going to high seas and is in the process of installation of VMS in offshore fishing vessels to improve fisheries management and monitor for any kind of illegal activities. Sri Lanka has developed a software solution to streamline information and data collection processes in the fisheries sector.
13. Considering the rapid depletion of fish stocks in our oceans, it is also important that major fishing nations in the world use sustainable fishing gears and practices, to ensure that juvenile fish complete their life cycle, which, in the long run supports sustainable livelihoods and equitable sharing of fisheries resources.

#### MV X-Press Pearl

14. The MV X-Press Pearl vessel with a cargo of 1,486 containers, composed of 81 Dangerous Goods containers, which include Nitric Acid, Caustic Soda, etc, also, more importantly, low-density polyethylene (LDPE) pellets, caught fire at a location north of the Colombo

Port of Sri Lanka, leaving in its wake an environmental disaster that the island will have to endure and suffer the consequences of for decades.

15. While the crux of the problem largely remains unascertained and unresolved, Sri Lanka reiterates the many challenges it faced in consolidating effective countering of the disaster. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that systems are strengthened ensuring safe, sustainable, and responsible maritime transport. Sri Lanka suffered the consequences due to the gap in the international disaster response mechanism and compensation modality. Hence, we call for urgent deliberations to establish such mechanism, covering all aspects of maritime disasters, especially concerning the recovery of environmental damages.
16. We also would like to highlight the fact that the burden of proof on environmental damage has caused additional burden to the victimized country when the victimized country is a developing nation. We appeal for international collaborations to address this concern, giving due considerations to developing countries.

#### Global rapid response to maritime disasters

17. In the aftermath of one of the worst maritime disasters, Sri Lanka also proposes that it is essential to establish a global rapid response mechanism for maritime disasters management, particularly focusing on mitigating damages to coastal and marine ecosystem and assistance and guidance on the process of revitalization. Furthermore, Sri Lanka is in the process of taking necessary steps of its accession to important conventions in this regard, to which Sri Lanka is not yet party to. This will enable us to take the necessary action to prevent marine pollution from the shipping sector in line with international standards.

#### Submissions to MEPC of IMO

18. Following the X-Press Pearl spill, Sri Lanka submitted a proposal to the Marine Environment Protection Committee of the IMO (MEPC 77/8/3) recommending that MEPC consider "the need to amend classification of all plastic pellets, flakes and powders under MARPOL Annexes III and V and the International Maritime Dangerous Goods (IMDG) Code to improve labelling, loading, stowage, and handling practices\_of all ship-bound plastic

pellets.” Based on the above IMO has already established correspondence Group. In line with these concerns Sri Lanka supported the UNEA 5.2 Resolution in March 2022 on “*End Plastic Pollution: Towards an International Legally Binding Instrument*”, noting that about 80% of marine litter originates from land.

19. While Sri Lanka remains committed to the environmental protection, Sri Lanka is mindful of the communities that dependent on marine and coastal ecosystems as a livelihood. Therefore, Sri Lanka reiterates the importance equitable access and distribution of marine and coastal resources. Sri Lanka further reiterates the core pillar of the blue economy should be equitable access and distribution of resources.
20. Sri Lanka is of the view that the principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR) should be considered as an integral part of all UN deliberations, such as this Conference, as intended by the Principle 7 of the Rio Declaration of 1992.
21. Sri Lanka welcomes the outcome of this Conference advocating the science-based approach as well as in the agenda of the Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021-2030). It is imperative that a genuine effort is made by and among all the partners to realize the commitments made; only then that it would be possible to convert this political will into a tangible outcome benefiting both humans and the oceans.
22. In concluding Sri Lanka is sincerely thankful to the all the nations who have supported Sri Lanka during challenging times in the past and particularly the unprecedented challenges at present.

Thank you.