

Business Liaison



Prema Cooray, Secretary General / CEO of the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce, speaks to Harin Fernando on the forthcoming ‘IMEXPRO’ exhibition and the role of the chamber in a challenging commercial environment.

On IMEXPRO 2008

IMEXPRO 2008 is one of the largest bi-annual, trade fairs to be held in Sri Lanka, and is being held for the fourth time.
IMEXPRO 2008 is organised by the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce in association with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Trade, Marketing Development, Co-operatives and Consumer Services, Ministry of Export Development and International Trade, Board of In-vestment of Sri Lanka, The Export Development Board and Sri Lankan Airlines. This level of interest practically promotes IMEXPRO as a national scale event.
IMEXPRO 2008 is held with the objective of assisting the Sri Lankan and overseas business community to source suitable business partners.
The event will showcase a range of local and international products and services, and will feature products and services under a wide range of categories and sectors. Over 160 partici-pants will be in attendance. The event will be directed under the timely theme, 'Link to the Global World.'
The sectors of spices, foodstuff, footwear, garments, pharmaceuticals, fruits and vegetables, rice, handicrafts, textiles, gems and jewellery are believed to be of popular interest amongst those visiting overseas delegates.
It is expected that trade delegations from Canada, India, Indonesia, Italy, Jordan, Malaysia, Nepal, Oman, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Korea, The Maldives, UAE, USA, Palestine, Romania and several other countries will participate. We have MoUs with over 60 trading nations and actively canvass these partners to attend IMEXPRO.

The event itself is a challenge because in the preceding three months there has been an escalation in the scale of violence due to the ethnic conflict. It was not the most conducive to promote an international trade fair at this time.

It is my opinion that if we had a much more stable situation we would have had greater participation at IMEXPRO.
Although the times are challenging, Sri Lanka has been very resilient, with an outward-looking focus that is spreading into the region. We have to mitigate the problems that we have and we must exploit or position ourself with regard to the markets of Maldives, Pakistan and India. It is a seamless world and we are all

looking at globalising our presence with special emphasis in the Indian sub-continent.
Our products are world class and we are now ready to take on the world.

Has the trade value of exports shown progress?

Exports are rising and the trade figures bear testament to this. Across the board most of the major sectors have shown significant improvement.

With the GSP+ status up for renewal, is it your opinion that this is merely a formality?

We have raised this issue with the government very recently and the government has ap-pointed a four-Minister committee to look into this. It is my opinion that the EU will look at all applications afresh. At the time of Sri Lanka being awarded this status our labour compliance levels were unmatched. But today rightly or not, the issue of human rights has reached the ears of many around the world and this will play a factor, under the scrutiny of those involved in reviewing GSP+.
Another aspect that would come into play, going forward is 'value addition.' There is a move to increase the value addition to 60%, but I believe if we were to renew the GSP+ status, we would need to have the concessionary terms and rates we enjoy at present.

As we head towards a CEPA (Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement) with the nation of India, what progress has been made under the existing FTA (Free Trade Agreement)?

From its inception, export trade value has grown from US$ 600 mn to US$ 2.4 bn. There are trade areas such as copper and vanaspathi oil that perhaps need some form of scrutiny, but these are only a few setbacks. India too has benefited as well from this agreement.
Although India has liberalised its markets to a great extent, they are still very watchful about the impact of FTA on Indian companies. The restriction of pepper exports is a case in point.
But India is becoming a more open economy in globalised trade. Some Sri Lankan companies are prospering in India, while some are still having difficulties.
Sri Lankan business entities are not just sitting and waiting, in some form or other,

they are interested in expanding to India, especially to the south. The whole world is now coming into India, especially the big global brands. The middle and upper middle classes are booming, and even the richest individuals in the world hail from this nation.
Sri Lanka is on the second and third position when it comes to imports and exports to India, respectively. I can also tell you that a decade ago, India was not even on the radar when it came to tourism, but today they are our biggest market.
The investment by Brandix into Andhra Pradesh has also been welcomed and seen as significant, by even the Chief Minister of A.P.
Following a CCC delegation visit to the recent Partnership Summit held in India, our atten-dance at the Indian Economic Summit in early December 2007 and with our regular interaction with the Indian chambers, one can see that Indians are looking at Sri Lanka positively.

“Although The Times Are Challenging, Sri Lanka Has Been Very Resilient, With An Outward-Looking Focus That Is Spreading Into The Region.”

The changing role of the Chamber?

The Chamber handles a range of sensitive and non-sensitive issues in its role as influencing the government.
We have a range of steering committees, representing all segments of industry. Thus we have a very good idea of what is happening on the ground and also we carry a certain influence amongst society and government. This influence is voiced through our presence in the re-spective NCED clusters.
We also have our members in various policy-making bodies and this representation gives us an enviable position when it comes to our role as a business chamber.
We also have monthly discussions with the Treasury Secretary where we notify him in ad-vance of the agenda and then we engage in meaningful dialogue regarding crucial issues raised by our members. All relevant officials are present at these meetings and this forum gives us a great opportunity to resolve issues and address their concerns.

How closely does the Chamber interact with the donor community?

We have several projects which are funded by donor agencies like GTZ, USAID, European Commission, etc. We have a very successful matchmaking programme with NORAD and has been successful in bringing together partners from Norway and Sri Lanka to commence 28 joint ventures to date. These initiatives with the

donor community has given the opportunity to the business community to enlarge their growth in business.

IMEXPRO 2008, February 14 – 16, 2008, BMICH, 1000 – 1800 hrs.
www.chamber.lk

The Ceylon Chamber of Commerce has links with 39 trade associations, 12 regional chambers, over 4,000 companies and is the host of over 19 business councils with major trading partner nations.