

As written

**SPEECH OF THE HON. MINISTER OF
HEALTH AND INDIGENOUS MEDICINE TO
BE DELIVERED AT THE HAGUE FORUM
IN FEBRUARY 1999**



Mr. Chairman,

Allow me to join the previous speakers in **congratulating you** on your election as Chairman of this important Forum. I extend to you the greetings and good wishes of the Government of Sri Lanka for your successful stewardship of this meeting. I also wish to express our sincere thanks to the UNFPA and the Government of Netherlands for the commitment and effort in organizing this Conference.

Sri Lanka is privileged to share its experiences with regard to the implementation of the goals of the ICPD Programme of Action. All the major aims contained in the principles and objectives of the Programme of Action have been the stated policy objectives of Sri **Lankan** national programmes for several years.

Sri Lanka's efforts, unique in the South Asian context, to slow down population growth, reduce poverty, empower women and achieve economic progress have influenced its demographic transition. With a population of nearly 19 million growing at an annual rate of 1.2 per cent, per capita income of about US \$ 850, near replacement level fertility and life expectancy at birth of around 72 years, Sri Lanka is well poised to take advantage of the resulting low dependency ratios for its social and economic development. In several indicators of social development - primary and secondary education, literacy, fertility, infant and child mortality, Sri Lanka is clearly an outlier in relation to many countries at similar level of per capita income.

The process of rapid demographic and socio-economic change in Sri Lanka has brought about considerable change in family composition and structure. Accordingly, a fundamental position the government has assumed is its obligation to provide **socio-economic** support to the family especially to those rendered vulnerable through changing social and economic circumstances.

One of the major politico-institutional developments to protect the rights of women and promote their empowerment was the creation of a new Ministry of Women's Affairs in 1994. Three important policy documents- the Women's Charter, the Children's Charter and the proposed Workers Charter underline the Government's commitment to improve the situation of disadvantaged women, the girl child and the protection and welfare of working women in the formal and informal sectors. However, the Government recognizes that much needs to be done in achieving progress on some crucial gender issues.

Sri Lanka has given high priority and attention to all dimensions of the protection, survival and development of children and youth, particularly since ratification of the Convention of the Rights of the Child in 1991 and the adoption of the Children's Charter in 1992. In 1998, the Government established the **National** Child Protection Authority.

The Government is equally concerned with regard to the changing demographic structure resulting in population ageing. About 20 per cent of Sri Lanka's population will be over 60 years of age by the year 2025. Therefore, the population and reproductive health policy of the government has identified strategies and actions to provide adequate health care and welfare services to the elderly.

An effective national family planning programme with wide outreach has contributed considerably to the decline in the fertility rate to an average of about two children per woman. However, the problems of unwanted pregnancy continues to cause concern. Another reproductive health issue to which the government has given attention is the increase in the incidence of sub-fertility.

While our progress has been thus far **satisfactory**, we feel that there is no room for complacency. The new Population and Reproductive Health Policy adopted by the Cabinet of Ministers in 1998 contains goals, strategies and actions covering all areas of concern in this field.

Finally, I wish state that in the considerable tasks that face us in the future, the support of the international community would be of great value. Sri Lanka is among the countries that have effectively and efficiently utilized domestic and international resources in the realization of its demographic, reproductive health and development goals. Continued support of the international community will enable us to continue our efforts at capacity building and self-reliance.

I thank you.