

**ECOSOC Regional Ministerial Meeting on Financing
Strategies for Healthcare**
9.00 am ,March 16, 2009, Cinnamon Grand, Colombo
**Keynote Address by Hon. Prime Minister Ratnasiri
Wickramanayake**

Distinguished visitors,
My fellow Ministers,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to be chosen to deliver the keynote address at this important Regional Meeting on Financial Strategies for Healthcare. I am also somewhat bemused by the theme: “Financial Strategies for Healthcare”, because Sri Lanka’s strategy for financing healthcare is really very simple: We provide for it in the national budget. We are by no means a rich country, but the state has always provided free healthcare to all its citizens from birth to death. And, our system of healthcare has been cited by international observers as among the best.

As the Prime Minister of this country and as a senior politician who has been around for quite some time, I am personally aware of the dedication and commitment which successive governments of Sri Lanka have accorded to healthcare. And this is not something new. In fact public financing for healthcare

began in Lanka more than two thousand years ago when Buddhist kings established public hospitals and maintained them with royal revenue.

Ancient records show that 18 hospitals were established by King Dutugemunu, in the Second Century B.C. This tradition was strongly influenced by Buddhist culture which accords high priority to actively caring for the needy, the poor and the sick.

In post colonial modern Sri Lanka free healthcare for all has gone hand in hand with the blossoming of freedom and the expansion of democracy. The gradual empowerment of the rural poor and factors such as gender equality and high levels of female literacy have contributed towards a greater awareness of healthcare and the progressive establishment of salutary practices. And now there are not only modern fully equipped hospitals in the cities and larger towns but also rural hospitals in remote villages.

While free healthcare, and also free education, for all have always been state policy, today President Mahinda Rajapaksa

has effectively placed development issues, including poverty alleviation, at the centre of his policy agenda, known as “Mahinda Chintana”.

The vision of the Government is to target an annual growth rate of 7 to 8% over the medium term. The Government’s way forward to achieve such growth is by adopting pro-poor and pro-growth strategies. It is the firm belief of the Government that economic and social objectives should focus on the needs and aspirations of the ordinary people.

Sri Lanka has maintained a liberalized economic policy over the past several decades. Though average growth rates were moderate we have systematically spent a fair portion of our national income on social welfare. We have put in place various welfare programs aimed at reducing poverty and morbidity. Free public healthcare services are maintained on a country-wide basis. The free education system is maintained from primary to tertiary level.

The system educates doctors free. Free education in Sri Lanka has had an important impact on all desired goals for economic

growth, poverty alleviation and social justice. Educational welfare programs include the provision of free school text books, free mid-day meals, free school uniform, and subsidized transport facilities for students. Various scholarship schemes, such as one at grade five level, open up educational opportunities for promising children from all social classes. Through these measures Sri Lanka has achieved almost universal primary education. Net enrolment ratio reached 97.5 per cent in 2006 for both males and females. Literacy rate has been high among the 15-24 years age group at around 95 per cent.

High average literacy and educational levels of mothers help in no small measure in achieving health goals. We are indeed proud of our achievements on the health front. Infant mortality rate has declined from 19.3 per 1000 live births in 1990 to 12.0 in 2005. Immunization programs too have been a great success. Our maternal mortality rate at 1.4 per 10,000 live births in 2002 has declined by two thirds since 1990 in terms of widely used health indicators. Sri Lanka's achievements are considered rather exceptional for a country with a GNP per capita of US dollars 1600.

All these achievements have been despite our resources being debilitated by a scourge of terrorism and a natural disaster, the tsunami of 2004. Mercifully one is behind us and the other is now about to be rooted out.

Sri Lanka appreciates the supportive role of donor agencies including the UN in achieving its development goals. We also welcome such international conferences as we are attending here today.

I wish it all success.

Thank you.