

# Defending core values

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PRESIDENT OF SRI LANKA



**MAHINDA RAJAPAKSA** began his political career in 1970, when at 24 years old he was first elected to parliament. A lawyer by profession, he subsequently served in opposition and in government in various ministerial positions including Minister of Labour, Vocation Training and Fisheries. He was elected prime minister in 2005 and won the Presidency in 2005 in closely contested elections, becoming Sri Lanka's 6th President.

I am pleased to contribute this message to FIRST Magazine's special edition on the occasion of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) 2009, being held this year in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

The theme for the CHOGM this year, "Partnering for a More Equitable and Sustainable Future", is indeed most relevant in finding solutions to the contemporary challenges faced by the Member States of the Commonwealth and the world in general. Being an Association which encompasses all faiths and ethnicities and with a membership that spans the globe, the Commonwealth is well equipped to deliberate on this important subject.

This year we also celebrate "The Commonwealth@60". Sri Lanka being one of the founding members of the Commonwealth, takes pride in the achievements of the Commonwealth over the past six decades. In fact during these years, the Commonwealth has actually responded to the fast changing global economic, social and political movements. The peoples of the Member States have benefited much from the numerous initiatives and programmes that the Organisation has launched. The Commonwealth is well known to our people for such collective action.

The peoples of the 53 Member States of the Commonwealth, though diverse in their cultures and traditions, share a number of common features, including a commitment to the fundamental values and principles of international peace and security; democracy, liberty of the individual and equal rights for all; eradication of poverty, ignorance and disease; and the need to oppose all forms of racial discrimination which have stood since the dawn of time. Sri Lanka, as a country that is proud to be associated with the Commonwealth, has always actively pursued the promotion and protection of these core values. In recent times, Sri Lanka has been host to the meetings of the Commonwealth Youth Ministers and Finance Ministers, among a plethora of Commonwealth workshops. Sri Lanka is also actively involved in a number of Commonwealth programmes ranging from education to information technology and peace building, to name a few.

Undoubtedly Sri Lanka, like some other Member States, has gone through numerous challenges in abiding by the Commonwealth Principles. One of the

most common challenges that we face as democracies is the threat posed by terrorism. I am humbled to state that with the defeat of terrorism which gripped the country for three decades, Sri Lanka is now truly a free country.

For the past 30 years, the people of Sri Lanka, be they Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims, Burghers or Malays, have all suffered at the hands of terrorists, more so, those living in the Northern and Eastern provinces of the country. Due to the tyranny of the terrorists, the people of the North and East were barred from the democratic rights and socio-economic development enjoyed by their brothers and sisters in the rest of the country. It is only now, with the annihilation of terrorism, that these people have been able to exercise their rights and live in a safe and secure environment. It is unfortunate, however, to note that while Sri Lanka has defeated terrorists on our soil, their networking continues unhindered on foreign soil and is still posing a threat to the political and socio-economic transformations of our people.

The threat of terrorism, common to all members of the Commonwealth and the world at large, challenges the main values on which the Commonwealth was built. It is the duty of the Commonwealth to boldly face this threat in our efforts to promote and protect the Association's fundamental values and principles. The diverse nature of the Commonwealth and its quiet diplomacy are attributes that are well placed to meet this challenge. Collaborative efforts on this issue by all our members would contribute vastly towards our efforts in pursuing an equitable and sustainable future for later generations, which will be in vain if some sectors of our people are subject to the horrors of terrorism.

Sri Lanka is confident that the Commonwealth will provide its member countries with the strength to successfully meet the demands of the future. Whilst wishing every success for the deliberations at the meeting in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, to be truthful, Sri Lanka hopes that in the coming years, the Commonwealth will continue to be an important global player whose collective actions will strengthen the existing relations among the member countries and help to achieve practical and meaningful co-operation in potential areas of mutual benefits.