

Intervention of the Hon'ble Prime Minister during the Open-Ended Meeting of Commonwealth Heads of Government on CHOGM Reform to be held in New York on 25 September 2014 on the sidelines of the 69th UNGA

Your Excellency President Mahinda Rajapaksa and Commonwealth Chair-in-Office
Your Excellencies Heads of Government of Commonwealth member states
Your Excellency Secretary General Kamallesh Sharma
Distinguished delegates

A very good afternoon to you all.

Allow me to extend sincere thanks to you, Chair, for convening this very important meeting of the Commonwealth leaders, mid-way between two Summits, to consider some important reform proposals that can have far-reaching impact on the future of our Association.

Evolution has been a unique element of the Commonwealth during its journey from the old, colonial to the present, modern days. It is, therefore, only natural that we remain open-minded to any proposal for reform. I thank the Secretary General for presenting a discussion paper on the possible areas of reform to take into account the new ideas that have emerged since the last reform exercise ten years back.

Nomenclature of CHOGM

Before we consider changing the name of CHOGM, we need to reflect on the background of naming it CHOGM in the first place. We are aware that, since the inception of modern Commonwealth, the leaders' meeting has been called *Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference* until the year 1969. It came to be called *Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting* as a more generic term to indicate the growing diversity of the constitutional structures of the Commonwealth member states. The proposed term *Commonwealth Summit*, while retaining its generic nature, would be consistent with inclusive character of the present-day CHOGMs that present the scope for meetings of youth, civil society and business. Not to mention, Commonwealth Summit is more lucid and simple to pronounce. I would, therefore, extend my full support for the proposal.

Attendance at the Retreat

Ideally speaking, attendance at the Retreat should be at the level of Heads of Government. However, a strict adherence to this principle might result in total absence of representation by member states whose leaders could not attend the meeting. Some level of representation of member states is important, particularly in consideration of the biennial nature of the meeting. We need to strike a balance. It would, therefore, be appropriate to allow representation by a Minister of Cabinet rank. However, representation by any one below the rank of a Cabinet Minister may not serve real purpose of the Retreat and should not be allowed under any circumstances.

Duration of Retreat

It appears that current practice devotes two working days for Retreat. This length of Retreat may not always be time-effective. The lengthy Retreat sometimes becomes the reason for early departure of leaders. We believe that the leaders should concentrate only on the issues that are important as well as sensitive, which, not even Ministers are in a position to resolve. On the other hand, Retreat is particularly important for the Commonwealth which is characterized by its hands-on approach. Here again, we need to take a balanced perspective. We believe that one full-working day should be sufficient for the Retreat.

Outcome Documents

We all know that brevity is the soul of wit. However, when it comes to negotiating a document by a large number of delegations, it becomes impossible to keep the length of the document within the desired limit. We, therefore, support the proposal that the Commonwealth Communiqué should remain limited to issues that collectively concern Commonwealth countries only. Moreover, in order to avoid repetition of ideas and repletion of similar debates, it would be worth-while to consider adopting a single Commonwealth Communiqué and avoiding other stand-alone declarations.

Thank you all for your patient hearing.