

**Speech Made at Regional Consultation on Social  
Determinants of Health, February 18, 2009**

**In this glittering gathering of health sector professionals I am one of the few laymen. But as the Prime Minister of the country I am aware of what the government has been doing, and is doing, for the health sector, for the welfare of the people.**

**I gather from an informative note provided by the organizers of this conference that a Commission on Social Determinants of Health was set up by the WHO in March 2005 to bring together evidence on what can be done to achieve better and more fairly distributed health in the world. The Commission had a three year directive to gather and review evidence on what needs to be done to reduce health inequalities within and between countries.**

**Inequalities there are in plenty between countries, and within countries too, in most countries. But in our own Sri Lanka there are no inequalities in the healthcare provided by the state. All health services provided by the state, in hospitals, in clinics, in all other medical institutions maintained by the state, are free for all citizens. Free not only for the poor but also for the rich. You do not find this even in socialist countries, except in Cuba where health care is not only free but also excellent. In Sri Lanka it is not only health care that is available free for everybody, but also education. Education is free from the primary class through university. And this includes medical college education. We educate doctors free. But sometimes some of these doctors forget what they owe the state and the people. They abandon their**

**country to go abroad to serve the people in some other country, usually in the West. They forget their own people and go in search of la dolce vita, the fleshpots of the West. Some of these doctors have not only got free education here but go abroad for specialization on scholarships provided by the state. Then they qualify as specialists, and do not come back. Sadly, not all those who stay back are patriotic and grateful to their country. They go on strike at the slightest provocation.**

**Perhaps this is not a situation peculiar to Sri Lanka, in our part of the world. There are historical, sociological and economic factors that we share. This regional conference should discuss all that too, and look for solutions that would improve our common lot.**

**As for the state, the overall emphasis of state policy of the government of Sri Lanka has been on social justice and equity, on economic well being and fundamental human rights. The policy of the state with regard to health care and social welfare has remained fairly consistent and stable. Sri Lanka has made and continues to make, substantial investments in health care, education and poverty alleviation. The poor segments of the population have benefited much due to such investments. The state regards health and education as crucial to socio-economic development. That is why Sri Lanka has one of the highest rates of literacy and of life expectancy in the region. We have a literacy rate of 90.1 per cent and a life expectancy rate of 70.7 for males and 75.4 for females. There is also substantial investment in poverty alleviation. But for this unfortunate armed conflict which has**

**been debilitating our resources, in money, materials and man power, for almost three decades we could have been much better off materially, and with peace more peace of mind and contentment.**

**I am pleased to be able to tell you that that conflict is about to be over. The armed band of barbaric terrorists, described by international observers as the most ruthless terrorists in the world, are now reduced to a small fraction of what they were and have been cornered by the state's armed forces in a desolate patch of jungle in the North of our country. There will be peace soon.**

**Even with this conflict with separatist terrorists going on Sri Lanka's poverty rate has been declining steadily. As for environmental legislation, the Constitution**

**of Sri Lanka makes it the duty of every person to protect nature and conserve its riches. The national environmental policy renews commitment of government, in partnership with the people, to manage effectively the environment for the benefit of the present and future generations.**

**Despite Sri Lanka's achievements there is yet room for improvement. The deliberations at this regional consultation in Colombo will I am sure contribute towards such improvements. I wish this conference, and all of you, success.**

**The Prime Minister addressing the Regional Consultation on  
Social Determinants of Health**

**Prime Minister with the convenors of the Regional  
Consultation on Social Determinants of Health**