

President Mahinda Rajapaksa, delivering the keynote address to the Asian Regional Ministerial Meeting on Aquaculture for Food Security, Nutrition and Economic Development today (July 28) at the Hilton Hotel, Colombo.

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I welcome you all to Sri Lanka, as we are privileged to host this ministerial meeting at a time when we examine the opportunities and challenges to food security in our region and the world, and realize the potential benefits from effective aqua-culture development in our region.

As an island nation we have a very long tradition in fisheries, a tradition that keeps expanding with growing demand for fish which forms a very important source amounting to seventy per cent of animal protein in the national diet of Sri Lankans.

It is remarkable that the Asian region with its vast fisheries resources produces more than 90% of the world's farmed fish. This reflects the importance of aqua-culture for food security, nutrition, and economic development. But, as in many other sectors of food production essential to humankind, fisheries is also greatly threatened today.

The fisheries resources are over-exploited and the physical resources to produce more fish are fast reaching their limits to yield more under available technology. You meet today facing the challenge of the world having to produce thirty million more tons of fish per year by 2030 to feed an ever growing population.

We often read today of how fish is our last wild food and that our oceans are being picked clean. We learn of factory trawlers that scrape the ocean floor threatening the livelihoods of fishing communities in countries and regions. These trawlers are commercial operations while the small time fisherman goes out fishing as a means of day to day living. This meeting is most timely because the natural habitat of fish is being gravely threatened and aqua-culture development is of special importance.

For us to protect our fish farmers, it requires many policy initiatives such as strong trading standards removing non-tariff barriers and eliminating unfair trading practices. Methods that can improve sustainability are necessary because their absence can have adverse effects on small farmers and fishers. These need to be tackled with speed and great sensitivity before vulnerable communities that depend on fishing and fish farming are harmed.

In this context, I am pleased to learn of the approval of the Global Aqua-culture Certification Guidelines by the FAO Committee on Fisheries. I commend FAO and urge that all of us make a commitment to implement these guidelines in Asia. I must thank the COFI leadership for setting the global agenda for fisheries and aqua-culture.

As aqua-culture expands further out to sea issues of responsible management of international waters would pose a challenge to policy makers and planners investors and many other stakeholders. New policies and laws will be necessary on issues such as leasing or renting of the sea with due protection for economic zones.

We have to now face the reality that the world's and our region's marine stocks are fast depleting with small and traditional fishers facing serious livelihood problems. They make up a very large section of the Asian work force. Finding ways to help them is a matter of urgency. Perhaps, one way would be to create opportunities for aqua-culture and related service industries as alternative and additional livelihoods. We must also protect and improve our natural stocks of fish so that fishing will continue to provide food, jobs and income.

Aqua-culture can also help to address important issues on the environment and social welfare. These include climate change and problems of greenhouse gas emissions. We must also look at aqua-culture for improving the coastal environment which is of special relevance to Sri Lanka with the planned growth of tourism.

The growth of aqua-culture needs the development of technology in all of its sectors. It is encouraging that we in Asia are rich in related technology and have shown our ability to develop them further and use them for good results. But in a region that is so large it is necessary to overcome the problem of uneven development and fully exploit the great potential for aqua-culture and to fully realize the value of this asset.

Although fisheries is part of our lives and has been so through history, yet fisheries and aqua-culture are small compared to other Asian countries and I think it will remain so. But it is a major sector for economic growth. Though currently contributing 2% of GDP, this can and should be improved.

In addition to the sea around us, Sri Lanka has many rivers and lagoons and man-made lakes built for irrigation that support fish production. These irrigation tanks have opened the possibility of a Rice-Fish Culture. This can be a dramatic way of producing more food and helping to improve the rice farmer's income.

I am happy to learn that the National Aqua-culture Development Authority (NAQDA) established by our government in 1998, in addition to supporting our goals in aqua-culture, is also working on the development of Rice-Fish Culture as a means of giving new strength to the rural economy.

I am also reminded of the severe drought that prevails in some countries in the African Continent and I strongly suggest that the FAO along with the WFP and other UN agencies devise a speedy mechanism to provide food for the people in those countries.

Sri Lanka is now catching up with what we lost during three decades when terrorism deprived us of so much of development. It prevented fishing and fish farming in the North and East from getting the same attention as in other provinces. For many years, fishing in the northern and eastern waters had to be prohibited or greatly restricted. Today, with peace prevailing, we are moving to massive national development in every sector including fisheries. We have given a special place for aqua-culture and fisheries for a major role in food production, job creation and income generation. These programmes are spread throughout the country today with an added emphasis in the North and East to give the people there, a better life freed of the fear and threats of terror.

I wish to thank FAO for continued assistance to our efforts. On fisheries and aqua-culture, I believe that our collective wisdom, knowledge and work will help maintain Asia's leadership in global aqua-culture production in the coming decades. It is very important that these same assets should be used to ensure that the countries and provinces less developed in aqua-culture are able to fully realize the potential of their fisheries and aqua-culture. Cooperation and collaboration is of the utmost importance in this task.

It is important today to look at where we stand in regional cooperation on aqua-culture. When the Network of Aqua-culture Centres in Asia-Pacific (NACA) was established in 1990 dedicated to aqua-culture development, Sri Lanka was one of the first countries to ratify the agreement.

It was a gesture of our commitment to practical regional cooperation in an important area of development. Since then, NACA has become a strong organization that serves our region and beyond too in aqua-culture development. I am happy that NACA is now headed by a fellow Sri Lankan Professor Sena de Silva.

I recall the first Conference on Aqua-culture in the Third Millennium, organized by NACA, the FAO and the Royal Thai Government in the Year 2000 when I had the privilege of participating as an honoured guest. The Bangkok Declaration and Strategy, adopted at this conference remains the core instrument for aqua-culture development. It has shown strength as an instrument and a guide. Later, it was fortified by the consensus at the Global Conference of Aqua-culture held in Phuket in September last year. These are milestones of success but what more can be done?

I wish to remind you that for many years, we have tried to improve the welfare of people in fisheries and improve the productivity from the waters to obtain a richer harvest from the sea and other sources. We have tried many methods from policies to regulations, incentives, subsidies, in fact, everything that public administration allows. We borrowed expertise and technology. We sent our people abroad for training to improve our human resources. We improved facilities for research and technology development.

The results of all this have been mixed. We made some good inroads but, our efforts were also challenged by social, cultural and environmental issues. Yet, some of our projects sustained. These were streamlined into institutional processes.

If there is a lesson I can draw from our few successes, it is that political commitment is the key to sustaining the goal of any initiative. Place this in the larger context of our region and political commitment becomes an even more crucial element. This raises the important question as to how, we in the Asian Region can direct and sustain political leadership and commitment to fisheries and aqua-culture development.

We see from experience today that individual states can work together more effectively to achieve common goals, especially, if they provide the means and resources for regional associations to become stronger. Therefore, political leadership and commitment must also be backed with enough resources.

An expanded regional initiative can only be sustained by having both political leadership and adequate resources. That we are not lacking in political commitment will be seen when we adopt the "Colombo Declaration" tomorrow. It is a political commitment to "Regional Cooperation in Aqua-culture Development for Food Security, Nutrition and Economic Development in Asia".

But there is another challenge. We have to provide the resources as well. For this purpose, I think the way forward would be to establish a Common Regional Fund that will in the future become a Common Global Fund for responsible aqua-culture. If you think this is an idea worth looking at, I believe that in this gathering there is plenty of experience to develop the mechanism for such a fund. Let us not miss such a golden opportunity.

FAO has shown that together we can contribute to the welfare of the people of Asia from where aqua-culture stands today and where it should go to. These are great goals. But my concern is that we do not have the luxury of time to reach these stated goals. I am not unduly worried about resources. Together we have the people and material needed to achieve these goals. But the challenge is how we put these resources together that are within different borders and institutions of individual states and territories to work towards our common objectives.

These hopes and challenges make it urgent to commit the Asian political leadership in fisheries and aqua-culture to collectively face the problems that will diminish the welfare of our people. This is the challenge we all face today.

There are many issues of international politics and governance that affect aqua-culture and fisheries. Product marketing in compliance with various international trading standards is a serious problem to developing countries and to the small scale fish farmers who produce the most of Asia's aqua-culture output. Just as in any other agricultural commodity, we must address this situation politically.

Let us remind ourselves that the best results come when farmers, especially, the small holders are empowered technologically and politically. It is when they have both the means and the voice. With greater awareness and empowerment, higher standards and good farming practice, they will not be driven out of business.

Finally, let me express my fullest confidence in the success of the Ministerial Meeting and my great optimism that its results will strengthen and further promote fisheries and aqua-culture in Asia and also provide effective ways to resolve the problems of overfishing and threats faced by the world's maritime species that are unprecedented in human history.

I wish you well in your deliberations and trust you will have a pleasant stay in our country and carry away the most pleasant memories of Sri Lanka.