



Statement by
His Excellency Ambassador Ravinatha Aryasinha,
Sri Lanka Permanent Representative to the United Nations
at the
101st Council Session of the International Organization for Migration
30 November 2012

Mr. Chairman,

At the outset let me congratulate Ambassador Hannan on his election and for his leadership in steering our discussions. Allow me to also thank the Director General of the IOM for his comprehensive report, the Secretariat for facilitating our work for this session, and the IOM head of Mission and staff based in Colombo for their dedication.

With nearly 1.7 million Sri Lankans working abroad, and foreign employment impacting nearly 23% of our population, the migration discourse has long been of utmost importance to Sri Lanka. As Sri Lankans from even the remotest areas migrate for work abroad, their remittances have become a driving force on poverty alleviation and rural development. Total remittances in 2011 was \$ 5.14 Billion and this year it will increase to \$ 6.0 Billion. This amount is equivalent to 8.2% of Sri Lanka's GDP, 25% of total government revenue and 35% of total foreign exchange earnings. Migrant workers constitute 17% of our working population and this has also helped reduce our unemployment rate to 4% and poverty rate to 7%.

Even as the relative share in the category of housemaids amongst those who seek employment abroad has continued to drop from 46% in 2009 to 41% in 2011, consistent with the GOSL's present policy to promote more skilled & professional migration, in the recently announced 2013 budget Sri Lanka has allocated 300 Million Rupees for the setting up of two new Foreign Employment Technical Colleges to enhance the skills level of prospective migrant workers and to orient them to the requirements of the relevant employment markets. My delegation is appreciative of the capacity-building and disaster risk reduction projects undertaken by IOM in the country to match requirements in receiving countries and for accreditation of our qualifications with foreign agencies.

Sri Lanka remains steadfast in its commitment toward the protection of migrants. As you may recall during the 64th World Health Assembly, Sri Lanka presented a progress report on the Assembly's 'Health of Migrants' resolution, becoming the first WHO Member state to take such an initiative. However, my delegation notes with concern that more work remains to be done.

The Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE), the Ministry of Health and IOM have all voiced warning that health-abuse of Sri Lankan migrant workers abroad has resulted in sickness, death and in some cases, suicide. As this Council may know this is a trend that the Sri Lankan Government continues to strongly combat and address. In this regard, my delegation believes that the joint training programme by the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment and IOM, designed to train SLBFE officers on how to respond to and counsel affected migrants, will greatly aid to strengthen these efforts.

We are grateful to the IOM for the noteworthy assistance provided this year to repatriate a number of Sri Lankan migrants, and would like to explore the possibility of further strengthening collaboration between IOM and our Missions abroad in order to facilitate and streamline future repatriation measures. Conscious that communications is key to monitoring and ensuring the safety of migrant workers, Sri Lanka has recently introduced a system of issuing pre-loaded SIM cards to migrant workers before leaving the country, to be used in the country of destination. While the initiative has to date, covered a number of important destination countries, the country hopes to expand this number significantly by early 2013.

In order to raise awareness with regard to the valuable contribution made by migrant workers toward the country, Sri Lanka commemorated the 18th international migration day last year with district based ceremonies, organized with assistance from the IOM and the ILO, identifying migrant workers as 'Rataviruwo' – our heroes abroad. This year the event hopes to establish a special organization to monitor the welfare of families of migrant workers with 1000 graduate development officers assigned to work at Pradeshiya Sabha level with this organization. As a means of assisting migrant workers equitably, the national budget for 2013 has sought to exempt individuals returning from foreign employment who invest their savings in new businesses, from all taxes payable on turnover, on profits and income, for a period of 5 years.

With the end of the terrorist conflict that lasted more than 30 years, as you are aware Sri Lanka has begun a process to heal, rebuild and reconcile. In this regard we are thankful to the noteworthy role played by IOM in Sri Lanka's reconciliation effort, with the economic and social reintegration programme, funded by Norway, which provided over 3,000 former LTTE cadres with the means and opportunity to start new livelihoods by providing training, tools, small grants and job placements. My delegation is confident that initiatives such as these will help expedite the process of returning the country to its full potential.

The emphasis by the international community that Sri Lanka is now free from the dangers that constrained it during the time of the conflict, has been an important factor for those who left the country as refugees during the time of the conflict to return, with the joint assistance of the host countries, and the IOM. As a result, families can once again be reunited with their loved ones, and Sri Lankans from across the globe are returning to their homes and to their regular lives. At the same time, illegal people-smuggling rings continue to rob families not only of their hard earned savings, but some times even their loved ones. It is noted that IOM, as well as a number

of foreign governments, have in recent months acknowledged that many Sri Lankans who continue to arrive on foreign soil illegally, are in fact economic migrants and not refugees. In this regard Sri Lanka remains committed to work with international partners toward raising awareness as to the dangers relating to illegal migration, with a view to end such practices.

Human trafficking is a crime that has plagued nearly every State and Government for centuries. In Sri Lanka the Government has endeavored continuously to combat this issue and bring to justice perpetrators of such crimes. These efforts have been reinforced with Sri Lanka's collaboration with IOM. Earlier this year, the Sri Lanka Judges Training Institute, together with IOM organized a two-day residential programme on combating human trafficking for a group of 50 High Court judges and magistrates from across Sri Lanka. The Sri Lanka Government continues to work closely with IOM, with over 2000 Sri Lankan law enforcement officers being trained to date, in the areas of victim identification, protection and prosecution of traffickers. The workshops developed in close cooperation with the Sri Lanka Police Department, the Attorney General's Department, the Immigration and Emigration Department and the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, continue throughout the island. And we remain confident and resolved that through such initiatives we would be able to end trafficking in persons permanently.

In conclusion Mr. Chairman, may I reaffirm my country's commitment to these deliberations, and reiterate our continued cooperation with IOM.

I thank you.