

## His Excellency President Maithripala Sirisena addresses FAO

His Excellency Maithripala Sirisena was invited by the Director General of the FAO to address the 24<sup>th</sup> Session of the Committee on Forestry (COFO) and the 06<sup>th</sup> World Forest Week held at FAO headquarters in Rome, from 16<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> July, 2018.

Delivering the Inaugural Speech at the opening ceremony of the COFO held on 16<sup>th</sup> July, His Excellency Sirisena said that the COFO is the right platform for the forestry experts to share knowledge, discuss, debate and take decisions for the progressing of the global forestry sector. Also, he pointed out that more than 50 percent of the land area in Sri Lanka was covered by forests two centuries ago and now the total dense forest cover of the island is estimated at 29.7 percent of the total land area of the country. He further said that Sri Lanka is now highly committed to conserve its existing forest cover and enhance to 32 percent by adopting better practices, to improve land governance, as a key measure to achieve the SDG target.

Whilst thanking the FAO for the assistance given to Sri Lanka and its people, especially during periods of national disasters such as floods, drought and landslides that occurred causing much damage, especially to poor farming communities, by providing them with urgently required food and provisions etc, he mentioned that the reforestation has been the responsibility of the Forest Department of Sri Lanka and with the coordination of many other Government Ministries, local government institutions and cooperative societies Sri Lanka has commenced a project to plant five million trees by 2020.

### Following is the full text of the speech:

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*Director General of Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished guests,  
Ladies and gentlemen.*

*I wish to thank the Director General, of Food and Agricultural Organization for inviting me to address the opening session of the 24th Session of the Committee on Forestry.*

*It is a great honor to Sri Lanka, and personally to me.*

*As the Minister of Agriculture and later as the Minister of Environment and Natural resources, as at present, I had very intimate relationship with FAO.*

*And now is my turn to address this august assembly as the Head of State.*

*I deeply appreciate and thank FAO for the assistance given to my country and its people, especially during periods of national disasters such as floods, drought and landslides that occurred causing much damage especially to poor farming communities, by providing them with urgently required food and provisions.*

*Ladies and Gentlemen, coming back to the subject of this session, a majority of the people in my country depends on agriculture for their livelihood.*

*A couple of centuries back it has been estimated more than 50 percent of the land area in Sri Lanka was covered by forests. And now the total dense forest cover of the island excluding other forms of vegetation is estimated at 29.7 percent of the total land area of the country.*

*Sri Lanka is now highly committed to conserve its existing forest cover and enhance to 32 percent by adopting better practices, to improve land governance, as a key measure to achieve the SDG target. More than 50 percent of the forest cover in my country was lost due to clearing of forests to be used for export oriented agriculture, and large agricultural land settlements.*

*Forest destruction has caused severe environmental hazards in many parts of the country. It has affected rainfall patterns, soil erosion and destruction of agricultural products.*

*Forests also provide many socio-economic benefits, including food, energy and shelter which are basic human needs. To sustain the products and services that help meet these and other needs, forests must be sustainably managed.*

*Reforestation has been the responsibility of the Forest Department. With the coordination of many other Government Ministries, local government institutions and cooperative societies we have commenced a project to plant five million trees by 2020.*

*Currently Sri Lanka has approximately 4.3 million children attending schools. We are commencing a project under the sponsorship of the Government to motivate and encourage the school children to plant at least a tree in their home gardens , school premises or wherever possible. We will help and support the plant growth by helping the children financially. We will allocate to them by their personal name. We will pursue to plant trees that could bring some income to the children and the household. This will encourage and make the children aware of their duty to conserve and preserve the nature.*

*In order to conserve the environment and the waterways the government banned felling of trees over 5000 feet elevation.*

*Mega or even medium level projects should conduct environmental impact assessments before commencing activity.*

*I am aware that, the Committee on Forestry is the right platform for you to share your knowledge, discuss, debate and take decisions for the progressing of the global forestry sector. The agenda ahead of you is very comprehensive and challenging.*

*Ladies and Gentlemen, before I conclude, I wish to congratulate and thank FAO for the warm welcome to me and my delegation.*

*Thank you.*  
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