

Parliamentarians and the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights

Excellencies,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed a great honour and privilege for me to address this august gathering on the key topic of 'Parliamentarians and the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights'.

Human Rights are the most fundamental and inalienable rights of all persons irrespective of their race, religion, cast or creed. All Human beings are equally entitled to human rights without discrimination. Thus, human rights are indispensable for a safer and a secure world.

Distinguished Delegates,

Parliament, an indispensable component of national governance systems, is a crucial institution in the protection and promotion of human rights. Parliamentarians, too, being the people's representatives, are uniquely positioned in steering the State's actions in safeguarding and upholding human rights of the people.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When the new Government came into power in 2015, President Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe proceeded to set Sri Lanka on a transformative path in terms of human rights, good governance, rule of law, justice, reconciliation and economic development with the formation of a National Unity Government. Moreover, the appointment of the Tamil National Alliance leader, Mr. R. Sampanthan, as Leader of the Opposition, was a distinct message of the opportunity granted for all irrespective of ethnicity, race, religion, gender, language, class or social status.

Distinguished Delegates,

The Parliament of Sri Lanka and the Parliamentarians have played a central role in promoting and protecting the human rights of all citizens irrespective of ethnicity, religion, gender etc. The passage of a number of legislation for instance, incorporating human rights values and principles, that the global community strives to uphold reflects the role of Sri Lankan Parliament as the guardian of human rights;

- the adoption of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution in April 2015 with a two-thirds majority including many positive features such as the transformation of the Presidential form of government to a Presidential-Parliamentary system of government, repeal of the 18th Amendment that allowed a third presidential term, and the restoration of the 17th Amendment to the Constitution. The legislation also encompasses the dilution of many powers of Executive Presidency, the reduction in the terms of President and Parliament from six years to five years, and the establishment of Independent Commissions.
- the revival of the Constitutional Council will enhance democracy.
- the whole Parliament is working as a Constitutional Assembly to draft a new Constitution.
- the enactment of legislation by Parliament to establish a Permanent Office on Missing Persons giving effect to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances.
- the Registration of Deaths (Temporary Provisions) Act No 19 of 2010 was amended by Parliament, enabling the issuance of Certificates of Absence
- the Cabinet of Ministers approved the National Human Rights Action Plan for the period 2017-2021, evolved through a wide consultative process
- the passage of the Right to Information Act was brought into force on the 3rd of February 2017
- the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on (CRPD) on 08th February 2016.

- Sri Lanka's active engagement with the international community including the United Nations.

Thus, it is clear, that Parliamentarians act as a catalyst in the realization of human rights via the participation in Parliamentary debates, introduction of draft bills highlighting key issues, tabling amendments on legislation and asking Parliamentary questions on the issues related to human rights.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In conclusion, it is apparent that the Parliament of Sri Lanka and the Members of Parliament have accorded top priority while reaffirming their steadfast support and commitment to protect and promote human rights through the introduction of sound policies and legal mechanisms.

I look forward to your fruitful participation and deliberations. Thank you very much for your kind attention.