**Vote of Thanks on the occasion of the International Day of Vesak at the Peace Palace, The Hague Thursday, 11th May 2017**

The most pleasant aspect of the job of an event organiser is to thank and express gratitude to all those who helped in its organisation.

I feel deeply honoured to perform this pleasant task, on behalf of the Embassy of Sri Lanka, which has organised the International Day of Vesak at the Peace Palace, in The Hague, for the very first time, since the adoption of the UN General Assembly Resolution on the *‘International recognition of the Day of Vesak at United Nations Headquarters and other United Nations offices”* in December 1999, on an initiative of the then Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka, the late Hon. Lakshman Kadirgamar.

Let me begin by thanking you, the audience, starting from the respected members of the Buddhist Maha Sangha, and representatives of the Hindu, Christian and Islamic faiths for your gracious presence, symbolising the common desire of people professing different faiths to unite for peace. The high turnout of such a large number of my dear ambassadorial colleagues, heads of international organisations, members of the diplomatic corps, officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, academics, members of the Sri Lankan community, friends and well-wishers, braving the obvious inconvenience of the special security measures at the Peace Palace, is a source of great inspiration to us.

We are honoured by the gracious presence of Hon. Rabin Baldewsingh, Deputy Mayor of The Hague, the International City of Peace & Justice.

I believe, it is in the fitness of things that the International Day of Vesak observance in the Hague coincides with the Government of Sri Lanka also marking it for the first time in Colombo, tomorrow with the distinguished participation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India.

It is also of immense significance that we have been able to hold this event in the hallowed precincts of the Peace Palace, the seat of the International Court of Justice, the only principal organ of the UN, located outside New York and hitherto the only major UN institution that has not been marking the International Day of Vesak until now.

This lacuna has been more than amply filled today with the President of the Court, His Excellency Dr Ronny Abraham, who not only gave his personal blessings by offering the Great Hall of Justice itself, where the Court sits, as the venue, but also graciously accepting our invitation to preside over the function this evening, taking time off his busy schedule. Your Excellency, words fail me to convey my sincere gratitude and heartfelt appreciation to you for your kind patronage and support.

I also wish to express my sincere thanks to the Registrar of the Court, Mr Philippe Couvreur for facilitating the use of the Great Hall of Justice for this event. I will be remiss in my duty if I fail to thank the Chair of the Carnegie Foundation, Dr Bernard Bot and its Director General, Mr Eric de Baedts for granting permission to hold this inaugural International Day of Vesak event at the Peace Palace.

My sincere thanks also go out to His Excellency Dr Peter Tomka, former President and current Judge of the ICJ for readily acceding to my request that he offers a tribute to former Vice President of the Court and a distinguished son of Sri Lanka, the late Judge Dr Christopher Weeramantry. Judge Tomka concurred with my view that this would be a fitting and auspicious occasion to acknowledge the yeoman service rendered by Dr Weeramantry to humanity and for international peace.

The highlight of today’s proceedings was of course, the inaugural guest lecture by our distinguished speaker, Dr Christopher Pinto, former Legal Adviser of the Ministry of External Affairs & Defence of Sri Lanka, former Ambassador of Sri Lanka to Germany and a Member of the highly prestigious *Institut de Droit International,* an exclusive Club of experts in International Law. On behalf of all of us present in this hall, I wish to express our collective thanks to you, Dr Pinto for your erudite and thought provoking presentation. I am personally aware of the many days and hours of painstaking research and toil that has gone into your work.

The message of the Buddha is important on account of its timeless relevance as well as its universal appeal to the entire humanity. I would like to share an excerpt of the Message to Buddhist Friends, on the occasion of Vesak -2017, issued by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue at the Holy See that the Apostolic Nuncio, His Excellency Monsignor Aldo Cavalli has sent me, and I quote,

“We wish to reflect this year on the urgent need to promote peace and non-violence. Religion is increasingly at the fore in our world today, though at times in opposing ways. While many religious believers are committed to promoting peace, there are those who exploit religion to justify their acts of violence and hatred. This situation requires a call to non-violence, a rejection of violence in all its forms.

Dear friends, your founder, the Buddha also heralded a message of non-violence and peace. He encouraged all to, “Overcome the angry by non-anger; overcome the wicked by goodness, overcome the miser by generosity; overcome the liar by truth.” (*Dhammapada* chapter 27, verse 3). He taught further that “Victory begets enmity; the defeated dwell in pain. Happily the peaceful live, discarding both victory and defeat”. (*Dhammapada* chapter 15, verse 5). Unquote.

Thank you, my esteemed colleague, Monsignor Cavalli for sharing this inspirational message, so appropriate and fitting for the occasion.

We are also extremely grateful to Dr. Arthur Eyffinger and Dr. Nilupul Gunawardena, the co-editors of the book titled *‘One World, One Home, One Law for All: a tribute in honour of Judge Weeramantry’*, for presenting this book today to the members of the head table. This volume had been presented to Judge Weeramantry on the occasion of his 90th birthday in November last year. Sadly, Judge Weeramantry is no longer with us, but his spirit lives on through his numerous scholarly works, which have made a significant contribution to the development of International Law and the promotion of world peace and justice.

Dr Nilupul, although you are a medical doctor and a lawyer, by profession, a rare combination indeed, you have also demonstrated your maestro talent this evening as a Master of Ceremonies, *par excellence*! Thank you very much.

I will be failing in my duty if I did not acknowledge with warm thanks, the sterling professional services rendered by IFS for the audio-visual coverage, Mr Kamran Mirza for the still photography and Mr M.K.M. Niyas for the catering arrangements today to make this event a success.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to Mr Robert Barkel, CEO of Janson Bridging, who is present here today, having cancelled a pre-scheduled overseas visit, for his generous sponsorship of today’s event, without which the maiden ‘International Day of Vesak’ in The Hague would not have become a reality.

I must admit that I was pleasantly surprised that Mr Barkel so readily acceded to my request to underwrite the entire cost of hosting this event, and that too without the usual demand of reciprocity by sponsors. Nevertheless, I felt that it was nothing but fair that we do our bit to promote Janson Bridging, which is engaged in building bridges in the rural heartland of Sri Lanka. Mr Barkel, I must tell you that Janson Bridging is not merely helping rebuild the physical infrastructure of Sri Lanka, but is building bridges of friendship and goodwill between the peoples of The Netherlands and Sri Lanka. A big round of applause for Janson Bridging, please!

There are many people who have worked tirelessly, behind the scenes, and deserve all the credit for the success of the International Day of Vesak at the Peace Palace today. They are the members of the staff of the Sri Lanka Embassy. Since this is our maiden effort in organising this event, there are bound to be shortcomings and I extend my sincere apologies to you for any lapses, for which I am solely responsible.

Before I wind up, I seek your indulgence to pay a personal tribute to a very special person, who is not with us today – My Mother. She was truly a remarkable lady; a charismatic personality; Her name, Noorjehan, which means “The Light of the World” in Persian, was the Light of my Universe, and was suddenly extinguished just over a month ago, leaving an unfathomable void in my life.

She was the guiding light and inspiration of my life, and I owe my present station in life to her selfless sacrifice in overcoming poverty and hardship and raising my siblings and me and providing us with a sound education. After my mother’s demise, my sister in Sri Lanka shared with me a letter that my mother had written, presumably meant for me. In it, she had penned the following lines,:

“When in far and distant land, You see the writings of my hand, And my face, you no more see, Then dear, remember me.”

Mummy,I will always remember and treasure you.

Thank you for your kind attention.