

**Address by Hon. Mahinda Samarasinghe, M.P., Minister of Disaster
Management and Human Rights at the Fifteenth WMO Congress**

Excellencies

Distinguished delegates

Ladies and Gentlemen

It gives me great pleasure to address the Fifteenth Congress of WMO. As the Minister in charge of Meteorology in Sri Lanka, I am well aware of the tremendous amount of work performed by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) for the benefit of member countries in the fields of meteorology, hydrology and disaster management. The latest scientific findings with regard to global warming and the effects of climate change will further underline the importance of the WMO in time to come.

In the aftermath of the unprecedented Tsunami in 26 December 2004, the scale of response from WMO including the first ever visit by a head of WMO to my country, deserves commendation. The Meteorological Service in Sri Lanka received assistance in a number of forms including communication upgrades, man-power training, and technical assistance through the active engagement of WMO. Several other capacity building projects are presently underway in Sri Lanka including a project to procure a Doppler radar system, upgrading of upper air observation system, and automation of weather observing network.

In Sri Lanka, the Department of Meteorology is the national focal institute for tsunami and other weather related early warning systems. The capacity of the Department has been enhanced to effectively carry out its duties as the Tsunami Early Warning Centre with a 24 x 7 operations centre and strategic formal linkages with the Japan Meteorological Agency and Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre in Hawaii.

Over the past two years, since the tragic tsunami episode, there has been no shortage of reminders that reducing risk and improving the management of natural hazards must be given the highest priority. Significant steps have

been taken in Sri Lanka in this regard, as well as to integrate disaster risk management into sustainable national development strategy.

In the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, a bi-partisan Parliamentary Select Committee was constituted under my chairmanship to investigate and recommend steps to ensure that we are better prepared with prevention, mitigation, response and recovery efforts. The deliberations of the committee were conducted in a very transparent and apolitical constructive manner, leading to virtual unanimity in the final recommendations towards achieving a safer Sri Lanka.

Following the report of the Select Committee, the Sri Lanka Disaster Management Act was enacted, providing the legal basis for instituting a disaster risk management system in the country. The Act provides for the establishment of the National Council for Disaster Management, a high level inter-ministerial body under the chairmanship of H.E. the President to provide direction to disaster risk management in the country and the Disaster Management Centre as the lead agency for disaster risk management. Both methods are gazetted under my Ministry.

Sri Lanka has established a framework for disaster risk management centering on a holistic approach, leading to a policy shift from relying too much on response based mechanisms to adopting a more proactive mitigation approach. A 10-year Road Map for disaster risk management – *towards building a safer Sri Lanka* – is already under implementation promoting multi stakeholder efforts through integrated disaster risk management. The components of the Road Map was developed through a consultative process which identified gaps, needs, priorities and strategies for further action and is consistent with the Sri Lanka Disaster Management Act and in line with the Hyogo Framework for Action (2005 – 2015).

My Ministry is in the process of establishing an effective early warning system for all natural disasters, giving priority not only to those more frequent disasters but also for those rare but most destructive hazards such as tsunamis. The early warning system will be end-to-end, linking hazard

detection systems with warning communication, preparedness, mitigation and response, along with a feedback mechanism.

With an institutional base and supporting legal, policy framework in place, and a better understanding of what the key priorities for action are, we are now well on the way towards building a safer Sri Lanka. We count on WMO to remain our partner on this road forward towards sustainable development.

I wish the Congress all success in its deliberations.