

Evident benefit of direct contacts

President of Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, Mahinda Rajapaksa, pays official visit to Minsk

By Vasily Kharitonov

Belarus and Sri Lanka are eager to advance bilateral collaboration, noted Belarusian President Lukashenko and his Sri Lankan counterpart, Mahinda Rajapaksa, during their meeting in Minsk. Mr. Rajapaksa arrived in Belarus on a huge A320, accompanied by a delegation of 130 people: evidence of the Asian guests' serious expectations and intentions.

Of course, Belarus is keen to develop interaction, as Mr. Lukashenko underlined, saying that Belarus is ready for closer co-operation not only with Sri Lanka but with its neighbouring states. He noted, "We're convinced that your people and your state have a bright future. Accordingly, we seek closer ties with your state and with other countries in the region — with your help."

Mr. Lukashenko pointed out similarities in the domestic and foreign policies of Belarus and Sri Lanka, saying, "In domestic policy, you seek to stabilise the situation, securing peace. Moreover, you are developing a socially-oriented economy, primarily focusing on people's needs. Your foreign policy shows that you are an absolutely peace-loving state, working towards making the world a calmer place. You are against the proliferation of nuclear weapons, war and conflict, while advocating the development of the United Nations. Here, our positions coincide."

The Belarusian Head of State praised the great successes of the President of Sri Lanka regarding prosperity and stability within the state. "After many years of conflict in Sri Lanka, you've given your people not just hope but a guarantee of a peaceful life. You've also drawn the attention of other nations' leaders and public-political figures."

Mr. Rajapaksa added that Sri Lanka would like to strengthen friendly ties with Belarus, emphasising that Belarus' peaceful situation is a good model, since peace is the foundation for further development.



Alexander Lukashenko and Mahinda Rajapaksa meet in warm and friendly atmosphere

At their one-on-one meeting, the two heads of state discussed a wide range of bilateral issues, confirming their mutual eagerness to advance Belarus-Sri Lanka co-operation to a new level.

The extended meeting, involving the presidents and delegates from both states, also focused on ways to expand bilateral collaboration. Mr. Lukashenko pointed out the importance of advancing trade-economic relations, believing that the existing turnover of about \$50 million can be improved upon. "We're resolute in our desire to advance this significantly," the Belarusian Head of State underlined. Mr. Lukashenko noted the importance of the Belarusian-Sri Lankan business forum in Minsk, expressing confidence that the visit by the President of Sri Lanka would help in deciding some key areas of trade and investment co-operation.

Mr. Lukashenko remarked that Belarus is ready to use modern trade instruments, such as leasing, export lending and insurance. Moreover, Belarus would like to see Belarusian engineering products included in Sri Lanka's government programmes. The President of Belarus proposed a number of large bilateral projects, saying, "We'd like to use Sri Lanka as a stepping off point for trade on the huge markets of Indonesia, South East Asia and, particularly, India — especially considering that Sri Lanka has an advantageous tax regime in its trade with these states."

Mr. Lukashenko invited Sri Lanka to set up joint ventures and increase deliveries of Belarusian technologies. "We're ready to set up joint ventures on your land; proposals have already been worked out by our two countries' specialists and many ventures

could soon be launched," noted the Belarusian Head of State. He asserted that our two countries have great potential to develop relations in education, the military technical area, science, culture and sports. He also stressed that Belarus would continue providing assistance to Sri Lanka in training specialists across various spheres.

Tourism is another promising area for development. "We know that Sri Lanka is serious about the development of the tourism industry," said Mr. Lukashenko. "We've discussed the establishment of direct flights from Belarus to Sri Lanka, with tourists in mind."

Mr. Lukashenko pointed out that Belarusian-Sri Lankan relations have gained positive dynamics recently. "During talks, we've confirmed our mutual intention to advance Belarusian-Sri Lankan co-operation to the highest level. To achieve this, it's necessary to

establish direct contacts between the legislative bodies of our countries and to activate inter-parliamentary dialogue — not only at bilateral level but within the framework of international organisations," noted the Belarusian Head of State.

The Belarusian President assured his Sri Lankan colleague that the Belarusian side will do its utmost to implement the arrangements made during the talks. "There're absolutely no closed topics in our co-operation and we'll advance relations across all areas which are of interest to you," said Mr. Lukashenko. "Today we're opening a new page in our relations. The Belarusian side is committed to go forward quickly and efficiently."

The President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka emphasised the importance of the visit, being the first in the history of our bilateral relations. It confirms the interest of our two states in strengthening mutually beneficial contacts. "I've come to Minsk as a friend of your country and I want to reaffirm Sri Lanka's determination to promote all-round co-operation with Belarus," said Mr. Rajapaksa. He invited Mr. Lukashenko to come to Sri Lanka and invited Belarusian businessmen to visit in November.

After the talks, Belarus and Sri Lanka signed eight international documents aiming to promote collaboration in the spheres of trade and investment, visa-free travel for holders of diplomatic and service passports, double taxation and tax evasion, military-technical co-operation and the promotion of tourism. An agreement was also signed for mutual legal assistance in criminal cases and for mutual understanding between our nations' justice ministries.

Mr. Lukashenko expressed confidence that the documents would lay the foundation for a legal framework guiding bilateral relations. The two presidents also signed a joint statement affirming their commitment to expanding mutually beneficial interaction.

Forum beautifully reveals potential of two countries

By Vladimir Khromov

Sri Lanka invites Belarus to jointly develop medical and eco-tourism

Sri Lanka's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Gamini Lakshman Peiris, recently attended a Belarus-Sri Lanka tourist forum, involving Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa. The Minister emphasised, "Tourists from Belarus are attracted by more than the sun, sea and sand in Sri Lanka. We offer the most ancient medical system of Ayurveda, which is becoming increasingly popular, and are continuing co-operation in eco-tourism."

During the forum, a memorandum of mutual understanding on co-operation in air transport was signed between the Belarusian Transport and Communications Ministry's Aviation Department and the Sri Lankan Civil Aviation Authority. Belarus' Director of Aviation, at the Transport and Communications Ministry, Vladimir Kostin, placed his signature beside that of the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Sri Lanka to Russia and Belarus on concurrent, H.E. Mr. Udayanga Weeratunga.

According to Vadim Karmazin, Director of the Tourism Department, at the Belarusian Ministry

of Sports and Tourism, tourist flow depends largely on transport connections. He explains, "Currently, Belarus lacks a direct flight to Sri Lanka. It's an issue for future discussion. Figures show that direct air services raise tourist numbers 3-5 fold."

A memorandum of understanding was also signed between the Belarusian National Union of Tourism Organisations and the Sri Lankan Tourism Development Authority. The forum included presentations by major Sri Lankan tour operators and hotel networks, as well as bilateral meetings for representatives of tourism businesses.

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