

Remarks by Hon. Mr. John Amaratunga, Minister of Tourism Development and Christian Religious Affairs and Lands, Sri Lanka.
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UNWTO Conference on
“Tourism: a Catalyst for Development, Peace and Reconciliation”
Passikudah, Sri Lanka, 11 -14 July 2016

Secretary General of the UNWTO, Mr. Taleb Rifai,
Chair, Petra National Trust of Jordan, HRH Princess Dana Firas,
Minister of Urban Development Hon. Rauff Hakeem
Governor of the Eastern Province Austin Fernando,
Chief Minister of Eastern Province Nazeer Ahamed,
Deputy Minister of Tourism of Cambodia, Hon. Chantha Tith,
Deputy Minister of Tourism Development and Christian Religious Affairs Arundika Fernando,
Secretary, Ministry of Tourism Development and Christian Religious Affairs and Lands, Mr.
Janaka Sugathadasa,
Mr. Paddy Withane, Chairman of Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority
Distinguished Panelists, Invitees, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here today at the United Nations World Tourism Organisation conference on the topic of "Tourism: A Catalyst for Development, Peace and Reconciliation" held in the beautiful beach resort of Passikudah. This is a timely initiative that will help transform this former war ravaged region into a zone of peace. It is noteworthy that this conference is being held when the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority is celebrating its golden anniversary.

I cannot think of a more appropriate place to hold this conference than right here in Sri Lanka which has for the better part of 30 years seen a bitter war. Passikudah is a beautiful holiday destination with a thriving economy driven by tourism. Today Passikudah is a shining example of how the people who were seriously affected by the conflict have picked up the pieces, started afresh and are now reaping the rewards of their efforts.

Fifty years ago at a conference like this the UNWTO discussed how tourism could be the passport to peace. Today we don't have to look far to see this in reality. There is no doubt that tourism is not only a catalyst in the development of the entire north and east of this country but is also an important tool in the reconciliation process.

There is no other industry that brings together people than the tourism industry. Tourism is an industry that has the power and the potential to transform entire communities in a relatively short period of time. The economic benefits of tourism are felt far and wide beyond the local communities. In fact our national economy is dependent on the success of this industry for its economic survival.

I'm very thankful to the Secretary General of UNWTO Mr. Taleb Rifai and the UNWTO for choosing to have this important meeting in Sri Lanka. Needless to say we would not be having this meeting if not for the peace that we are enjoying today. While the world around us, even as close as Bangladesh is in turmoil, we are enjoying absolute peace and I know for a fact that this peace will be protected at all costs. The message that we want to tell the world, is that Sri Lanka is one of the safest places to travel to today and this is the best time to explore the hidden treasures of this land, one such being this very beach in Passikudah.

Some of you may know that this region was out of bounds to tourism for almost three decades due to the war. Today we have investors lining up to put up hotels in this stretch of unspoiled, unexplored, beach because they see the vast potential for tourism. One reason could be that it is the opinion of many that the beach in Passikudah resembles the beaches in our neighbour the Maldives.

The revenue that we earn from this industry is the peace dividend that the country has received with the end of the conflict. This government is determined to ensure that this dividend is first enjoyed by those who were at the receiving end during the war. In other words we want the local community to be the biggest beneficiary of the peace dividend.

My government has given top priority to the development of tourism in every corner of the country, especially the north and east which were inaccessible during the conflict. Today we see in real life how tourism has become a catalyst in transforming the lives of the local people both economically and socially. When local economies that suffered the brunt of the war become economically stable and the people well off financially, reconciliation becomes that much easier. It has been said over many years that the root cause of the conflict here was economic inequality and marginalization of certain communities. We have learnt our lessons. Tourism is one of the few industries that can develop economies overnight. One example is the Maldives which used tourism to transform that country into a much sought after destination.

It is only now that tourism is transforming the lives of people in this country and especially in the areas that have been starved of development for years. Local communities have benefited from finding employment in hotels, in providing transport and taxi services, in supplying fish, meat and vegetables to the hotels, in providing handicrafts, souvenirs and other items for sale to tourists etc etc. The list goes on. However I must also say that we have a problem. Many of the youth in these former conflict zones are hesitant to enter the regular workforce because

they are not used to the work culture. It is our duty as the government to guide these youth on the correct path and make them contribute to the development of the country.

We have a unique situation that could become a case study for the UNWTO. There are many success stories right here in Passikudah. I know of a hotelier here who has used his income from the hotel to build local schools, computer labs and provide other social services. Contrary to stories doing the rounds, the local fishing community is fully supportive of the hospitality industry and are working with the hotels for mutual benefit.

Tourism is a highly peace sensitive industry. We experienced this firsthand and now we see this in many parts of the world, especially the Middle East. No one wants to go to a country that cannot guarantee safety. That is why I say reconciliation is of the utmost importance for the sustainability of the tourism industry. Tourism on the other hand will ensure development.

What I want to tell all you is that Sri Lanka is aware of what it should do and the role of government. We will work with both the public and private sectors in building a sustainable model that will not only transform the north and east to all year round tourism destinations but also be a beacon to the world in how to rise from the ashes through tourism development.

Once again I thank you all for holding this conference in Passikudah and bringing hope to our resurgent tourism industry. Thank you.