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Address by Dr Rajitha Senaratne, Minister of Health, Nutrition and Indigenous Medicine of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka

Mr. President, Vice Presidents, Madam Director General, Excellencies,
ladies and gentlemen,

At the outset, on behalf of the government of Sri Lanka, let me congratulate you and the Vice Presidents for being elected to high offices of this Assembly. We appreciate the leadership of the Director-General in moving forward untiringly the WHO mandate in shaping global health.

This year's theme, "Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", is timely, and underlines the strong interdependence and correlation between health and development.

This forum can provide us a sound platform to discuss the health issues related to sustainable development, focusing on the broader Agenda of prosperity and peace for People and the Planet, through enhanced Partnership.

Mr. President,

We are aware that SDG3 is the prime goal focusing on ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for everyone. It is indeed a bold commitment towards achieving universal health care, as health is intrinsically linked with many other SDGs.

As I speak to you in Geneva, nearly half a million people in my country have been severely affected, with considerable loss of lives (close to 200 and could be even more) and damage to property, due to the floods, and landslides resulting from the tropical cyclone 'Roanu '.

It is the immediate concern of the government of Sri Lanka to provide necessary rehabilitation and disaster relief measures and to avoid post-disaster adverse health consequences and outbreak of communicable diseases.

In this context, I appreciate the expression of solidarity and support by our friends and partners and the WHO, to strengthen our timely health response to the affected people.

Mr. President,

Amidst 30 years of conflict, Sri Lanka was yet able to achieve all health MDG indicators, or they were well on track. This can be attributed to our consistent investment in free healthcare, education and poverty alleviation. Sri Lanka treats health as a fundamental need for development, and not only a mere outcome.

As stated by our President Maithripala Sirisena at the UN High Level Summit on Sustainable Development in New York last year, Government of Sri Lanka is fully committed to the Sustainable Development Agenda. The Government has already set up a multi sectoral Sustainable Development Secretariat to achieve this goal.

Mr. President, distinguished delegates,

It is with a sense of humility that I announce that Sri Lanka recently marked a milestone in the progress of its health sector when we eliminated malaria that has accounted for hundreds of thousands of lives in my country for over centuries. Sri Lanka has been malaria free for over three consecutive years and, I believe, has now become eligible for the WHO

certification as a malaria free country. Yet we cannot be complacent and lower our surveillance on other infectious and vector-borne diseases. Even as malaria retreats, we note that dengue has been on the rise. Similarly, co-infectious diseases like tuberculosis stubbornly persist, driving people into a vicious cycle of poverty.

Mr. President,

My country has seen successes especially in the areas of communicable diseases and reproductive health. However, as the country advances economically, it is also fast undergoing a demographic and epidemiological transition.

We are challenged by the increasing disease burden due to NCDs, across all income groups. Our NCD plan is built on four strategic pillars - advocacy, partnerships, leadership, and health promotion. Underlying these is the reorientation of the health system for early detection and management of NCDs and their risk factors. In my country, Healthy Life style Centers provide screening for cardiovascular diseases, Diabetes, and Cancers, while the “Well Woman” clinics, with a new category of health professionals, also function as centers for NCDs.

Meanwhile, Chronic Kidney Disease of unknown etiology (CKDu) has emerged as a serious public health problem in Sri Lanka. Despite two decades of research supported by WHO, the problem of CKDu is not yet well understood. I therefore urge the WHO to further support us to establish a consortium of national/international researchers, particularly from global CKDu hotspots, to conduct interdisciplinary research and share expertise on this complex disease. I believe, WHO will then be able to help us to unravel the mystery of “u” (or unknown) in CKDu.

Mr. President

As the world experiences an influx of migrants due to varying reasons, we need to pay attention to the health of migrants, irrespective of their status

of migration. I am pleased to announce that Sri Lanka has offered to host the second Global Consultation on Health of Migrants in October this year, envisaging a political declaration as its outcome to demonstrate our commitment to this important issue.

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen

The way forward for global health demands strong and sustained political commitment, increased levels of investment in health, and affordable technology. We have to make sure that the global health agenda is driven based on equity and social justice. For this purpose, WHO should be further strengthened to play a crucial role as mandated. Realizing universal health, as much as it is a national responsibility, is a collective responsibility as well, for which partnerships and collective endeavours are imperative.

Finally, let me acknowledge the strong support that we receive and the partnership from the WHO over the years, and convey a special word of thanks to you, Madam Director General, and to Dr. Poonam Singh the Regional Director for South Asia, and for the Sri Lanka country office. We look forward to continuing this strong partnership in the years ahead.

Thank you