

## **Keynote Speech**

**by H. E. Mahinda Rajapakse, President of the Socialist Democratic Republic of Sri Lanka  
at the High Level Special Event – The Role of Aquaculture in Sustainable Development  
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Director General of the FAO,  
Hon. Ministers,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen

Whilst thanking the Director General of the FAO for inviting me to address this special session, I want to express my regret for not being able to be present at this session. Since our government is presenting its budget for 2008, as the Minister of Finance, my presence in the country is essential. However, I am delighted to send this message and my brief remarks on the theme.

I think it timely that the Food and Agricultural Organization has thought it necessary to devote this special session to Fisheries and Aquaculture, in the context of the growing importance of the harvest from the waters of the earth - both from the sea and inland waters - in helping people to enjoy their right to food and achieve the elimination of hunger.

Fisheries is a subject very close to me, coming from an island country where from the ages past, large segments of our people have made it their sole livelihood, and do so today, too. Among the important experiences I have, is the period I served as Minister of Fisheries of Sri Lanka, when I was able to work with and for fishers and fish farmers. It is then that I saw and understood the challenges they face, and both proposed and introduced many changes for the betterment of their industry and livelihoods.

Where necessary, we gave subsidies to those engaged in fishing; we have taken a variety of measures to improve their livelihoods; we initiated a move to provide them with housing –this is the largest single housing project in the country, and even introduced a pension scheme for them. Today, I continue to act to protect the rights and safety of the fishers, and to ensure equity and welfare of the people employed in fisheries and aquaculture.

I recognize and appreciate the recent change of the name of the FAO Fisheries Department to read as **Fisheries and Aquaculture Department**, as part of the Director General's reform process. This is a clear recognition of **aquaculture** as a main source of fish and human food, and its growing importance as a food producing sector. I trust this realistic change of name will also lead to increased allocation of resources to aquaculture.

Friends,

In the context of the ever diminishing access to food supplies for the vast mass of people, fisheries and aquaculture are today faced with increasing problems of expansion, marketing, and standards. Those worst affected by this are the small-scale fish farmers, with the threats faced by them no different to what is faced by those engaged in agriculture in the developing countries.

FAO, I am sure, is acutely aware of the fundamental social and economic role played by these two sectors in meeting global and national sustainable food security, providing self and paid employment for fishing and aquaculture related communities, as a means of alleviating poverty in these fishing communities, and helping to stop rural-urban drift, as well as contributing to national and international trade and generating national income. Achieving these social and economic goals requires fisheries and aquaculture to be responsibly managed. Very importantly, this implies preventing over-fishing,

promoting sustainable aquaculture, co-ordination and delivery of effective research and extension and the empowerment of people, especially women.

Today, the food fish industry can be separated into two main activities - one is that of capture fisheries, in the sea and inland waters; the other is aquaculture in inland, coastal and marine environments. My own country, Sri Lanka is an island nation that has a combination of both these activities. Fisheries is part of the life of a large segment of our population, yet, the communities engaged in fisheries, mainly in the coastal regions, are generally less privileged and economically disadvantaged. This is a situation that has challenged planners and governments for many decades, and it is our determination to make this a thing of the past.

Fisheries and aquaculture is small in Sri Lanka, compared to many Asian countries. China produces over 70% of the world's food fish. Sri Lanka, today, does not come even within the first 20 countries in the world in food fish production. Yet, it is an important sector in our economy, contributing 1.8% to GDP. We believe this could be improved. The policies of our government, makes provision for fisheries to contribute to increasing growth of the economy, hopefully taking it to double digit growth.

Friends,

In a largely rural based society, we see in aquaculture, many opportunities for low income earners to diversify their livelihoods to obtain a larger income. We look forward to the day when with the proper development of aquaculture in our inland waters, the culture of rice can be enriched with income and nourishment of fish, to make it an identifiable tool in improving the income of the rural communities.

It is necessary for me to remind you of the vast damage that Sri Lanka's fisheries sector suffered by the Tsunami in December 2004. The worst affected were the coastal people, which means the industry that suffered most was fisheries. But, rehabilitation and reconstruction was soon under way, a combination of the efforts of our own people, so ably helped by those from other lands. Help came from individuals, organizations, and governments. Significant progress has been made in rehabilitation, which is still under way. This rehabilitation saw a modernization of the industry, too. For those displaced from coastal homes, we also looked at alternate livelihoods through aquaculture, which I am glad to say has brought good results. While we remain grateful to all those who came to the assistance of Sri Lanka at that time, we will always remember the significant contribution made by the FAO to the rehabilitation effort. I consider it my duty today to express the appreciation of my country and my people to FAO for this timely assistance.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

If the Tsunami gave a devastating blow to fisheries in Sri Lanka, the industry has also been affected over the past two decades by the ravages of terrorism. The East and North of the country, where fisheries have been a substantial way of life for large numbers of our people, have been severely affected by the violence of separatist terror of the LTTE. Thousands of fishers and fish farmers have been compelled to live in fear of the terrorists, who have not hesitated to use the fisher as cover for their violence; and have compelled the security forces to impose restrictions on the movement of fishing craft in the sea, and in lagoons. We need to combat the menace of terrorism that threatens the livelihoods of so many people, denies the human right to gainful employment and adequate food, and also affects the growth of our economy.

We are using aquaculture in the process of rehabilitation in the East, now liberated from the clutches of terror. Agriculture and fisheries are the two major occupations of the people of this province. As far as agriculture is concerned, the Government has now taken measures to hand over the agricultural lands earlier occupied by the LTTE, to their owners.

The same approach, however, cannot be adopted towards resolving the livelihood issue of fishermen, as there is an ever present threat posed to strategic locations along the coast by the terrorists. We are looking at options such as fresh water fisheries, to help fishermen sustain themselves, until the situation improves. We want to exploit the large extents of inland waterways found in the Eastern province. Fresh water fisheries are also economical for fishermen since they do not have to spend large sums of money on fuel for their boats. Fresh water fish breeding could also be successfully undertaken in many areas of the East.

Since the East is now freed of the terror of the LTTE, we are keen to carry out major improvements in infrastructure facilities and provide every assistance possible to enable the fishing communities to resume their livelihood with the assurance of safety. We look forward to support from the FAO, and the international community for the accelerated development programme in the East. We see that there is a great opportunity for both private and public sector participation in economic activity, with fisheries being responsible for a major share of the new developments there.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We all read of, are familiar with, and feel truly sorry for the plight of the great whales; we know of the efforts to save endangered sea turtles and the tragedy of dolphins dying in nets set for food fish. What is lesser known is that tuna and many other species of marine food fish are also in deep trouble.

As fish decline, so does the very quality of the sea, turning it into a biologically unproductive and unstable environment. It is therefore necessary to have very strong conservation measures, and create the awareness for broad-based public support for implementing such measures.

For those who like us who are concerned with fishers and fishing, with capture fisheries and aquaculture, there will always be an interest in the protection and conservation of the mangroves. Today, there is increasing concern that rising sea levels, so closely linked with climate change will be moving to drown these precious and economically important ecosystems on which fisheries are so dependent. There is the need for urgent action to conserve the mangroves wherever they are threatened.

We are happy at the success story of aquacultures, its soaring worldwide production rates, but, there are other warnings that global main marine fish stocks are under grave threat, increasingly pressured by over-fishing and environmental degradation.

Friends,

Another important aspect we should be alert to is the power of fishing fleets around the world. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) says that thirteen of the world's largest fishing nations including the European Union have a fleet capacity that is two and half times greater than necessary for a sustainable harvest. It estimates that the world's fishing nations need to reduce the size of their fishing fleets by two-thirds, in order to ensure that catches are sustainable.

When the fisheries are being threatened in this manner, it is a threat to the right of people to adequate food wherever they are. We all know that adequate food is a human right, a right of every individual in every country. It

is the aim of the Millennium Development Goals to achieve this at least substantially by 2015. The Right to adequate food is a human right, closely interlinked to the other universal rights of man. It is therefore regretted that those countries that speak so often of human rights on other matters are so reluctant to take the necessary steps that are within their power to restrict the power of fishing fleets, that with their over fishing and other damage to fish stocks, threaten the right of people to adequate food.

It is not only in the oceans that fish and fishers are under threat. There are also dangers to rivers, lagoons, tanks and inland sources of water, from industry and construction. The pollution in rivers and other sources of inland fishing and aquaculture pose a serious threat to fishing and the livelihood of millions as well as the source of food for millions more. Therefore, it needs the combined efforts of governments, industries and societies to save the water, the fish, and the ecology of inland waters from these increasing dangers.

I think these are issues with sufficient importance to be seriously considered in the deliberations of this conference and that the FAO will be able to move forward, to join others to protect the marine habitat and inland waters to keep alive fisheries and aquaculture for the good of man and all other species of this planet that is our home.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In view of the new importance being given to aquaculture, I would urge the setting up of a global fund for responsible aquaculture. I see this as a fund that will be able to assist small farmers in developing countries to become sustainable, responsible and competitive in production and marketing. It is a fund that can help build greater awareness of the importance and possibilities for progress through aquaculture and assist both governments and private

investors in the developing countries, with expertise and technology that will take aquaculture to a level of dynamism in the economies of these countries.

With the growing emphasis on global aquaculture, I would suggest to this conference that the Committee on Fisheries Sub-Committee on Aquaculture, be given the higher status it truly deserves by renaming it as the **Committee on Aquaculture**.

Friends, I think it is also time for us to give serious consideration to the establishment of a **Global Aquaculture Federation**, the aim of which will be to bring together the farming and farm-servicing community and the private sector that invests in aquaculture under a single global organization, to be managed by the FAO.

I commend these proposals for the consideration of all of you who are eager to see the rapid advance of aquaculture to take its due place of importance with fisheries.

I congratulate the Chairman, Director General and Board Members of FAO for the guidance they have given to this very important organization, that is playing a significant role in a world that is taxing its resources each day, and wish the FAO all success in the future.

Thank you.